



DISCOVERY

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BEETHOVEN

Missa Solemnis

Illing • Campbell • Doig • Macann

Sydney Philharmonia Choir

Sydney Symphony Orchestra • Mackerras





LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN 1770-1827

Missa Solemnis in D major, Op. 123

1	Kyrie – Assai sostenuto (Mit Andacht)	8'53
2	Gloria – Allegro vivace	15'46
3	Credo – Allegro ma non troppo	17'38
4	Sanctus – Adagio (Mit Andacht)	15'14
5	Agnus Dei – Adagio	14'35

Total Playing Time 72'29

Rosamund Illing *soprano*
Elizabeth Campbell *mezzo-soprano*
Christopher Doig *tenor*
Rodney Macann *bass*
Sydney Philharmonia Choir
Sydney Symphony Orchestra
Sir Charles Mackerras *conductor*

Beethoven once described the *Missa Solemnis* as his 'greatest work'. The later of his two settings of the Catholic mass text, it was conceived in honour of his friend, pupil and patron, the Archduke Rudolph of Austria (1788-1831), brother of the reigning Emperor Franz. Yet, in the years it took to complete (1819-1823), the work outlived its original honorific purpose, and became increasingly a vehicle for Beethoven's own aspirations, spiritual and worldly.

Composition of the Mass coincided with the most tempestuous days of Beethoven's public battle for custody of his nephew, Karl; a battle which in turn brought on depression, bouts of heavy drinking, and probably also illness, including, in 1821, rheumatic fever and a serious liver complaint. It also came at a time when the introspection of deafness was having a radical effect on Beethoven's artistry. While he was at work on the Mass, the ninth symphony, the final piano sonatas and the late quartets all had their genesis. Musically, Beethoven was on the verge of leaving behind those around him; not least his friend Prince Galitzin, who in trying to find something positive to relate about the St Petersburg premiere of the Mass (in April 1824), wrote lamely to Beethoven, 'Your genius is centuries before its time.' Whether or not Beethoven believed such praise, he was sufficiently worldly to want to receive it; for the *Missa Solemnis* which sees Beethoven at his most visionary, also sees him at his most venal.

To his discredit, Beethoven strung along at least four publishers with hollow promises of rights over the work, in an attempt to extract the highest possible financial return from the project. Upon completion, he then reneged on all previous agreements, so as first to release manuscript copies of the work on subscription to the crowned heads and major nobility of Europe. By these means he contrived to extort cash and other honours from Louis XVIII of France, the Kings of Prussia and Saxony, and the Russian Emperor among others. But, like the publishers, the nobility too found reason to feel poorly used. Prince Galitzin, again, summed it up when he asked: 'Who acted more nobly, Beethoven or I? He sends me without warning a useless manuscript for which I had not asked. He then makes me pay 50 ducats for it when I could have bought a printed copy a few months later for only five thalers.'

Finally, in order to encourage performances of his difficult work, Beethoven countenanced all manner of unspeakable bowdlerisations, including fitting it out with new vernacular texts. This occurred not only in Protestant countries (such as England, where doctrinal objections made it

unperformable in its original state), but even in Catholic Vienna, where its local premiere was further marred by being incomplete and under-rehearsed.

Poor deaf Beethoven, of course, did not hear the result. Nor, sadly, did the work's dedicatee, Rudolph, who was unable to be present.

Until the age of thirty, Rudolph had followed a leisured existence as a dilettante, connoisseur and collector of eccentrics, not the least among whom was Beethoven himself. He himself was a talented musician, and bravely submitted to Beethoven's tutelage, both at the piano and as the only composition student Beethoven ever taught. Thereby, Rudolph also committed himself to a lifelong regime of financial and moral support for the composer, whose deafness and erratic behaviour in return often made him a difficult and socially embarrassing friend. In gratitude, Beethoven dedicated more important works to Rudolph than to any of his many patrons. These included the so-called 'Archduke' Piano Trio (Op. 97), the Fifth ('Emperor') Piano Concerto, and the piano sonatas 'Les Adieux' and 'Hammerklavier'.

By 1819, however, Rudolph's artistic career was almost over. Henceforth he was to be an ecclesiastic. In April that year Pius VII admitted him to the college of cardinals, and on June 4, having reached the canonical age of episcopal consecration (thirty years), he was elected archbishop of the Moravian city of Olmütz. Beethoven responded to the public news of the elevation with a promise of a new mass to be sung on the occasion of his enthronement: 'The day on which a High Mass composed by me will be performed during the ceremonies solemnised for YIH [Your Imperial Highness] will be the most glorious day of my life; and God will enlighten me so that my poor talents may contribute to the glorification of that solemn day.'

Beethoven, however, must have known of Rudolph's news considerably earlier than the June public announcement. First sketches for the Kyrie of what was to become the *Missa Solemnis* seem to date from the first three months of that year. Yet, despite this, there was never much likelihood that the work could be finished in time for Rudolph's enthronement on 9 March 1820. By the end of 1819 Beethoven had barely begun sketching the Gloria, which makes his claim (in a letter to Ferdinand Ries) on 10 November 1818, that he had 'almost finished a new grand mass', not merely wishful thinking, but verging on self-deception. In the event, Rudolph's enthronement passed during work on the Credo, which was substantially complete by the end of 1820.

The Sanctus and Agnus Dei were sketched early in 1821, and if Beethoven's own comments (in a letter to Franz Brentano) are to be believed, the whole work was finished in rough form by 12 November. Certainly, early in 1822 Rudolph is known to have seen a draft copy. Revisions must have continued sporadically during that year, for a presentation score was not ready for delivery to Rudolph until 19 March 1823. Even then, small alterations continued to be made to the score for at least a year more.

The first Viennese performance took place on 7 May 1824 (exactly a month after the performance sponsored by Galitzin in St Petersburg), not in a church but at the Court Theatre, in the same concert as saw the premiere of the Ninth Symphony. Owing to the extraordinary length of both works, the Mass was reduced to its Kyrie, Credo and Agnus Dei. Moreover, these were sung not with their proper Latin words (ecclesiastical permission needed to perform the Latin texts outside the liturgy had not been forthcoming), but to a speedily-contrived German text, and were billed not as mass movements but as 'Three Grand Hymns'. To add insult to injury, when Beethoven later heard how little money the concert had netted him (owing not to lack of attendance, but to the high cost of the large forces involved), he broke into a fit of tears and recriminations.

Graeme Skinner

Cover and Booklet Design Imagecorp Pty Ltd

ABC Classics Robert Patterson, Martin Buzacott, Hilary Shrubbs, Natalie Shea

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