

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): Mass in C, Op.86 (1807)

Kyrie

Gloria

Credo

Sanctus

Benedictus

Agnus Dei

Compared to Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven wrote little church music. There are two clear reasons for this: first, Beethoven's own sense of the religious as a dimension of experience and secondly his increasingly successful commitment to making his way as a freelance musician at a time of declining interest in church music in Vienna at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was almost certainly a consequence of the liturgical reforms of the Emperor Joseph II in the 1780's (Beethoven had composed cantatas to mark his death and the elevation of his successor, Leopold II in 1790). By 1802, Beethoven had reached the end of what has come to be termed the first maturity of his middle period (1798-1812). This was marked by the Heiligenstadt Testament which, though it remained hidden among his private papers until his death a quarter of a century later, contained a statement of resolve for dealing with the devastating realisation that his loss of hearing was not a passing distress but a permanent, chronic affliction. He wrote that it had forced him "to become a philosopher in my twenty-eighth year – though it was not easy, and for the artist much more difficult than for anyone else. Almighty God, who looks down into my inmost soul, you know that it is filled with love for humanity and a desire to do good". He decided to confront his deafness by continuing his work in the belief that steadfastness and endurance are the most important personal qualities with which to face adversity. As his appeal to the deity suggests, Beethoven's sense of the religious was personal and not dependent on the mediation or intercession of church or clergy. His catholic upbringing had been in the context of individualist enlightenment rationalism which, though it did not affect the firmness of his belief in the ultimate benevolence of a divine being, meant that by the second maturity of his middle period he had formulated clearly his humanist perspective that art was generated by the aesthetic vision and intellectual energy of artists themselves, rather than a result of divine inspiration. As secular phenomena, works of art could not have a purpose greater than the celebration of humankind. As well as attempting to realise aesthetic ideals, works of art should also relate to human experience. His approach to composition of works on religious topics, therefore, whilst thoughtful and respectful, was grounded in some dimension of human experience rather than a sense of the sacred. The tension that this inevitably created when Beethoven turned to his startling, late setting of the *Mass in D (Missa Solemnis)* in 1823 led Theodor Adorno to praise it as an alienated masterpiece.

The two works with a religious character that Beethoven composed during his later middle period were *Christus am Olberge* (1803) and the setting of the *Mass in C*. The earlier work (which he revised in 1811) was begun immediately following the Heiligenstadt Testament. It provided an elaborated metaphor, in Christ's final abandonment and betrayal on the eve of his trial and crucifixion, for the human isolation that Beethoven felt condemned to by the deafness which, as he wrote to his friend Franz Wegeler, had deprived him of "a sense I once possessed in the highest perfection...such as few in my profession have ever possessed" making his life "miserable...because I find it impossible to say to people, I am deaf". His decision to set the *Mass in C* was certainly less emotional but still personal

though in a different way. By 1801 Beethoven had achieved the independence as a freelance composer that Mozart had so tragically failed to accomplish by the time of his death a decade earlier and was able to write to Wegeler: "My compositions bring me in a good deal; and I may say that I am offered more commissions than it is possible for me to carry out...people no longer come to an arrangement with me, I state my price and they pay. So you can see how pleasantly situated I am". His work at this time is widely regarded as the fullest musical aesthetic realisation of bourgeois enlightenment humanism. The court society to which several of his aristocratic patrons belonged and from whom he received guaranteed stipends was fast declining in the face of growing nationalism and republicanism across Europe, and it was against the background of these political changes that Beethoven developed his commitment to self-realisation through art. During this period he had developed from his late classical training through the individualist reorientations of romanticism to a capacity for virtuosic expression of the dominant secular forms of contemporary orchestral, chamber and solo instrumental music. The security of his stipends had paradoxically enabled him to enjoy creative freedom from court patronage and to negotiate sponsored performances and publication contracts for his music to provide himself with an additional, independent income. His reasons for accepting the commission for a setting of the Mass from Prince Nicolaus Esterhazy II would therefore have been complex.

The Prince had for the past decade commissioned a new setting of the ordinary of the Mass each year for performance at his Eisenstadt palace to celebrate the nameday of his wife, Princess Marie Hermenegild. Until 1802, these had been composed by his long-standing and eminent kappelmeister, who had also been one of Beethoven's teachers: Haydn, of course, who had composed his second setting of the *Te Deum* for the same occasion in his final year in the post. His deputies and successors were charged with the responsibility after his retirement until 1806, when Beethoven was asked to provide the setting for the following year. The Prince's reasons for doing so are not recorded but may well have been in recognition of Beethoven's position as the most important composer in Vienna - he had recently premiered his Fourth Piano Concerto, Fourth Symphony and Violin Concerto. Beethoven accepted the invitation, though with some anxiety, saying to the Prince: "you are accustomed to have the inimitable masterpieces of the great Haydn performed for you". Yet this seems to have been part of the challenge for Beethoven - to exhibit his own skill in a genre of which Haydn was the undisputed master but in which he had yet to work himself. His sketches for the Gloria show careful study of Haydn, including two passages copied from the Gloria of Haydn's *Schopfungsmesse* (Creation Mass), and several commentators have also noted thematic similarities with the *Missa in tempore belli* (Mass in Time of War) - also a C-major setting. Beethoven's misgivings about the Prince's response to the marked differences from Haydn in his setting were not misplaced. After hearing the work he is reported to have said: "But my dear Beethoven, what is this that you have done now?" This apparently compounded Beethoven's sense of insult at the artisanal guest quarters he had been allotted in Eisenstadt, more suited to the inferior status of court employee, which was exacerbated further by the sycophantic laughter at Nicolaus's remark by the present kappelmeister, the (lesser) composer and pianist Joseph Hummel, who had himself set the mass in C-major for the same occasion in the previous year.

What Beethoven had actually 'done now', however, was to consolidate the unprecedented expectations of the chorus which he had begun with the completion of the second version of his opera *Leonore (Fidelio)* the previous year. The historian of choral music, Chester L. Alwes, argues that Beethoven's *Mass in C* redefines "'symphonic mass' in the unusual use of tonalities, cyclic return of music, (and) orchestral interludes based on motivic continuity to create seamless connections between otherwise disparate movements". It paved the way for the *Choral Fantasy* of the following year - itself a first draft for the final, choral movement of the Ninth Symphony - and

the *Missa Solemnis*. Esterhazy could not have been expected to see this, however, and wrote later that “Beethoven’s music is unbearably ridiculous and detestable”; and Beethoven himself admitted that he had “treated the text (of the Mass) in a manner in which it has rarely been treated”. One quite idiosyncratic indication of this is given at the outset in the elaborate characterisation of tempo rubato for the Kyrie: *Andante con moto, assai vivace, quasi allegretto ma non troppo* (roughly: quick Andante, very lively, somewhat Allegretto but not too much)! Yet this instruction sets what becomes the prevailing mood of conscious, careful restraint, not just of the opening movement but of the work as a whole and reflects what Beethoven terms an “inner submission, the true inwardness of religious feeling” that he later terms “inner peace” in relation to the *Dona nobis pacem* of the *Missa Solemnis*, over the whole score of which he was to inscribe the profoundly humanist injunction ‘From the heart – may it go again – to the heart’. With the *Mass in C*, Beethoven explores the Romantic concept of *stille Andacht* (quiet devotion) in a work of deep repose, in strong contrast to the heroic operaticism of *Leonore* and the Third (*Eroica*) Symphony – and to the radiant optimism of Haydn’s later masses. The atmosphere of the entire work, according to the Romantic critic E. T. A. Hoffman, is of “childlike cheerful feelings, which, building upon its purity, entrusts its faith to the goodness of God and prays to him, as to a father who wishes the best for his children and hears their supplications”.

The Kyrie opens with the basses’ soft, sonorous intonation of the first two syllables, and flows on evenly through the first section before swelling diatonically into the contrasting E-major of *Christe Eleison*, then returning to the opening C-major music in a gentle climax on the closing Kyrie. This tripartite structure also organises the Gloria, whose rousing *Allegro (con brio)* opening moves, at first briskly towards a slower, more supplicatory central section led by the soloists in the minor key at *Qui tollis peccata mundi*. The final section begins its vigorous fugal procession at a reinvocation of *Allegro ma non troppo* for the chorus’s assertive *Quoniam tu solus sanctus*, building to an exultant climax on *cum Sancto Spiritu in gloria Dei Patris, Amen*. This more varied and at times more powerful expression in contrast to the Kyrie is characteristic also of the Credo and its extended narrative statement of the core mysteries of Christian faith. The opening expository series of differentiated beliefs is underwritten with a persistent string accompaniment, allowing for a range of dynamic choral textures to highlight the different interpretative meanings of the liturgical text. The central section follows contemporary custom in slowing to an *Adagio* in a different key on the soloists’ incantations of *Et incarnatus est*, before the basses lead the chorus, *forte* and forceful into *Crucifixus etiam pro nobis*. The initial tempo of the movement then resumes to celebrate the resurrection and moves to a joyfully prolonged fugal conclusion on *Et vitam venturi saeculi. Amen*.

The Sanctus opens in a quiet, appropriately reverential *Adagio* but soon recovers the cheerful *Allegro* of the end of the Credo on *Pleni sunt coeli et terra*, moving into a short *Osanna* fugue before the soloists commence the relaxed extended *Benedictus*. Chorus and soloists alternate in a gently undulating dialogue which sustains a mood of simple piety before concluding with a refrain of *Osanna in excelsis*. The final movement of the mass, a lengthy *Agnus Dei* resumes the structure of three sections in which the Kyrie and Gloria have been set. Beethoven also again follows convention in setting its prayerful opening in the minor key at a deeply rhythmic *Poco andante*, switching back to a more energetic *Allegro ma non troppo* in C-major for the chorus and soloists’ dialogue on *dona nobis pacem*. This builds expressively through dynamics shifting between *forte* and *piano*, halting briefly at a repetition of *Agnus Dei*, followed by an alternating choral series of *miserere*, before resuming its gradual progress to *Andante con moto, Tempo del Kyrie*, in which the tranquil opening thematic material of the Kyrie, as well as its tempo return to bring the work to its calm ending in what Hoffman terms “a feeling of inner melancholy, which, however, does not tear the heart to

pieces but rather soothes it, and, like the pain that comes to us from another world, dissolves it in unearthly joy”.