Ludwig van Beethoven: Mass for Four Solo Voices, Choir and Orchestra in D, Op. 123, ‘Missa solemnis’

If ever there were a musical work surrounded by an aura, it would be Beethoven’s Mass in D major, universally referred to as the *Missa solemnis*. Wilhelm Furtwängler considered it Beethoven’s greatest work, but gave his last performance in 1930, thereafter considering it to be beyond his, and perhaps humanity’s, capability to perform. Theodor Adorno, who devoted a good deal of attention to the work, argued that, ‘to speak seriously of it [the Mass] can be nothing other than, in Brecht’s phrase, to alienate it; to rupture the aura of unfocused veneration protectively surrounding it.’ It was, then, Adorno contended, an ‘alienated *magnum opus*’; it enjoyed ‘the highest fame, has its undisputed place in the repertoire, while remaining enigmatic and incomprehensible and, whatever it may conceal within itself, offering no support for the popular acclaim lavished upon it.’

As so often, Adorno proves both spot on and wrongheaded; such, one might almost argue, is the nature of his dialectical method. There is certainly a sense in which the *Missa solemnis* remains at least one of the ultimate musical challenges; it was such even for Beethoven himself. And yet, in performance worthy of the name, it overwhelms, especially so for an age that finds it at least as hard as Beethoven himself to take the claims of the Church, above all those adumbrated in the text and tradition of the Mass, simply ‘on faith’. Beethoven’s struggle may initially be perceived in the time it took him to compose his setting. It was intended, when he began composition in 1819, for the installation of his great patron, pupil, and friend, the Archduke Rudolph, as Archbishop of Olmütz. ‘The day on which a High Mass composed by me will be performed during the ceremonies solemnised for Your Imperial Highness will be the most glorious day of my life,’ Beethoven wrote to Rudolph. The deadline, 9 March 1820, came and went, however, and Beethoven was still making changes to the work when the presentation copy of the score was being prepared, in spring 1823. No complete performance took place in Vienna during Beethoven’s lifetime, although the first three movements were performed at the Kärntnertor Theatre on 7 May 1824, at the same concert in which the Ninth Symphony received its performance. (Imagine that!) The Mass, however, had been performed a month earlier, on 7 April, in St Petersburg, in a concert postponed several times, owing to musical, especially vocal, difficulties, as well as late delivery of the score. Performances remained sporadic, at best, until the 1860s; their posthumous reputation notwithstanding, the late quartets were performed with considerably greater frequency.

Adorno noted that, despite the ‘occasionally unusual demands on the singers’ voices,’ something of an understatement, the Mass ‘contains little which does not remain within the confines of traditional musical idiom.’ Certainly, harmonic progressions are not in themselves difficult to analyse, or indeed to perceive by the audience (or congregation). There are archaisms, harking back at least as far as Palestrina, to whom Beethoven had devoted a good deal of study, arguably also to the Flemish composers of the fifteenth century, but, whilst audible, they do not really stand out. Rather, to quote Adorno once more, ‘the difficulty is of a higher order – it concerns the content, the meaning of the music.’ The Frankfurt School sage pointed to ‘the aesthetically fractured quality of the *Missa solemnis*, its renunciation of clear structure in favour of a question, of almost Kantian severity, as to what is still possible at all.’ In a conversation book, we see Beethoven exclaim: ‘“The moral law within us and the starry heavens above us” – Kant!!!’ It is not unduly fanciful to see a parallel, whether it be a matter of influence or no, with elements of Kantian philosophy in this work. Kant had pointed to the inability of theoretical reason to ‘prove’ the truths of religion. One must look elsewhere, to the moral law – just as Beethoven does in the immense struggle he here not only depicts but also undergoes. It is not easy, especially as a fallen man, but it is unquestionably necessary.

What, then, is the nature of this struggle, encapsulated in Beethoven’s unique formulation, written above the *Kyrie*, ‘From the heart – may it return to the heart!’? It is, by the standards of the other movements – and we may consider this a symphonic work enough for ‘movement’ not to be an inappropriate term – relatively ‘normal’. Orchestral sonorities are, as William Drabkin has noted, related to the tonality of the movement. Horns generally conform to the constraints imposed upon them by the overtone series, far more so than in many of Beethoven symphonies, or indeed in later movements of this work. Kettledrums sound implacable throughout, as if intoning Holy Writ, or even trying to persuade us – and Beethoven – of it. As Sir Colin Davis commented in an interview given shortly before his final performance of the work in 2011, ‘You may not believe it immediately afterwards, but it [the work] doesn’t survive unless everybody is committed to it.’ There may already be a sense of grand(-ish) scale, but there is little of the superhuman strain we shall hear later on. An almost Classical movement offers, in Drabkin’s words, ‘reassurance early on,’ so that ‘the listener is better prepared for what is to come.’ It is indeed a twin inheritance from Bach, whose Mass in B minor had finally been published in 1818, and from Haydn which may be said to be dramatised here. The old, Baroque ‘cantata mass’ division of the threefold petition – ‘Kyrie eleison/Christe eleison/Kyrie eleison’ – is challenged by the sonata form example of Haydn’s late masses, and *vice versa*.

There is nothing remotely ‘normal’ about Beethoven’s setting of the *Gloria*, long a difficult text to set, if only for its length. (The same might be said of the *Credo*.) Again, Beethoven offers more than a nod to Classical practice, yet also, almost through force of will, or so it seems, blows the apparent tripartite division of the text if not quite to pieces than to somewhere beyond repair. It opens with a thunderbolt; we fancy that we hear not a description of the heavenly throng itself singing the Almighty’s praises, but that singing itself. Beethoven’s utterly personal solution to the problems of both Mass setting and belief is propelled by titanic, orchestrally- and harmonically-founded strength, such as heard with the chorus’s ‘Domine Deus, Rex cœlestis’. Hints of Mozartian Harmoniemusik upon ‘Domine Fili unigenite Jesu Christe’ are gratefully received, though we are never in doubt that Mozartian paradise has been lost for ever. An imploring ‘Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis’ seems almost to signal Beethoven kneeling – at the name of the one person or force before whom or which Beethoven would ever kneel. The ‘Quoniam’ presents a precarious balance - or better, dialectic – between certainty and uncertainty or downright despair. At the close, there is reprise, if not repetition, of the electricity of the glorious cries of the opening, a final choral shout of ‘Gloria’ reinventing the recapitulatory principle.

Nowhere is Beethoven’s struggle with belief more manifest than in, appropriately enough, the setting of the Creed. Credo quia absurdum (a perennial misquotation of Tertullian)? The plainchant and Renaissance polyphony in which Beethoven had immersed himself come to resound as if through history, if not eternity. Echoes of what we now call early music sound especially clearly upon profession of the mystery of the Incarnation, human soloists and flautist differentiating beyond doubt the Second from the First Person of the Holy Trinity. One feels, as in a Bach Passion, the unbearable agony of Gethsemane and Golgotha upon the word of suffering, ‘Passus’. Beethoven’s compassion expressed for Christ as man seems to evoke Fidelio, and yet at the same time to extending beyond its earthbound confines, indeed to point to Kant’s ‘starry heavens’. Partly as a consequence of Beethoven’s notoriously difficult vocal writing, the question remains: does he, do we, believe? The uphill sense of struggle, almost a literal expression of ‘ascendit’ and yet of course meaning so much more than that, is valiantly, vigorously worked through in an ‘Allegro molto’ section, until a return to the oft-intoned ‘Credo’: in this case, belief in the Holy Ghost, but seemingly more a matter of belief as such. The final fugue dazzles, both as profession of (momentary?) conviction and as contrapuntal compendium, both reminiscence and intensification of the dialectical conflicts in the finale to the *Hammerklavier* Sonata.

Beethoven marked the *Sanctus*, as he had the *Kyrie*, ‘Mit Andacht’ (‘with devotion’). Sung by the solo quartet, it is, in Donald Tovey’s words, ‘a short intensely devout movement, ending with a note of the kind of fear that would be cast out by perfect love’. Following a brief ‘Osanna’, there comes the purely instrumental evocation of the Elevation of the Host, and the descent of the Holy Ghost in the guise of solo violin: a masterstroke that in lesser hands might have sounded sentimental but here instantiates sublimity itself. It offers, moreover, musical transition to the ‘Benedictus’ section, which, for Adorno, touchingly called to mind ‘the custom attributed to late mediaeval artists, who included their own image,’ in this case related to a theme in the E-flat major String Quartet, op.127, ‘somewhere on their tabernacle so that they would not be forgotten.’

Finally comes the Agnus Dei, in dark B minor, permitting eventual, hard-won return to the tonic, its relative major. The sounds of war, trumpets and drums ablaze, heard before in Haydn’s *Missa in tempore belli*, but here let loose with modernistic fury, terrifyingly recall the recent experiences of Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe and look forward to our own unstable world, interior and exterior. We are taken to the abyss. Will the Lamb of God grant us ‘pacem’? Perhaps. An apparent reference, intentional or otherwise, to Handel’s ‘Hallelujah’ Chorus – Beethoven once considered adding his reorchestration to Mozart’s – has suggested to some English intervention from the Duke of Wellington; its scope is surely more universal. There is still no more modern setting of the Mass; it alienates itself in its fervent attempt to wrest reconciliation from the jaws of despair. And yet, that aura cannot entirely be disrupted; nor, perhaps, should it be.