

HYMNS AND ODES

A Concert by Jerome Ellis

The Brother in Elysium Books, Tivoli, NY

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“As a carpenter making a seat for the chariot, I bend the hymn around my heart.”

-Rigveda X, tr. E.J. Thomas

Freude, schöner Götterfunken,
Tochter aus Elysium,
Wir betreten feuertrunken,
Himmlische, dein Heiligtum!

Joy, beautiful spark of gods,
Daughter of Elysium,
We enter, drunk on fire,
Heavenly One, thy sanctuary!

-from “An die Freude” (Ode to Joy) by
Friedrich Schiller

A group of runaway slaves was hiding in a forest somewhere between Maryland and New York one night in the 1850s. The children, drugged with opium to keep them asleep, were lying on the ground, and each adult stood silently behind a tree, hungry and terrified. Whites were scouring the woods, knocking on doors, and stopping people on the road, frantic to find the runaway party and collect the \$40,000 reward. The slaves stood and waited, jumping at every sound: the wind, an animal. Then they heard a woman’s voice singing in the distance: “Hail, oh hail ye happy spirits, / Death no more shall make you fear.” The slaves knew this hymn meant the coast was clear and they could continue to the next “station” of the Underground Railroad. But if the voice had sung “Moses go down in Egypt, / Till ole Pharo’ let me go; / Hadn’t been for Adam’s fall, / Shouldn’t hab to died at all,” that would have meant danger was ahead and they needed to remain hidden in silence. The voice belonged to their “conductor,” Harriet Tubman.

In May 1785, at the age of twenty-five, Friedrich Schiller arrived in Leipzig to spend the summer living in a converted farmhouse. Like most poets he was having cash flow problems. That summer he wrote “An die Freude.” Forty years later, after a period of great political turmoil, Beethoven set the poem to music to close his Ninth Symphony. Beethoven’s setting has since been used as a protest song and a utopian anthem: anti-Pinochet demonstrators sang it in Chile, Leonard Bernstein conducted the whole symphony after the Berlin Wall fell, and Chinese student protesters, using a makeshift broadcast system cobbled together from loudspeakers hooked up to car batteries, blared the song against the speeches and music broadcast by the Chinese Communist Party in Tiananmen Square.

The use of code songs was common among slaves well before Tubman. In general slaves were forbidden to talk to each other, so they communicated through hymns and spirituals right in front of their masters. Ironically, many of these songs had been taught to them by these same masters.

As a black musician living and working in America, every time I pick up an instrument, the heritage of Tubman's code songs is present in my playing. I can't escape the explicit connection she drew between hymns and freedom, music and liberation. Tubman herself was participating in a longer history: the bond between hymns and passage stretches back at least to the Vedic Hymns of the Indian subcontinent in the second millennium BCE: "As a carpenter making a seat for the chariot, I bend the hymn around my heart."

When the seventy-one-year-old Bernstein conducted the Ninth Symphony on Christmas Day 1989, he told the choir to sing the word Freiheit (freedom) instead of Freude (joy) in the poem's chorus. Indeed, some scholars believe Schiller originally wrote an ode to freedom and later changed it to avoid an overtly political message and possible censorship in Absolutist Europe. But there's a third F associated with the poem: Freundschaft (friendship). Judging from his correspondence, Schiller wrote the poem partially as an outpouring of joy in his newfound friendship with Freemason Christian Gottfried Körner, who would later patronize and house the often penniless writer.

Freude, Freiheit, Freundschaft: a triad of utopian values. Can a bookstore embody all three? I can't speak for others, but I've found them in The Brother in Elysium Books. It's a bookstore, yes, one that believes in books as a "venue for communication and possibility." But it's also an exhibition space, as well as a place to think and breathe and have real interactions with people. Books contribute to our liberation in different ways: by disseminating and protecting ideas, by providing solace and room for reflection, by inspiring conversations. Above all they bring people together into a space of possibility, a space of possible liberation.

Tonight I'll play some hymns and odes I've written and inherited over the years. These are songs of praise—in praise of the earth, in praise of poetry, in praise of blackness, in praise of peace.

The night Harriet Tubman escaped from slavery for the first time (she was forced to return two weeks later and soon after escaped for good), she walked past the cabins of the other slaves and sang:

When dat ar ole chariot comes,
I'm gwine to lebe you,
I'm boun' for de promised land,
Frien's, I'm gwine to lebe you.

I'll meet you in de mornin',
When you reach de promised land;
On de oder side of Jordan,
For I'm boun' for de promised land.