

# **Music and meaning; 3 books look at the life of Daniel Barenboim, the history of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and the glories of the pipe organ**

## **Chicago Final Edition**

*By Terrence Hackett*

**Chicago Tribune.** Chicago, Ill.: Jul 27, 2003. pg. 4

A Life in Music

By Daniel Barenboim

Arcade, 246 pages, \$25.95

Beethoven's Ninth: A Political History

By Esteban Buch, translated by Richard Miller

University of Chicago Press, 327 pages, \$27.50

All the Stops: The Glorious Pipe Organ and Its American Masters

By Craig R. Whitney

PublicAffairs, 323 pages, \$30

To some, music is a way of life, while to others it is simply something to listen to alone to escape life for a little while.

At each of these extremes and at all points in between, however, exists the undisputed and unrivaled power of music to inspire masses of people by delivering a seemingly infinite number of messages and meanings.

"Music, more than any other art, involves semantic ambiguities," writes author Esteban Buch in "Beethoven's Ninth: A Political History." "We readily accept the idea that it is a language, but rare are the occasions on which we can all agree on what it is trying to say."

Buch's volume, originally published in 1999 in French, and two other titles--an updated edition of "A Life in Music," by Daniel Barenboim, and "All the Stops: The Glorious Pipe Organ and Its American Masters," by Craig R. Whitney--share a willingness to explore, through personal reflection and historical research, the uniquely elusive and inspiring nature of music.

Barenboim, musical director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, states that the goal of his autobiography, first published in 1991, is to describe "what it feels like to be obsessed with music and to have the curiosity to examine this obsession." His writing is an equal mix of memories of his musical life and opinions on a range of largely music-related, but also personal and political, subjects.

Buch, a social-science professor in Paris, traces the complex and contradictory uses of one of the world's most widely known musical compositions. The music that was played for Adolf Hitler's birthday in 1937, used as the national anthem of Rhodesia, and chosen to mark the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Ninth Symphony has meant many things to many people over the past two centuries.

Whitney, a longtime writer and editor for The New York Times, confesses to a lifelong obsession with the pipe organ, its builders and colorful musicians who have played it. With evangelical zeal

he lays out the history of "the king of instruments," a history that he believes is integral to American culture and that "deserves to be broadly known and widely appreciated."

Barenboim's tremendous talent as a pianist thrust him into the musical spotlight at an early age. A descendant of Russian Jews and the son of two musicians in Argentina, young Daniel gave his first concert at age 8 with an orchestra in Buenos Aires, playing Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23.

A few years later, after moving with his parents to Israel and studying in postwar Europe, Barenboim was introduced to the uncomfortable but very real intermingling of politics and music. In 1954, he was offered the opportunity to play with renowned German conductor Wilhelm Furtwaengler--who called Barenboim "a phenomenon"- -and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra.

"This was the greatest honour he could bestow on me, but my father declined," writes Barenboim. "I think he felt that after all the atrocities that had taken place it was too soon for a Jewish family to travel from Israel to Germany."

Barenboim maintains that music is not capable of inherently holding meaning, positive or negative. We provide music with associations, but a musical composition should be seen as existing by itself and for itself.

"It can be used for a profitable end, material or spiritual, but the music itself has no such characteristics," he writes. "Music is not only descriptive of other things. It is neither benevolent nor malevolent."

Music can, however, provide people with a sense of escape and relief, particularly during the strain of wartime. Barenboim describes an experience in 1991 during the Persian Gulf war when the Israeli Philharmonic was allowed to play for a limited time each day to a limited number of people who listened with their gas masks at their sides.

"There was a real need for music to be played, for the musicians to be able to play and for the audience to listen," he writes. "For some, it was a way of forgetting the tension of the night before, for others it was a moment to hope, of not thinking of the next night with the inevitable alarms sounding. In every case, it was anything but a superficial form of entertainment."

The intersection of politics and music has also been a part of Buch's life. As a student in a small town in Argentinean Patagonia, he researched the Argentine national anthem. His doctoral thesis on Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and the construction of a European identity later led to his current book.

Buch details how Beethoven's Ninth has over time acquired symbolic meaning. The symphony's roots are in German poet Friedrich Schiller's 1795 poem "An die Freude" ("Ode to Joy"), which has as a central theme mankind's earthly happiness. Revisions to the poem later made it into a "manifesto for an ideal of universal human brotherhood."

"Thanks in part to its overtones rich with notions of liberty," Buch writes, "the Ode to Joy has always been open to different overtly political interpretations."

Beethoven was among the many struck by the poem, but the work didn't find its way into his music right away. Near the height of his popularity in 1812, he scribbled in his notebook, "make something using fragments of Schiller's Joy." Still, it wasn't until 12 years later, on May 7, 1824--three years before he died--that the Ninth Symphony premiered. In the four movements of the work, the fourth often also referred to as "Ode to Joy," Beethoven fuses patriotic themes with lines from Schiller's poem.

Nationalists embraced the music. Otto von Bismarck, Germany's first chancellor, said years later, "If I were to hear that music often, I would always be very brave."

The symphony was regarded as a symbol of unity and brotherhood in Germany and in France, where the French removed the German words and added their own. Hitler's birthday in 1937 was celebrated with a performance by the Berlin Philharmonic of the Ninth Symphony, conducted by Furtwaengler. Hitler wove the music of Beethoven and other German composers into his attempt at European domination.

Buch also describes how a children's choir sang "Ode to Joy" as part of cultural activities in the Nazi extermination camp at Auschwitz. A survivor of that camp says 50 years later that he's unsure if the choice of music was a sign of protest and resistance of the spirit or "the expression of an extreme sarcasm, an almost satanic gesture."

The urging "All men will become brothers" contained in Schiller's text and Beethoven's music is simple enough, but Buch states that it gets complicated depending on who heeds the message and their motives and methods for carrying out the message:

"And yet, men have various motives for calling themselves brothers, motives that often inspire them to do what is best and most noble, but motives that can sometimes lead them into hatred, violence, murder. For that matter, the same is true of other great ideas, such as those of life, or liberty."

Whitney's book is not a personal narrative like Barenboim's or an in-depth analysis like Buch's. It is more of a personal quest to spread the word of the pipe organ's contribution to American cultural history.

Whitney begins by chronicling the rise and fall of pioneering organ builder Ernest M. Skinner, whose vision was to construct magnificent organs that could reproduce the sounds of the finest orchestras.

"An organ-builder has to be an architect, a master cabinetmaker and a musician all in one," Whitney writes, "the one person in the shop whose vision can produce a coherent work of art out of the chaos of thousands of pipes and pieces."

In the early 1900s, pipe organists drew big crowds. Music was not instantly accessible, radio was in its infancy, and microphones weren't all that good at capturing sound. Churches saw pipe organs as a way to attract more people to Sunday services, and business leaders like Andrew Carnegie--who called music a religion--began funding the construction of concert halls and municipal auditoriums to bring classical music to the masses.

Churches gave two of the stars of organ music--E. Power Biggs and Virgil Fox--their first stages. The two swore their love for German composer Johann Sebastian Bach and his music, but that's where similarities between the two charismatic characters stopped.

With the help of organ builder Donald Harrison, Biggs led a revival of classical pipe-organ music in America. Through constant touring, a weekly CBS radio show and an aggressive knack for self-promotion, Biggs, originally from England, became a star. He traveled, playing all of Western Europe's surviving baroque organs. In 1970 he was excited to visit and make a recording at the church in Leipzig, Germany, where Bach sang as a choirboy.

Fox panned Biggs' playing as boring and conservative, and he fancied himself as the true modern-day master of Bach. While both men had considerable fan bases, Fox may well have had the edge when it came to showmanship.

For example, during an Easter service in 1951 at Riverside Church in New York, the pipe organ's loudest, tuba-like stop became stuck, letting out a deafening rumble. To fix it, rather than simply turning off the organ, Fox--the resident organist--scaled two ladders in view of 4,000 people (including President Dwight Eisenhower, his wife and main church benefactor Nelson Rockefeller) and removed the offending pipes from their places. Fox had been complaining for some time about necessary repairs at the church, and this was a perfect way to drive home the point.

Fox's immense talent as an organist was matched by his dramatic sense of style, featuring flowing capes, a lavish spending habit and nasty public quarrels with his boyfriend. A stark contrast to Biggs, Fox embraced the electronic organ and is credited with bringing classical music to a younger audience. Half Elton John and half Liberace, Fox played to a sold-out crowd at the Fillmore East in New York City in 1970. He began his performance--which featured dry-ice fog and a light show--by telling the audience, " 'Sebastian Bach is delighted you are here.' "

Whitney's meticulous research and his knack for storytelling make his book the most engaging and readable of these three. Like the other authors, though, his passion for music is clear. This passion leads to a consistent instructive quality across the three books that is aimed at helping the reader emerge with a better insight into the still mysterious and beautiful world of music.

Whether music is your life or simply a quiet, momentary place away from life, the insights these authors provide can enhance your understanding of music and perhaps clarify some of the messages and meaning you attach to it.

*Terrence Hackett is a Chicago writer.*

### **[Illustration]**

PHOTOS 6 GRAPHIC; Caption: PHOTOS and GRAPHIC (color): Chicago Symphony Orchestra musical director Daniel Barenboim (from left), composer Ludwig van Beethoven (with part of his manuscript for the Ninth Symphony) and organist Virgil Fox appear in three new books that explore the world of music. Tribune photo illustration by Earl Toledo.

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