

DIE SELIGKEITEN (THE BEATITUDES)

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) Die Seligkeiten S25 (1859)

Liszt's compact but atmospheric setting of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5, v 3-10) for choir, solo baritone and organ, was composed as part of his major oratorio, *Christus*. It was the first movement to be completed and was first performed, well before the full oratorio was finished, in Weimar at the wedding of the daughter of Liszt's lover, Princess Carolyne. It uses the invocation and response structure of mediaeval plainsong, a familiar feature of the Catholic liturgy, to present these teachings of Christ in the form of a moving dialogue between chorus and baritone soloist (in tonight's performance, the choir's vocal consultant, Mark Oldfield).

The Beatitudes are a core Christian text, the apparent simplicity of which distills, into a series of the purest of aphorisms, some of the most spiritually intense formulations of the Christian message, core axioms of the faith. Realisation of the qualities that they espouse as blessed enables transcendence of self-interest, an important goal of Christian practice and one summation of its moral worth. Interpreting them as injunctions makes it possible to recognise them as directions to a Christian way of life, the destination of which is an intrinsic state of grace, enjoyed already by those whose qualities appear to be furthest from conventional, materialist assumptions about the ordinary actions required to achieve blessedness. Liszt composed his setting of them in 1859 whilst Kapellmeister-in-Extraordinary to his friend Carl Alexander, the Grand Duke of Weimar. He had occupied the post since 1848, during which time he had settled into a relationship with the second great love of his life, Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, the estranged wife of an aide of the Russian Tsar Nicholas I. Liszt's personal life had long been characterized by tension between a strong religious impulse and a love of worldly sensation and it was whilst at Weimar that his sense of the religious began to dominate his consciousness. This was marked in part by his decision to confront what he termed 'the problem of the oratorio' – "the one object in art", as he wrote to his friend, Franz Brendel, "to which I must sacrifice everything else". He had already solved, as he saw it, the problem of the symphony and was already famous as a pianist and composer. In 1853 he conceived what he subsequently referred to as 'my musical will and testament', the oratorio *Christus* (1866-72), the composition of which, he said, "was an artistic necessity for me. Now that it is done, I am content".



It took another 13 years before the oratorio was finally done but the first movement to be completed was the setting of *Die Seligkeiten*, which was first performed in Weimar at the wedding of Princess Carolyne's daughter. The selection of this text seems to have marked the point at which Liszt began to solve the problems he experienced initially in deciding on an appropriate libretto, the remainder of which is complemented by other biblical texts, mediaeval Latin hymns and excerpts from the Catholic liturgy. In the final sequence of movements it comes sixth, with the first beatitude as subtitle, 'Beati pauperes spiritu', opening the second half of the work (entitled *Post Epiphanium*). It is deployed to announce the core of Christ's teaching at the beginning of the narrative of his mature life and the passion of his sacrifice. Its composition seems also to mark the beginnings of the maturity of Liszt's own religious vocation. The majority of *Christus* was written in Rome between 1863-65. Liszt had followed Princess Carolyne there in 1861, where she had gone to seek an annulment to her marriage to Prince Nicholas in order to marry Liszt. Political and ecclesiastical machinations over the control of her husband's estate meant she failed to achieve this despite her strenuous efforts to do so. Liszt meanwhile settled into a cell at the monastery of Madonna del Rosario where he began to

pursue his religious vocation by preparing himself for the lower monastic orders. This was not so much a newfound calling as one that he said “harmonized with all the antecedents of my youth” – not least, perhaps, because the orders to which he sought admission did not require celibacy. He had no desire to be a monk in what he termed “the severe sense of the word” and never became a priest. His receipt of the tonsure as Abbé Liszt in 1865, whilst he was completing *Christus*, enabled him “to belong to the hierarchy of the church to such a degree as the minor orders allow me to do”. After 1870 he became a close friend of Pope Pius IX, who took to calling him ‘my dear Palestrina’ and for whom he gave private recitals at the Vatican and Castel Gandolfo. Liszt was made honorary Canon of Albano in 1879.

Christus requires considerable choral and orchestral forces as well as solo organ, six soloists and an additional offstage female choir. Its loose, episodic structure, which takes more than three hours to perform, relies on plainchant melodies – perhaps making sense of the Pope’s term of endearment for him - with which a Catholic audience would be familiar and which Liszt had studied for his earlier oratorio, *St Elizabeth of Hungary* (1857-62). This he had also completed in Rome whilst composing the later work. In its quiet, almost devotional simplicity, however, *Die Seligkeiten* is in marked contrast to

much of the full work, its structure cast in the familiar mediaeval plainsong form of invocation and response between soloist and chorus. A short organ introduction, marked *andante con pietà*, sets an appropriately gentle pace as each one of the eight scriptural categories listed in the Matthean gospel of those who are blessed (Glücklich sind) is serially invoked in a solemn and gentle manner by the soloist, together with a statement of what will be their reward and thus the basis of their benediction. The chorus then responds with a repetition of this followed by a pause, marked *lange*, before the next. The tempo of the work remains much the same throughout whilst the dynamic is varied occasionally, but only ever briefly, for the soloist to *forte*, followed by a return to *piano espressivo*; for the chorus, occasional *crescendo* to *forte* is interspersed with the same instruction to return to quiet expression. More significant change occurs as the work approaches its climax, at the invocation of the final blessing which is preceded by the soloist’s triple repetition, *forte*, of ‘Glücklich’ at the nomination of the persecuted (die Verfolgungen). The chorus respond, moving through the same dynamic to *fortissimo* for the statement of their reward ‘das Reich des Himmels ist ihre Belohnung’ (theirs is the kingdom of heaven) before returning to *piano* for a repetition. Soloist and chorus then draw the work to a close in a gradual *diminuendo* of harmonic repetitions of ‘das Reich des Himmels’ before a concluding triplet of soft ‘Amen’s’.

Die Seligkeiten

Glücklich sind die geistlich Armen, denn das Himmelreich ist ihre Belohnung.

Glücklich die Sanften; denn sie werden das Reich der Erde erhalten.

Glücklich die Trauernden; denn sie sollen getröstet werden.

Glücklich, die da hungert und dürstet nach Gerechtigkeit, denn sie sollen gesättigt werden.

Glücklich sind die Barmherzigen, denn sie werden Barmherzigkeit erlangen.

Glücklich die reinen Herzens sind, denn sie werden Gott schauen.

Glücklich die Friedfertigen, denn sie werden Kinder Gottes heißen.

Glücklich, die Verfolgung erleiden müssen ob der Gerechtigkeit, denn das Reich des Himmels ist ihre Belohnung.

Amen

The Beatitudes

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the Kingdom of Heaven is their reward.

Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the Kingdom of the Earth.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they that are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for the Kingdom of Heaven is their reward.

Amen