LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1826)
MISSA SOLEMNIS, OP. 123

The biographer Maynard Solomon described the life of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1826) as "a series of creative events unique in the history of mankind." Foremost among these creative events is the *Missa Solemnis* (Op. 123), a work so intense, heartfelt and original that it nearly defies categorization.

Beethoven began the *Missa* in 1819 in response to a commission from Archduke Rudolf of Austria, youngest son of the Hapsburg emperor and a pupil and patron of the composer. The young aristocrat desired a new Mass setting for his enthronement as Archbishop of Olmütz (modern day Olomouc, in the Czech Republic), scheduled for late the following year. Bringing with it sovereignty over a small but wealthy principality, Rudolf's elevation as a prince of the church was as much a temporal as a spiritual occasion. Beethoven attached great importance to Rudolf's good fortune and, spurred by genuine good will (and no small amount of self-interest), set about the work he would come to view as his masterpiece.

After a long hiatus from symphonic music (the years since 1812 having been devoted primarily to chamber works) and at the end of a decade that witnessed Beethoven's withdrawal into total deafness, the end of his performance career and an anguished child custody battle over his nephew, Karl, the *Missa* did not flow easily from the composer's pen. Whether it was the pressure of the commission's importance, the weight of his personal struggles or the painstaking birth of his "Late Period" style, Beethoven quickly realized the *Missa* would not be finished in time for Rudolf's installation. Luckily for us, the passage of the deadline freed him to conceptualize the *Missa* as a work of greater permanence and universality, a keystone of his own musical and personal legacy.

The Kyrie and Gloria settings were largely complete by March of 1820, with the Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei following in late 1820 and 1821. Beethoven continued to polish the work through 1823, in the meantime embarking on a convoluted campaign to publish the work through a number of competing European houses. (At one point, he represented the existence of no less than three Masses to various publishers when all were one and the same.) A torrent of masterworks joined the *Missa* during this final decade of Beethoven's life, including the *"Hammerklavier"* Sonata (Op. 106), *Diabelli Variations* (Op. 120), *Grosse Fuge* (Op. 133) and final five string quartets (Opp. 127, 130, 131, 132 and 135), and *Ninth Symphony* (Op. 125).

The *Missa* received its first performance in 1824 in Saint Petersburg, at the palace of the Austro-Russian Prince Galitzin, another of Beethoven's chief patrons. Later that year, the Kyrie, Gloria and Credo were offered in Vienna as "Three Grand Hymns with Solo and Chorus Voices," in an epic concert that included the premiere of the *Ninth Symphony*. Publication followed in 1825-1826, with Beethoven correcting the proofs during his final illness. Schott's of Mainz, who had won the publishing sweepstakes, rushed Beethoven the case of Rhine wine he received on his deathbed: "Pity – pity – too late!" were his final words.

Beethoven actively sponsored the notion that the *Missa* transcended liturgical use,

in the vein of the great oratorios of Haydn and Handel, whom he revered. In the words of one commentator, the work's massive energy surely "overflows the church by its spirit and its dimensions." At its heart, however, Beethoven conceived of the *Missa* as an expression of the Humanity, God, and Nature "that stood as the foundation of [his] ever-ascending superstructure of faith and expectation." (Solomon) In the same 1821 letter to Archduke Rudolf which invoked this "spiritual trinity," the composer went on to write that "there is nothing higher than to approach the Godhead more nearly than other mortals and by means of that *contact* to spread the rays of the Godhead through the human race." Even for a composer not known for making humble claims about his talent, this objective was nothing less than Promethean.

In service of this exalted task, Beethoven studied closely contemporary settings of sacred texts, including the late Masses of Haydn, his own *Mass in C* (Op. 86) (1807), the Mozart *Requiem* and litanies of C.P.E. Bach, and journeyed even further into the musical past, including the oratorios of Handel and choral works of J.S. Bach, the works of Palestrina and beyond. He looked to Gregorian chant as the most perfect model of sacred music, writing in one of his conversation books that "in the old church modes the devotion is divine…and God permit me to express it someday." As the scholar Warren Kirkendale convincingly demonstrated, these "Old Roads to New Ideas" brought fresh inspiration and insight to Beethoven as he constructed his edifice of musical belief.

If the *Missa* constitutes the composer's attempt to carry the "bright spark of divinity" from "up there" to "down here" and ultimately "in here," one has to ask just what impact he envisioned on the unsuspecting listener. The answer is, quite simply, dialogue – dialogue with sovereign individuals capable of knowing the Divine through human nature, intellect and action. The *Missa*, along with the *Eroica Symphony* and *Ninth Symphony* – the soundtrack of the Enlightenment – ranks as one of Beethoven's great humanistic utterances. In the words of the critic Paul Griffiths, the *Missa* and the *Ninth Symphony* "are two colossal counterparts, celebrations of the godliness of humanity and the humanity of God."

In an era that witnessed wrenching, revolutionary changes in the social order, and a growing awareness of the crisis of modernity, Beethoven wrote that "only art and science give us intimations and hopes of a higher life." The composer's belief in the durability of artistic achievement shows itself in the intensely personal – even risky – character of the composer's late works. There is indeed the sense, in sections of the *Missa*, that Beethoven is thrusting out his hand against the hope that the unknown, unseen, and unborn listener may grasp it and know the best of him, and that which he wanted to survive.

Possessed of a beautiful mind and complex personality, cruelly isolated by deafness, and marked by a disillusioning life experience, Beethoven's fundamental optimism and fearless creativity shine through in his life's work. Through his immense personal trials, he never gave up on his fellow-man. At the head of the autograph score of the *Missa Solemnis* he inscribed the words, "from the heart – may it return again – to the heart." There has been no more succinct or beautiful expression of the purpose of music, and the art and aim of the composer.

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KYRIE

"HE IS OF HIMSELF ALONE, AND IT IS TO THIS ALONENESS THAT ALL THINGS OWE THEIR BEING." This ancient Egyptian incantation, copied out by Beethoven from Schiller's essay, "The Mission of Moses," sat in a frame next to the composer's writing desk. Marked "Mit Andacht" (with devotion), the Kyrie evokes the splendid isolation of the Deity. An atmosphere of solemnity and majesty is conveyed with massive, immoveable chords, as Beethoven introduces the chorus and soloist groupings that provide contrasting textures throughout the rest of the *Missa*. The pace quickens at the text "Christe eleison," as the human face of God reveals itself.

Kyrie eleison.	*Lord, have mercy upon us.*
Christe eleison.	*Christ, have mercy upon us.*
Kyrie eleison.	*Lord, have mercy upon us.*

GLORIA

The suspenseful closing of the Kyrie gives way to one of the most ecstatic and compelling settings of the Gloria canticle in existence. Ascending phrases express exaltation ("Gloria in excelsis" – "laudamus te"); devotional phrases ("adoramus te" – "et in terra pax hominibus") are serenely conveyed. Beethoven reserves the first trombone entrance for a massive outburst on the word "omnipotens," in keeping with his penchant for emphasizing words of particular importance. During the contemplative middle section, the image of Christ seated at the right hand of the Father is set in unmistakably regal terms, with dotted rhythms, trumpets and drums. A swaggering fugue on the text "in gloria Dei Patris" is introduced by one of the most exciting transitions in all of music. (The fugue's principal subject is a direct quotation from the majestic "Amen" chorus that ends Handel's *Messiah*.) Beethoven dramatizes the liturgical text of the Gloria, writing "ah, miserere" and "o! miserere" for added emphasis in the middle section, and, thrillingly, repeating the text "Gloria in excelsis Deo!" at the end, culminating in a jubilant shout.

Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.	*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.*
Laudamus te. Adoramus te. Benedicimus te. Glorificamus te.	*We praise thee. We adore thee. We bless thee. We glorify thee.*
Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam.	*We give thanks to thee on account of thy great glory.*
Domine Deus, rex coelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens. Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe. Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris:	*Lord God, king of heaven, God the omnipotent Father. Lord the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father:*
Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis.	*Who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us. Who takest away the sins of the world, hear our prayer. Who sittest at the right hand of the Father, have mercy upon us.*

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Quoniam tu solus sanctus, tu solus Dominus, tu solus altissimus: Jesu Christe, cum Sancto Spiritu, in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.	*For thou alone art holy, thou alone art God, thou alone art most high: Jesus Christ, with the Holy Ghost, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.*

CREDO

Beethoven's setting of the Nicene Creed best exemplifies his debt to early music in writing the *Missa*. Dorian mode is employed for the tenor and bass chant on the text "et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto"; later thematic material, including the "et vitam venturi" fugue theme, is written in Mixolydian mode. A solo flute announces the Incarnation – the Word becomes flesh – and a powerful *a cappella* outburst from the choir announces the Resurrection. (Beethoven reserves moments of extreme drama for unaccompanied voices in numerous places in the *Missa.*) The use of trombones on the word "judicare" to evoke the Last Trumpet (*letzte posaune*) is but one of many other skillful devices. With its archaic cadences, extensive modal writing and organic attachment of musical motives to the underlying text, Beethoven's Credo is far closer in spirit to the great Mass settings of the Renaissance than to those of Haydn and his contemporaries. Beethoven lavished attention on the double setting of the "et vitam venturi" fugue, looking perhaps to his own everlasting life through music. The reserved, almost halting first statement is experienced through a glass, darkly; the exuberant (and almost unsingable) recapitulation brings us head over heels into the afterlife. A massive "Amen!" set to four stationary chords allows us to imagine that, after rapping on the doors of Heaven, we hear God knocking back.

Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium omnium, et invisibilium. Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum. Et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula. Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero. Genitum, not factum, consubstantialem Patri: per quem omnia facta sunt. Qui propter nos homines, et propter nostram salutem descendit de coelis. Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine: ET HOMO FACTUS EST. Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, passus, et sepultus est. Et resurrexit tertia die, secundum Scripturas. Et ascendit in coelum: sedet ad dexteram Patris. Et iterum venturus est com gloria judicare vivos et mortuos, cujus regni non erit finis.	*I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Ghost by the Virgin Mary, AND WAS MADE MAN; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and on the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.*
Credo in Spiritum Sanctum, Dominum et vivificantem: qui ex Patre Filioque	*And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the*

procedit. Qui cum Patre, et Filio simul adoratur et conglorificatur: qui locutus est per Prophetas. *Credo* in unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam. Confiteor unum baptisma in remissionem peccatorum. Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum. Et vitam ventura saeculi. Amen.	*Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. And I believe in one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

SANCTUS AND BENEDICTUS

The Sanctus (Isaiah 6:3) and Benedictus (Matthew 21:9) are the earliest texts to enter the Mass Ordinary, in widespread usage roughly in the second century CE. In the liturgy, they introduce the miracle of the Eucharist, the literal conversion of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The dark-hued introduction of the Sanctus, assigned to violas, cellos and soloists at the low ebb of their ranges, gives way to a brief acclamation on the text "pleni sunt coeli gloria tua – Osanna in excelsis!" The devotional "Praeludium" that precedes the Benedictus evokes the organ improvisation that typically took place as the priest consecrated the Host (*praeludieren* meaning "to improvise" in German). The entrance of the violin, accompanied by flutes, is meant to indicate the materialization of Christ at the altar. The dialogue for solo violin and solo quartet that follows is one of the most beautiful and heartfelt slow movements in all of Beethoven. In the marvelous words of Robert Shaw, "the Benedictus is the vast, timeless repose towards which the Gloria and the Credo have been rushing."

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth. Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua. Osanna in excelsis.	*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts. Heaven and earth are full of thy glory. Hosanna in the highest.*
Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini. Osanna in excelsis.	*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.*

AGNUS DEI

Beethoven's setting of the Agnus Dei is dark and naturalistic, owing a great deal to Haydn's setting in the *Mass in Time of War* (H. XXII:9). No stranger to war, Beethoven once cowered in a cellar during Napoleon's bombardment of Vienna, using a pile of mattresses to preserve what remained of his hearing. Anxious string figures accompany soloists and male chorus, before the movement shifts into a buoyant, pastoral rendition of the text "Dona nobis pacem," marked in the composer's own hand as "a prayer for inner and outer peace." An inveterate hiker and nature-lover, Beethoven wrote that he was most at peace when surrounded by his beloved countryside, where "surely, woods, trees and rocks produce the echo which man desires to hear." The movement's simple, bucolic character hides a multitude of complex rhythmical figures and difficult woodwind solos in the orchestra, and tremendous harmonic challenges for the solo quartet. The two "war interruptions," one a soloist recitativo with distant military trumpets (marked

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"*timidamente – ängtlisch*"), and the other a fiendishly complicated orchestral interlude on warring themes from elsewhere in the movement, have been explained by Warren Kirkendale as "tropes, inserted into the liturgical text and expanding its ideas." A lone, evanescent drumbeat appears before the final resolution; in one of his sketchbooks for the *Missa*, Beethoven scribbled, "timpani at the end, as a sign of piece." In the end, Beethoven's Arcadian vision triumphs, as Man emerges into the sunshine.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,	*Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of*
miserere nobis.	*the world, have mercy on us.*
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,	*Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of*
miserere nobis.	*the world, have mercy on us.*
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,	*Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of*
miserere nobis.	*the world, have mercy on us.*
Dona nobis pacem.	*Grant us peace.*