

MUSIC REVIEW

ASO serves a joyful dose of Beethoven

By **MICHAEL HUEBNER**
News staff writer

Taken in large doses, Beethoven can be joyful, stimulating and intoxicating. It can make you forget about waterboarding, wars, politics and financial devastation, if only for a few hours. It can also be unforgettable, especially with the right mix of musicians.

Such was the case Friday at the Alys Stephens Center, when the Alabama Symphony completed its three-year cycle of Beethoven symphonies under the expert guidance of Music Director Justin Brown.

The pairing of the eighth and ninth symphonies on the final 2008-09 MasterWorks program leaned toward the joyful. Symphony No. 8, composed during one of the most difficult times in Beethoven's life, exudes ebullience, playfulness and classical freshness, and Brown's reading exemplified this spirit. Punchy accents and suave lines were congenial partners. Concise spurts and flourishes played to the composer's Haydnesque side while giving a nod to the Romantic era.

But the jubilation of this concert was heightened with Symphony No. 9 ("Choral"). In the three opening instrumental movements, Brown molded phrases like soft clay or blown glass. At times he looked like a jockey, prodding the orchestra with circular motions and driving momentum. At other times, he drew out achingly lyrical lines. In the familiar "Ode to Joy" finale, the low strings — only 11 strong — boomed out the theme with power and conviction.

Bass Timothy Jones announced "O Freunde" with startling intensity from the back of the stage, where the four soloists were situated. The other vocalists — Janice Chandler-Eteme, Margaret Jane Wray and Jay Hunter

★★★★★

ALABAMA SYMPHONY

Justin Brown, conductor
Janice Chandler-Eteme, soprano
Margaret Jane Wray, mezzo-soprano

○
Jay Hunter Morris, tenor
Timothy Jones, bass
Birmingham Concert Chorale

Friday
Alys Stephens Center
Repeats today at 8 p.m.

Morris, matched Jones' with fiery solos of their own. An energized Birmingham Concert Chorale was as focused as it could be, given the thorny octaves and impossible leaps Beethoven provided.

Yet through quick tempos and momentum building emerged warmth and light, the "Ode to Joy" performed with religious fervor. And joy.

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