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LA Phil Serves Up Unbridled Joy with Ortiz-Beethoven Pairing

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, October 30th, 2019

The Los Angeles Philharmonic closed out its centennial birthday weekend on Sunday, October 27 with verve, pairing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the "Ode to Joy," with a commissioned work by Mexican composer [Gabriela Ortiz](#).

The four-day bash [began on Thursday](#) with the triumvirate of Zubin Mehta, Esa-Pekka Salonen and Gustavo Dudamel—the first two greats, of course, being LA Phil music directors that preceded Venezuelan-born Dudamel. That gala was portioned into works led by each conductor. Each then led separate concerts: Mehta on Friday night, Salonen on Saturday evening and Dudamel led [Sunday's afternoon concert](#).

Ortiz was tasked with composing a work that would pair nicely with Beethoven's Ninth. Just reading that sentence would make any composer quake, and indeed Ortiz said she was "shocked and scared" and didn't sleep well for a month upon hearing the news of being matched with the mighty Ninth.

Ortiz is a graduate of Escuela Nacional de Música; her parents were musicians in the famed ensemble Los Folkloristas.



Gabriela Ortiz / Photo: Los Angeles Philharmonic

Gabriela Ortiz' Yanga

Dudamel chose well. Ortiz' work, "Yanga," which received its world premiere during the Sunday concert, not only stood its own joyous ground but matched both the tumult and driving, unbuckled force that is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Wholly musically different, of course, Ortiz' 17-minute work was backed by the [Tambuco Percussion Ensemble](#), the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Los Angeles Master Chorale.

[Gaspar Yanga](#) was a former African prince known for leading a 16th century colony of slaves in Mexico (he had been captured and sold into slavery). With the tribe, he pushed back Spanish incursions and led attacks into Spanish settlements. He won the right for his colony's self-rule in 1618.

"Libertad!" the oft-repeated phrase chanted by the chorus (text is by Santiago Martín Bermúdez) was a perfect complement to the Ninth—that and the vigorous whirling force that is "Yanga." The

piece began with the barest choral utterance that built to an eerie tension (pitch slides with the unworldly sense of being warped were used later). A violin crescendo followed, shattered after a pause by the percussion ensemble employing both floor drums and hand-held instruments.

As with the Ninth, the chorale was masterfully used, reaching not quite the presto that versions of the Ninth can achieve. But rather it laid out an unfolding celebratory reveal of wide-opened sound that matched the text's themes of liberty.

A zippy Ninth Symphony

Dudamel's velocity-powered Beethoven's Ninth purportedly clocked in at 63 minutes. The symphony can clip along with a pace that hovers around 60 minutes (the uber-fast end) or stretch up to 70 minutes or so. The LA Phil mastered the speedy pace with the choral-rich finale unlocking wide, exuberant vistas of sound. At times, the stage seemed to roar. The Ninth is a Dudamel favorite; he chose it for the [free Hollywood Bowl concert](#) that began his LA Phil association in 2009.

[The Los Angeles Philharmonic calendar](#)

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Photos courtesy Los Angeles Philharmonic

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