

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Monday, September 29, 2008

## A fresh take on Beethoven's work

By David Patrick Stearns  
Inquirer Classical Music Critic

Great Beethoven performances don't come along all that often.

The composer's ubiquity can kill the chances of fresh responses to his more popular works. And because so many great conductors of the past leave strong imprints on the symphonies, modern performers seem intimidated into respectful detachment rather than on-the-spot inspiration. You get used to it; it's still Beethoven, after all.

But in the first moments of Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia's season opening on Friday, you had to catch your breath: *This is it. It's here. It's alive. It's Beethoven's "Symphony No. 2" with conductor and players speaking the piece like a first language - no uncertainty, no extraneous effort.*

That experience seems to happen more often with Beethoven's even-numbered symphonies. They're less weighty, statements more about pure music than about civilization. That's not to undercut the Chamber Orchestra's achievement: Under Ignat Solzhenitsyn, the group has been a revitalizing force with Beethoven, but more now than ever. It hit a higher plateau, partly because tonal allure (not a Chamber Orchestra asset) isn't missed in Beethoven, and partly because the orchestra has developed a convincingly integrated sound picture that takes the strings out of their usual dominant role in the orchestra and makes them one of many equal choirs.

Europe's early-music ensembles have been illustrating that how we often hear Beethoven is an anachronism imposed on the music from later, Wagner-dominated generations. When that's removed, a new range of performance possibilities arise - ones that work well in the Kimmel Center's smallish Perelman Theater. Fast tempos suggested by the composer's metronome markings sound natural, not rushed. Solzhenitsyn infused them with high-spirited passion, though he also connects with Beethoven's grouchy impatience that makes the music edgy.

The dryness that sometimes comes with historic-minded music-making - as well as the severity that creeps into Solzhenitsyn performances of any repertoire - seemed far away, especially at the beautifully judged climaxes, where the orchestra's sound seemed to expand both in volume and magnitude, putting the music momentarily into a more spiritual (though decidedly not contemplative) realm.

Beethoven's greater *Symphony No. 7*, was similarly alive in a performance that hit all the important points, and was well-played and completely absorbing. But the performers didn't seize the piece the way they did the earlier symphony. *No. 7* takes even more courage, but these forces will no doubt summon it soon.

Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns at [dstearns@phillynews.com](mailto:dstearns@phillynews.com).