

# GCS & SSO: A truly magical collaboration

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In the history of classical music, [Ludwig van Beethoven](#) was the original drama king. As a composer of pounding, surging, theatrical, emotional, turbulent and explosive music, he was a first, influencing all who came after, especially the great opera composers [Giuseppe Verdi](#) and [Richard Wagner](#), in differing ways.

What could be more dramatic than a composer who writes and conducts his greatest work while profoundly deaf? Or the innovator who created a masterful choral symphony for the very first time?

[The Greenwich Choral Society](#) and the Stamford Symphony joined musical forces to perform the Ninth, with its sublime choral "Ode to Joy," to a packed house last weekend, and it was a revelation, almost drowning out Johannes Brahms' profound "Song of Destiny" (Schicksalslied), a quieter, deep reflection on mankind's place, and woes.

No matter. Conductor of the Stamford Symphony Eckhart Preu, who gave opening remarks and proceeded to dance both works from his podium, scarcely glancing at scores, described the Brahms work as an expression of human uncertainty influenced by sometimes happy, sometimes vengeful gods, and significant earthly trouble. Based on a text by the poet Holderin, which tells the story of the Greeks fight for independence following 350 years of Turkish oppression, it is dark and ponderous. To the insistent, consistent beat of the kettledrum, the somber opening swelled to consonance, the chorus entering against pizzicato cellos in the opening section of three. The drums and orchestra articulated the gravity of the work's theme. The chorus sang the story, and the work ended in a purely instrumental passage for orchestra.

Said a GCS chorister at the intermission, "we rehearsed the work for two months with only a piano accompaniment, and really did not fully understand it until we sang it with the Symphony." The choral work is considered second in the composer's oeuvre to Brahms' great Requiem.

Again commenting before the orchestra began the performance of the Ninth, Preu dedicated its performance to [Nicholas Rudd](#), a Greenwich Choral Society Board member, fine fellow and patron who loved life and music. He announced a change of soloists, as well.

Nothing if not passionate, the Ninth opened Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso, with a pianissimo rumbling, tremolos in the strings, then burst into a theme of immense power. Climbing chords sounded and were reworked and reiterated. The throbbing kettledrum underscored the gravitas and pounding insistence of the composer's message.

Scherzo's informing characteristic was caesuras, small breaks of no sound, and the musical themes were instantly recognizable. Woodwinds sounded, a trombone bleated, and the singing, swelling movement surged as a French horn rang out, solo timpani adding drama.

In the Adagio, oboe, French horns and clarinets sounded. A fragment of the "Pathetique" piano sonata was discernible, as the orchestra played the profoundly sweet, emotional music sensitively, the violins introducing a lovely theme.

Conductor Preu brought the four soloists on stage for the concluding movement, the "Ode to Joy," Presto; Allegro molto assai, a cry of universal brotherhood, based on text by Schiller, and perhaps the most famous music in the world (after the four opening notes of the Fifth Symphony). This movement has been called a "symphony within a symphony," standing along with four discrete sections.

The imposing baritone [Daniel Cilli](#), sang a solo in a superb voice, echoed by the chorus, the fine tenor Christopher Pfund joining, then the soprano [Michelle Trovato](#) and alto [Teresa Bucholz](#) in a glorious vocal quartet, the interplay with orchestra simply wonderful. The tenor's voice was a dramatic clarion as he interplayed with the chorus. The music flowed back to the orchestra in a flurrying passage, then the majestic, moving music was underscored, made profound by kettledrum. A slow statement with chorus and low brasses led to a complex passage. There were breaks in the rhythmic construction, and the soprano voice rang out. Previous "themes" of the movement recurred, the main theme heard in variations for vocal soloists and chorus.

This performance was an exultation, not an Ode, as two great musical groups, and two fine conductors made true performance magic. The audience was on its feet, bringing out Conductor Paul Mueller of the Greenwich Choral Society and Conductor Eckhart Preu of the Stamford Symphony, beseeching them for an encore, which it received in a short reprise from the Beethoven work.

The final season performance of The Greenwich Choral Society, "Eternal Joy," featuring Mozart's Requiem, will be on May 5 at [Christ Church](#) in Greenwich. For tickets and information, go to [www.greenwichchoralsociety.org](http://www.greenwichchoralsociety.org).

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