

Beethoven: *Missa solennis*
Script for Carnegie Hall Choral Workshop Video
Text by Robert Shaw
Final Revision of June 8, 1992

KYRIE

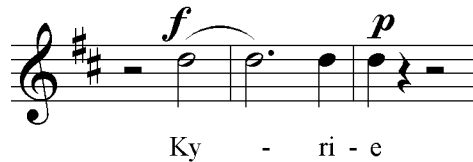
I suppose that the most striking first impression of the *Missa solennis* is that of unqualified seriousness, solemnity and majesty. One has no way of knowing, in the opening seconds, how long this heavy, slow pace will – or can – continue. When the chorus enters with three *fortissimo* cries, each dramatically and inhumanly stifled, it surely must be inescapable to the serious listener that there will be no easy questions and no glib answers.

Beethoven begins his work with silence – not unlike that silence which precedes biblical creation – “the darkness upon the face of the deep.” It has to be the most extraordinary “Down-beat” in the history of Western Music, for it makes of the hour and twenty minutes which follow it music’s most elaborate and dynamic “Up”-beat.



He deliberately obscures the metric function of the very first explosion of sound, and it is only several measures later that one can recognize a unit of metrics and can sense factors of pace and proportions in time.

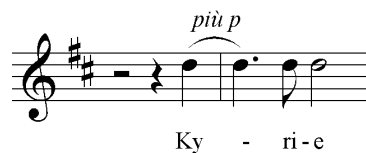
The most obvious interpretation of the opening choral “Kyrie,” with its plunge from *forte* to *piano* “e” is probably the correct one. The text “Kyrie eleison” or “Lord, have mercy upon us,” has existed since pagan antiquity, and its polarity is the awesome power of the Almighty Whatever as against frail and whimpering little Man.



After the impassioned address of the chorus, the soloists’ continuance of the musical and textual phrase not only suggest how each of the members of the human race faces solitary fears – and hands to the “family of man” (the chorus) the first fragment of imitable melody.

As would be expected, the “Christe” is less “awesome.” The tempo flows more graciously, the meter is less square, and the dynamics are less violent in their changes. This could suggest that “Christ-hood” (Son-ship) is a little less frightening and incomprehensible than “God-hood.” God has taken on human form; is more approachable, understanding and understandable.

The whispering, unadorned “Kyrie’s” in measure 209-212, are really diminutions of the earlier monstrous outcries. Their syncopations give an inexhaustible, unspeakable urgency as they fade away.



GLORIA

Essentially, the “Gloria” is a miniature Sacred Symphony in three movements: an *Allegro*, a *Larghetto*, and a *Finale* with a *Coda* that harks all the way back to measure one. It is an accumulation of musical, vocal and psychic

CREDO

The “Credo” is by far the wordiest of the five texts. Beethoven uses a four-note motive to declaim “Credo” – one of such simplicity and predictability that lesser composers might have stayed away from it.



But since there are four notes and only two syllables, he is obliged to repeat the word – and through the urgency of repetition, as well as subsequent development, escapes banality.

“Credo” is a first person singular verb (“I believe”), and once the chorus enters in measure 5, we hear substantially nothing in the next six measures but six “Credos,” which throws a tremendous importance upon the believer at the momentary expense of what is believed.

The “Deum de Deo” shouts are like the roll-call of the names of the “Domine Deus” in the “Gloria” – streaks of lightening through the orchestral tempest.

The short *fugato* on “consubstantialem patri” embodies the essence of fugal writing: many voices from many places at many times all saying one thing. Absolute unanimity within diversity, on the text “Of one being with the Father, by whom all things were made.”

“Qui propter nos homines” is a momentary lyric quiet hymn of thanks before the dramatic melodic descent as “the Son” plunges from the heavens.

The hushed, Gregorian-like entrance of the men’s voices at “Et incarnatus est” is to me one of the most transcendent moments in the entire *Missa solennis*. The ensuing solo quartet is accompanied by a fluttering flute. For generations before Beethoven, the hovering of the flute had been associated with the presence of the “Holy Spirit.”

The “Crucifixus” begins with the most literal of Beethoven’s musical illustrations, the hammering of nails through flesh into wood. As life’s blood slips away, the chorus at last rouses from an accompaniment role to swell the sadness of the passing – only to choke. It cannot say the words. At long last, in near silence, it lays the body in the tomb.

Ascension is a whirlwind of orchestral tunes, until the trombones finally announce the judgement on THE LOUD/LIVING and the quiet/dead (ms. 221-238).

The return of the “Credo” motive on the text “Credo in Spiritum Sanctum” is a theological affirmation that the “Holy Spirit” in fact “doth proceed from the Son and the Father.” -All this from the Beethoven who was a reluctant church-goer and who harbored mottoes from Eastern mystical cults.

“I respect Faith,” someone wrote, “but Doubt will get you an education.” -And few would doubt that Beethoven’s wrestling with his own doubts enabled him to write with uncommon passion in reference to aspects of the Christian liturgy which others are accustomed to accept unquestioningly.

Recall that in the opening movement he set three words: “Kyrie,” “Christe” and “eleison” in about twelve minutes of musical time. He now sets forty-two words, one hundred syllables in twenty-two measures, which is about forty-five seconds. Possible explanations are:

1. -Little interest in the Holy Ghost, and therefore made all references unintelligible or inaudible.
2. -May have recognized that he already had written at great length and intended to write lengthily in the fugue, so “get with it!”
3. -May have thought to hurry through text that mattered the least (the “sanctam Catholicam” perhaps didn’t entice his imagination as much as the crucifixion and suffering of the Hero).
4. -Inspired by Pentecostal ecstasy, with “Credos” flung all over. -An explosive turbulence. -Saint Vitus’ dance.

“Et vitam venturi” begins out of a contemplative stillness. If it’s performed as written – that is, if it’s sung *piano* for most of its length – the “life-that-is-to-be” comes into being as a tentative, almost timid questing, as though it were too great a miracle to be conceived, let alone grasped.

SANCTUS

The “Sanctus” has the sense of an endless sustained flow of musical serenity. It begins in B minor, which is a very rare and dark tonality for Beethoven. Though he is clearly in D major by measure 9, the exclusive use of low instruments, the solemn presence of the trombones, and the use of the solo quartet’s lowest registers, yield a texture of obscurity and mystery, in vivid contrast to the joyful setting of this text by almost every other Classical composer.

The *mezza voce* admonition to the soloists on their final “sanctus, sanctus” heightens the air of mystery. Actually, a “stage-whisper” strong enough to be heard at the rear of the hall seems to me to be not inappropriate.

“Pleni sunt coeli” is marked *Allegro pesante*, and the emphasis must be on *pesante* – enough heaviness there to suggest the majesty of heavenly glory, as distinct from the frenzy of the “Gloria.” The ensuing “Osanna in excelsis” comes to abrupt halt in order to ponder the solemn but sweet moments of the “Praeludium,” which will usher in the “Benedictus.”

The “Benedictus” is one of the most beautiful of Beethoven’s slow movements. With the simplest of harmonies and serene melodies he leads us into a trance-like state wherein time’s passing has little measure and less meaning. Its quarter-hour of elapsed time becomes a single moment of blessing.

AGNUS DEI

To many listeners and even some performers, the “Agnus Dei” is the most puzzling of this *Missa*’s major movements. It begins with supplications of mercy and moves to the accustomed prayer for peace – which is standard. But the prayers for peace take several and multiple forms; they are interrupted by cries of war, by shouts of despair, military trumpets, drums, and musical consternation, dissent and chaos. One looks in vain for “Blessed Assurance.”

The tonality of the “Agnus Dei” is dark, the tempo is burdened, the atmosphere anguished and suppliant, and the vocal parts begin in the lowest register, all of which is appropriate to the text – an invocation to the “Lamb of God” for mercy, and ultimately, for peace.

The final presence of war is a memory and menace. It’s placed so very near the end of the piece that there is no way to deny its final portent.

There is no answer to those who feel that the *Missa solennis* is “unfinished,” other than to say that the extraordinary variety and repetition of the prayers for peace – from simple child-like game-songs to shouts of despair and frustration, together with the abiding presence of pastoral comforting musical qualities add up to the truth – as Beethoven saw it. There is no assurance – not even for God Himself – that peace will come as a quiet end.

The peace which Beethoven credited was resignation: grass growing, children being born. He might well be concerned about the way his descendants are treating their world – and the world’s children.

His final message is that in spite of Nature’s ills and Man’s inhumanities, there are baser and nobler options of action, and it is a part of being human to choose the nobler.

War may continue to exist – we will continue to sing.