

## Missa solemnis in D Major, Op. 123

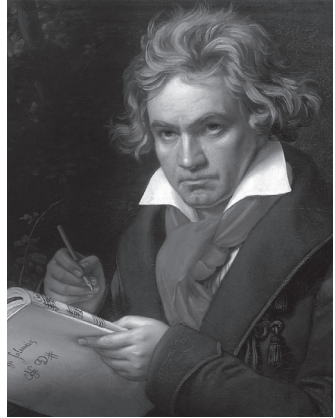
PROGRAM NOTES BY PHILLIP HUSCHER

*Beethoven began the Missa solemnis in 1819 and completed it in 1823. The first performance was given on April 18, 1824, in Saint Petersburg, Russia. The score calls for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass soloists; four-part chorus; and an orchestra of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, organ, and strings. Performance time is approximately eighty-four minutes.*

**T**HE FACE WE RECOGNIZE AS BEETHOVEN'S STEMS from a portrait painted by Joseph Karl Stieler in 1819 which shows the forty-eight-year-old composer clutching the score of his *Missa solemnis*. With increasingly unruly hair and a deepening scowl, this is the image that has lived on, to decorate concert halls, book jackets, recordings, and—particularly since the Beethoven bicentennial in 1970—posters, T-shirts, coffee mugs, and a wide variety of household items Beethoven can't have imagined using. Beethoven himself thought Stieler's painting a good likeness, though others questioned the premature graying of the hair and the slump of his shoulders—uncharacteristic, they said, of a man who carried himself proudly at all times.

Stieler introduced himself to Beethoven in the autumn of 1819 with an offer to paint the composer's portrait. Despite Beethoven's blatant disregard for image and appearance, he apparently was taken with the idea that his face would be preserved for posterity. Even though he was immersed in writing the D major mass that would prove to be the greatest undertaking of his career, he managed to find the time—and even the patience—to pose for Stieler, who, according to Anton Schindler, “had the knack of making the temperamental master conform to his wishes. Sitting after sitting was granted, without a single complaint about loss of time.”

When he sat for Stieler, Beethoven was nearly stone deaf; he had long before begun to use conversation books in which his visitors wrote their greetings, questions, and comments. The entries for the first weeks of April 1820, when Stieler returned to apply the finishing touches to his oil, include the painter's question, “In what key is your mass? I just want



### Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany. Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

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to write on the page Mass in ...” “D,” Beethoven replied, “*Missa solemnis* in D.” (The manuscript in Stielers portrait is inscribed *Missa solemnis* in D#, following the German practice of using sharps to denote major keys.)

Stielers portrait shows Beethoven with his pencil poised over his manuscript of the *Missa solemnis*. That may well have been the case; for more than four years, from

early in 1819 until mid-summer of 1823, this was the music that preoccupied Beethoven almost daily, the work with which he most struggled, the one he couldn't quite bring to a satisfying conclusion. It wasn't the only project of these prime years—the final three piano sonatas, opp. 109-111, were completed during this span, along with much of the work on the Ninth Symphony and the *Diabelli* Variations—but it was the composition that demanded more of Beethoven's time and thought than any other at any time in his career.

The first hint of the project can be found in a note the composer wrote to himself in his private diary sometime in 1818: “In order to write true church music, go through all the ecclesiastical chants of the monks, etc. Also look there for the stanzas in the most correct translations along with the most perfect prosody of all Christian-Catholic psalms and hymns in general.” Shortly after, Beethoven secured access to important music collections, including that of the archduke Rudolph, where he studied sacred music from Gregorian chant through Palestrina, Handel, and Bach; consulted a number of friends; and began work to improve his command of the Latin text, even though he had set it to music once before, in 1807.

The first musical sketches for the Kyrie of a new mass were made in 1819, on a page following designs for variations on the little waltz tune by Anton Diabelli that he would later make famous. Around the same time it was announced that the archduke Rudolph—long one of Beethoven's dearest friends and supporters, and the only composition student he would ever accept—was to be elevated to the position of archbishop of Olmütz (now Olomouc in the Czech Republic) in March 1820. Beethoven decided that he would honor his friend by preparing the music for that important occasion. On June 4, Beethoven wrote to Rudolph: “The day on which a High Mass composed by me is performed during the ceremonies solemnized for 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.” And thus, unsolicited and uncommissioned, that is how the first performance of the *Missa solemnis* came to be scheduled for March 20, 1820. It

was a deadline Beethoven would miss by some forty months.

The most famous of the progress reports delivered by friends and visitors is that of Anton Schindler, whose devotion to the master was matched only by his flair for creative writing. His account dates from August 1819, a matter of weeks before Stieler's portrait sessions began:

It was 4 o'clock in the afternoon. In the living room, behind a locked door, we heard the master singing parts of the fugue in the Credo—singing, howling, stamping. After we had been listening a long time to the almost awful scene, and were about to go away, the door opened and Beethoven stood before us with distorted features, calculated to excite fear. He looked as if he had been in mortal combat with the whole host of contrapuntists, his everlasting enemies.

It's likely, given the date, that the fugue in question was the great one that concludes the Gloria, "in gloria Dei Patris," but the image of poor Beethoven, possessed by music in ways that most of us can scarcely imagine, probably isn't far from the mark. Schindler would later recall: "When I think of the events of the year 1819, . . . I remember his mental excitement, and I must admit that never before and never since that time have I seen him in a similar state of removal from the world."

In December, after Stieler had taken his canvas home to add body and background to the face he had painted from life, Beethoven finished the Gloria. The rest of the winter leading up to Archduke Rudolph's installation was spent drafting the Credo and Sanctus, with occasional dips into one or more of the *Diabelli* Variations. In February Beethoven actually offered the mass to the publisher Simrock, even though he knew it wouldn't be ready any time soon. Actually, at the ceremony in Olmütz on March 20, the music was by Haydn and Hummel.

The full mass wasn't complete in outline until the spring of 1822. Work had been slow, difficult, and sporadic, interrupted by the three late piano sonatas that also enter the same spiritual world. By August 1822 the autograph manuscript of the *Missa solemnis* was finished, and Beethoven could turn his full attention at last to the *Diabelli* Variations and Ninth Symphony. But, as the composer's first biographer, Alexander Wheelock Thayer, reported, the *Missa solemnis* was "several times completed, but never complete so long as it was within reach."

In January 1823 Beethoven began to offer copies of the work, at fifty ducats, to several courts—a marketing idea intended to stir up interest and make money, although in the end it did neither, even after the intervention, at the composer’s insistence, of both Goethe and Cherubini. (Beethoven’s subsequent dealings with a number of publishers were no better managed, although eventually Schott recognized the importance of this work and added it to its catalog.) Beethoven, who had little use for empty slogans, had already begun to refer to the *Missa solennis* as the greatest work he had written.

Finally, in March, he sent a nicely bound copy off to the archduke Rudolph, who by now surely recognized that the work had never been conceived—or even written—with him in mind. That can’t have diminished his pride in placing this large, new volume on the shelf alongside the other works Beethoven had dedicated to him: the fourth and fifth piano concertos; the *Farewell, Hammerklavier*, and op. 111 piano sonatas; the violin sonata, op. 96; and the *Archduke* Trio named for him—one of the greatest series of gifts in the history of Western art, to which Beethoven would soon add the *Grosse Fuge*. The dedication, as direct and unexpectedly personal as the music of the mass it accompanies, reads: “From the heart—may it go to the heart.”



Beethoven was never a regular church-goer. He had no use for organized religion. What he learned of Catholicism he picked up attending Catholic schools. As a boy he knew the insides of several area churches solely from the organ loft, where he took lessons. Haydn once called him an atheist—no doubt out of sheer exasperation at his most difficult student, the one with the shaggy hair, dissident views, and anti-establishment tactics.

But the man who later left us this extraordinary account of faith—the *Missa solennis*, a solemn mass—could only have been, in the truest sense, a profoundly religious man. And perhaps only a man who had sometimes doubted, and regularly questioned, would ultimately come to a statement of personal belief as powerful as this.

Beethoven’s search for faith was part of a daily struggle to find order in the confusion of life. From an early age he worshiped nature easily, and, eventually, through nature, God. (He once scribbled on a page of sketches: “Almighty in the forest! I am happy, blissful in the forest: every tree speaks through you, O God! . . .”) Beethoven’s diaries and sketches are filled with prayers and comments addressed to God. On the same page of his diary with the first suggestion of the *Missa solennis* Beethoven writes: “Therefore, calmly

will I submit myself to all inconstancy and will place all my trust in your unchangeable goodness, O God! My soul shall rejoice in you, immutable Being. Be my rock, my light, my trust for ever!” It’s a quote from Christoph Christian Sturm, a Lutheran clergyman whose views Beethoven found highly persuasive. Late in his life, Beethoven began to explore Eastern thought and ritual, still searching for meaning. Framed quotations from ancient Egyptian writings sat on the desk where he worked, in characteristic disarray, on the *Missa solemnis*.

The music Beethoven wrote is no more conventional or any easier to classify than his beliefs. For one thing, it’s not literally church music—written to be performed as part of a religious ceremony; instead, as Romain Rolland wrote, it “overflows the church by its spirit and its dimensions.” In fact, it was designed not for the church at Olmütz nor for any other space, but for posterity. The *Missa solemnis* is a work of sometimes bewildering complexity, in which sacred and secular, faith and skepticism, the traditional and the personal, and the private as well as the public all abide. It is, in essence, Beethoven himself.

As Beethoven told Stieler early in 1820, the key is D major—a key Beethoven associated with Handel’s “Hallelujah” Chorus and with the Gloria and Sanctus of Bach’s B minor mass, scores he deeply admired and restudied before he set to work. Beethoven’s opening chord is the same brilliant D major that Bach and Handel knew, and yet the sound is entirely his own. Beethoven sees to that, not just in the particular voicing of the chord—the way the three notes of the D major triad are distributed over five octaves and among the instruments of the full orchestra—but in the way that it arrives mid-measure rather than on the downbeat, like a premature shout of faith. As we enter this grand and holy space, it takes our ears a few moments to adjust, to find Beethoven’s pulse, and to begin to move with it as clarinets and then oboes intone “Kyrie” long before the chorus sings. That’s one of the hallmarks of this music: the instruments of the orchestra often speak the words of the mass, anticipating and answering—but never, in the conventional sense, accompanying—the singers.

The Kyrie unfolds simply and majestically, with only a slight quickening of the pulse for the central Christe. The Gloria, on the other hand, is vast and immensely varied. It begins with a loud and joyful noise and then drops suddenly, like a worshiper falling to his knees, at “Et in terra pax” (And on earth peace) and again at “Adoramus te” (We adore you). There are a number of exceptional touches, like the trombones’ first appearance at “omnipotens.” The fugue at “in gloria Dei Patris” is the one Schindler no doubt heard behind closed doors, and it’s certainly a howling, stomping sort of music, only increasing

in density and excitement as it passes through a quicker “Amen” and on into a hair-raising presto that leaves the singers almost breathless, shouting their final “Gloria” after the orchestra has already finished.

The text of the Credo led Beethoven to write a kind of sacred musical drama, with each chapter brilliantly set off and often compressing a significant incident and emotion into a single, telling gesture. In the “Et incarnatus est”—a reverent adagio set in ancient modal harmony—a solo flute flutters high above the voices, like the Holy Spirit descending to earth in the form of a dove. The dramatic shift from the depths of the “Crucifixus” to the “Et resurrexit” is accomplished by the chorus alone, which fairly shouts the news. At the reference to the Last Judgment, which has led other composers to elaborate special effects, Beethoven simply interjects one prominent and discordant note from the trombone. The final passage beginning “Et vitam venturi”—a double fugue, with separate, compatible subjects for “Et vitam venturi” and “Amen”—includes some of the toughest music ever written for chorus—longer, higher, and more florid even than the “Ode to Joy” from the Ninth Symphony. It’s also a fine depiction of the “life of the world to come” spinning mysteriously into eternity.

Beethoven’s Sanctus, unlike those of Bach before or Verdi to come, is very still and dark. There are ecstatic outbursts at “Pleni sunt coeli” and “Osanna,” but those only lead to the orchestral prelude, music of a spiritual calmness unknown before Beethoven. The orchestra begins with low, ruminative music—suggesting the organ improvisation that, in a traditional mass, leads to the “Benedictus.” Suddenly a bright beam of light—a high chord, scored for two flutes and solo violin—breaks through. The chorus basses introduce the “Benedictus,” and then the solo violin begins a great, soaring rhapsody—unexpected in a mass and unlike anything else in all music. It’s a surprisingly personal touch that only a great master could pull off, and it may well be, as Theodore Adorno has suggested, Beethoven’s response to “late medieval artists placing their own likenesses somewhere on their tabernacles so that they might not be forgotten.” Soon the solo quartet and the chorus add their lines of benediction, but it’s Beethoven’s own voice, searching for understanding and immortality, that soars the highest.

The Agnus Dei begins solemnly, with bassoons, horns, and low strings, to which voices add their measured comments. When the music shifts into a 6/8 meter at “Dona nobis pacem,” Beethoven writes above the staff: “Prayer for inner and outer peace.” Soon this lovely, lilting music is disturbed by distant drums and far-away trumpet calls. We

next hear the sound of the human voice filled with terror—a sound that we today, like Beethoven in his own turbulent times, know as the only possible response to the threat of war. The chorus begins an insistent fugue on “Dona nobis pacem,” its notes echoing those of the famous phrase “And he shall reign for ever and ever” from the “Hallelujah” Chorus. (We know that Beethoven greatly loved the *Messiah*, that he hung Handel’s portrait on his wall, and that he once cried out, “I would uncover my head and kneel down at his tomb!”)

There’s a brief orchestral passage that carries with it renewed sounds of war. Again it’s safely countered with pleas of “Grant us peace.” Finally, even when the timpani still rumbles ominously from a foreign land, the chorus says simply, “pacem, pacem,” and the music warmly embraces D major, briefly and gently. The answer has come, and knowing that it’s as good as any we are likely to find, Beethoven quickly lays down his pen.

Beethoven wasn’t present at the first performance of this mass. That took place in Saint Petersburg, in April of 1824, under the sponsorship of Prince Galitzin, who had already commissioned several of the composer’s last string quartets. In Vienna a month later, Beethoven agreed to conduct the Kyrie, Credo, and Agnus Dei—sung to German words and announced as “Three Grand Hymns with Solo and Chorus Voices” to avoid a prohibition on sacred music in the theater—at the same concert with the premiere of his Ninth Symphony. That evening, May 7, 1824, is now famous, not for the important music it introduced to Vienna, but for the sight of poor Beethoven, so totally deaf that, with his back to the audience, he was unaware of the thunderous applause greeting his new symphony until the contralto soloist tapped him on the shoulder and turned him around. No other performances of the mass were scheduled during Beethoven’s life.

After Beethoven’s death, the autograph manuscript of the *Missa solennis* sold for a mere seven florins (the cheerful Septet for winds brought eighteen). Later, as listeners began to realize the universal power of Beethoven’s oddly personal statement, the *Missa solennis* was still more admired than loved. Even today, the work Beethoven thought his greatest single achievement is little known compared to the music of fate knocking at the door, the story of a great musician going deaf in the prime of his life, or the picture of a scowling genius clasping a sheet of music.

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