

ON STYLE IN BEETHOVEN'S *MISSA SOLEMNIS*

A ARTE ALEGRE #1

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A note on recordings:

I was inspired to write this text after listening to Nikolaus Harnoncourt's recording of the *Missa Solemnis*, with the Arnold Schoenberg Chor, and the Concentus Musicus Wien, which was released on Sony in the summer of 2016. Harnoncourt brings out the older musical styles imbedded in the vocal parts, such as in the *Gloria*. These are notably vocal parts that may not have been explicitly composed in a church mode, but suggest an archaic tone. In this recording, Harnoncourt has a skillful ability to blend the energy of older ecclesiastical vocal traditions with the orchestra while it plays newer-sounding music. My preferred recording of the *Missa Solemnis* is one that used to be referred to as a Herbert von Karajan "lost recording." This is a recording that was issued on EMI in 1959 — in mono — with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (soprano), Christa Ludwig (mezzo-soprano), Nicolai Gedda (tenor) and Nicola Zaccaria (bass), with the Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna and the Philharmonia Orchestra, directed by Herbert von Karajan. The recording was digitally remastered and released on Testament, with rehearsal sessions for *Missa Solemnis* and an interview with Schwarzkopf, in 1997.

In E.T.A. Hoffmann's novel *Kater Murr* [*The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*] (1820-1822), there is a painting that operates in the narrative as a play within a play. We encounter the painting when Hoffmann describes an episode in the story of the composer, Johannes Kreisler, who is taking refuge in an abbey. Kreisler enters the Abbot's apartments and finds the Abbot opening a large crate with a hatchet and chisel. This surprises Kreisler, because it seems strange that "that reverend gentleman" should wield tools like these. They open the crate and before the composer has looked at the painting beyond its frame, he notices that the Abbot's copy of a work by Leonardo da Vinci of the Holy Family is no longer on the wall. It is in the place of that masterpiece that this new painting will hang. Once the composer and the Abbot affix the painting to the wall, they both admire the new, magnificent work. We read that the painting is of a miracle that shows the Virgin Mary and a young man who has been physically wounded; the Virgin Mary is

in the foreground with lilies in her left hand and her right hand touches the gruesome wounds of the young man. This suggests to Kreisler that the Virgin Mary has saved the young man from death. As the composer and the Abbot discuss the artist's superior technique, Kreisler suddenly thinks he recognizes one of the figures in the painting's composition, far in the shadows of the background with a dagger in his hand. Rather than discuss this with the Abbot, however, Kreisler chooses to mention the aspects of the painting that brought about this realization: the figures in the painting are depicted in modern dress. Kreisler says to the Abbot: "And yet, as I say, I don't like that hat, that sword, that shawl, that table and chair.... Now tell me, revered sir, can you imagine the Holy Family in modern dress: St. Joseph in a plush coat, the Savior in a frock coat, Our Lady in fashionable dress with a Turkish shawl round her shoulders? Wouldn't you think that an unworthy and indeed shocking profanation of what is most high?" (Part III).

Kreisler's critical judgment is crucial for what happens next, as it is this judgment that leads Kreisler to inspect the painting more closely. There he sees, through the artist's superior technique of illustrating light in the painting, a ray from the Virgin Mary's halo illuminates the features of one of the villains in the novel. The reader seems to come to this realization following Kreisler's own progression in thought: first we read about the representation of a miracle and the Virgin Mary holding lilies, with a heavenly light surrounding her. These initial impressions of the painting resonate with traditional depictions of the Virgin Mary and do not strike us as out of the ordinary. It is after praising the artistry of the painting that the composer begins to comment on the articles of dress, which seem to disturb the meaning. For the reader, as for Kreisler, the painting at that moment becomes more about its function to assist the narrative than about the portrayal of a miracle. After the Abbot and Kreisler's lengthy debate about the value of new religious art, which centers on this particular painting, Kreisler's critical judgment about the work fundamentally boils down to the notion that the details of the representation are not appropriate for the content; the style does not fit the content.

This scene in E.T.A. Hoffmann's novel sets the stage for a discussion of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* (Op. 123). The *Missa Solemnis* is a frighteningly difficult work to approach from a critical perspective, and we will consider it here with a focus on style. The work is from Beethoven's "late period," but it does not employ much of Beethoven's compositional style characteristic of that period. Beethoven began composing the work when he learned that his close friend (and pupil) the Archduke Rudolph was to become the Archbishop of Olmütz (in Moravia) in 1820. Beethoven did not have the *Missa Solemnis* ready at that point, only finishing it in 1823 for a total of four years of work. So that we have an idea of other works from Beethoven's late peri-

od: Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was completed in 1824; his final piano sonata, Op. 111, was composed between 1821 and 1822; and the late string quartets were composed between 1825 and 1826. Beethoven died after finishing the late string quartets, with a few projects still in progress, on March 26, 1827.

Beethoven considered the *Missa Solemnis* his greatest achievement. In Beethoven's lifetime, there were very few performances of it: one performance in St. Petersburg in April 1824 and another incomplete performance (consisting of the *Kyrie*, *Credo*, and *Agnus Dei*) on 7 May 1824—in the same concert as the première of the Ninth Symphony, where the composer gave the tempo indications for each movement and two others conducted the music. This must have been an extraordinary collaborative effort, because Beethoven was quite deaf at this point; as the famous anecdote goes, a singer pulled on Beethoven's sleeve for the composer to turn around and see the audience's enthusiastic applause that interrupted the performance of the Ninth Symphony.

At times, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* inspires a similar confusion that E.T.A. Hoffmann describes Kreisler feeling as he observes the Abbot's painting. Beethoven adapts a familiar liturgical text that also depicts miraculous things, a larger-than-life narrative, and composes with acknowledgment of forms that are historically associated with the setting. And yet, there is something perplexing about the *Missa Solemnis* itself as a whole that is directed precisely at the style and how it fashions the content. There is an aura about it that strikes us to think: How is it that this music sounds familiar, foreign, sometimes naïve, far-fetched, and visionary in the same experience?

The *Missa Solemnis* is an example of Beethoven's interpretation of an older musical form, where he combines older musical styles with his own style, which ultimately projects a rich understanding of the liturgical text. To a certain extent, the vast array of dynamic changes, vocal

colorings, and the stylistic combinations from older Church music (“older” as in church modes determined approximately in 1000 AD—used, for example, in Gregorian chant—and sacred works by Renaissance composers like Palestrina) enable us to sense Beethoven’s tremendous effort in the final product—the seams between movements, sections, and ideas are noticeable because of their dependence on the liturgical text for meaning. Each phrase of music is enriched with the words from the text, but the transitions between parts are often sudden; it gives the effect that one is running down the length of a street, the road abruptly ends, and one must continue on a different road in a different direction. As we listen we can recognize Beethoven’s struggle with a form he rarely composed in, his sculpting of precise connections between the liturgical text and tonal gestures, and the years of sketches and arranging.

When we manage not to focus on the baggage of Beethoven’s struggle, the technical difficulties the work presents to performers, the conductor’s heroic purpose to keep the sudden changes from loud to soft levels well balanced, the drastic shifts in mood and the overall abandonment of musical themes as the work progresses through the movements, we can have a better sense of what is going on. This is to say, understanding the *Missa Solemnis* is best savored in parts because to make an argument about the coherence of the work is not as easy as saying it is the totality of the sections of the liturgical text.

The instrumental music of the *Missa Solemnis*, in countless instances, is subordinate to illustrations in the text—either to strengthen what the text describes or provide an interpretation of the text’s meaning. It suggests that Beethoven is taking guidance from an earlier tradition and adapting that advice differently for each movement. It is here that we find levels of meaning in Beethoven’s musical representations of a liturgical text. In light of these considerations, *Missa*

Solemnis comes into its own as a truly unique work in Beethoven’s oeuvre.

Music scholars, when writing about the *Missa Solemnis*, all seem to agree that, at face-value, the work is rather easy to understand: the *Missa Solemnis* is deeply bound to a device called *word painting* and Beethoven’s respect for Renaissance composers and early Church modes. This is so much the case that many aspects of the work can be traced to gestures that have been used by many composers before Beethoven. For example, Beethoven famously illustrates the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove with a delightful birdsong motif in the flute during the “Et incarnatus est de spiritu sancto” of the *Credo*. When we follow the liturgical text along with the music (maybe not on the first listen), many of these word paintings become vibrant. Here, however, is the weakness of the *Missa Solemnis*: as far as musical devices go, *word painting* is as naïve as they come; one does not necessarily need a lot of musical training to follow and note their appearance. Beethoven apparently composed the *Missa Solemnis* with a copy of the liturgical text in a German translation, and this anecdote enforces the intuition that this work, in many instances, is text-dependent music.

The banality of this kind of musical expression suggests that Beethoven fundamentally did not wish to compose an obscure work: this is a mass for the community, to be understood by the community, and the individuals who make up that community are not exclusively musicians or trained in music theory. The word painting examples are frequent throughout the *Credo* and are successful despite their genius employment by greats like Palestrina and Josquin. But no matter, the purity of expression and the truth behind the text, not to mention the centuries of reverence and piety the text wears before we hear the words sung, generates a unique setting. The text is not new and thus why should the musical setting be foreign to previous illustrations? Further, Beethoven studied older church music

around this time, or at least he alludes to this in an entry in his diary, the infamous *Tagebuch*, that in order to compose *true* church music one should consult the Ecclesiastical chants of the monks. There is evidence of this study because Beethoven incorporates the Dorian mode immediately preceding the “et incarnatus est” Holy Spirit flute motif, and the Mixolydian mode in the *Credo*; these moments lend an archaic character to the musical image of the liturgical text: we inevitably look backward at history in the *Missa Solemnis*, as though we can hear past eras – the nineteenth century, the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, and the devotion and the piety of the people in those eras – within our experience of the music.

When listening to the *Credo*, especially, we can imagine Beethoven walking through an ancient cathedral with dead composers buried beneath the stones of the floor—Palestrina, Josquin, Guillaume Du Fay—and their immortality

quivers with life in Beethoven’s own movement through the ancient liturgical script; it is an impressive achievement when tradition can come alive and hundreds of years of music can be apprehended by a great number of individuals in one place. We recover a very different age in the modal parts of the *Missa Solemnis* as these parts sound the most foreign to Beethoven’s musical language. To unite perception through artistic concepts that are easy to understand, and beautiful, delights the audience and not only enhances their experience of Beethoven’s music as sublime music, but also cultivates a newfound appreciation for an ancient liturgical text.

To give a context to these comments, let us look at the “Et surrexit” section of the *Credo*. In the “Et surrexit,” Beethoven transitions from a church mode, to a word painting, and to an illustration characteristic of Beethoven’s own compositional language, over an exceedingly short span of time.

Ludwig van Beethoven. *Missa Solemnis*, Opus 123.
Credo, Allegro/Allegro Molto, measures 188-196.

The first illustration is of a church mode in Mixolydian, which lasts for approximately ten seconds. The section of the text “Et surrexit tertia die secundum scripturas” (“and on the third day he rose”), according to the scriptures is sung by the tenor choir voices, and supported by the soprano, alto, and bass choir voices, and composed following rules set by the Mixolydian mode. It has a noticeably different sound from the music that comes before it. The sound is odd

because of the intervals that are characteristic of the mode, the counterpoint, and the overall mood of this sequence of measures. Beethoven asserts the Mixolydian mode in an evident way because all of the other instruments in the orchestra are silent for the section once the tenor choir voices pronounce the word “surrexit.” It is here that we have a sudden encounter with the Middle Ages that quickly vanishes into a musical device associated with the Renaissance.

The second illustration is of word painting for “et ascendit,” which lasts for approximately ten seconds. As we notice in the figure, directly following the key change, the bass choir voices sing: “et ascendit” (“and ascended”). We see how the notes follow in a trajectory, ascending the C major scale. This is a very successful and common use of word painting, but it works extraordinarily well especially after a (short) modal section that cleans the ear of the tonal expectations of nineteenth century music.

The third illustration is what we can call “Beethoven symphonic unity,” expressed in the “in coelum” section, which spans approximately twenty seconds. All choir parts make a marked ascension when singing the words: et ascendit in coelum. When all voices settle on the word “coelum,” we hear a portrayal of heaven and euphoria where the choir and the symphonic instruments (including the timpani) are working together in a unified whole yet playing very different parts. This section sounds gigantic, compared to the choir solo of “Et resurrexit” and the canon-like entry of voices in “et ascendit.” The “coelum” section additionally has a colossal orchestral sound that Beethoven is known for. And it also helps that the entire orchestra is playing at *fortissimo*, the loudest dynamic level of the sequence. This section is something of an acme of Beethoven’s illustrations of euphoria and joy in the *Missa Solemnis*, where the driving force can be traced to the interactions between the violin and viola parts, with the cellos and basses in a supporting role. The horns, woodwinds, and timpani imprint a sense of time and call out the harmonic shifts in intervals of thirds and fifths and seconds—but it is the strings that pull off this whole effect. We hear this most clearly in Herbert von Karajan’s “lost recording,” where Karajan ingeniously blends the symphony together as a single instrument, at the same time as allowing the violins and violas to rise above the choir voices. Many other conductors favor the horns in this section; the horns here accent the

harmonies typical of eighteenth and nineteenth century music. Highlighting this harmonic movement is detrimental to the short “coelum” section, and gives it a dance-like superficiality rather than the effect of symphonic unity. This symphonic unity is so difficult to achieve that, when it is successful, the elation the music depicts and the elation of the musicians, the conductor and the audience offers a glimpse of the absolute.

In Karajan’s “lost recording” of the *Missa Solemnis*, we find that the success of the “coelum” section is dependent on the dialogue between the instruments of the orchestra and the voices. The two earlier sections of the “Et resurrexit” that we explored above, the Mixolydian mode and the word painting sections, all build toward the gesture of symphonic unity of the “coelum” section in the form of a progression. If we focus too closely on the parts, and not on how they work together, then we might venture to say that Beethoven did not succeed in his use of the Mixolydian mode because the music does not sound stable in that section as *truly* Mixolydian—it sounds a bit strange, like one part were missing in the score, or as though it were a twentieth century exploration of the far reaches of harmonic relations in tonal music; the *word painting* that depicts the ascension of Christ into heaven can also be seen as naïve, as too obvious, that it does not require painful scrutiny of the score for an intellectual reward—the meaning is too easy and available merely by reading the liturgical text that accompanies the “Et resurrexit.” What is it that Beethoven’s setting gives to us that merely reading the text cannot?

Beethoven’s setting offers a critique of earlier musical styles through their consistent use to propel the music to deeper meaning that Beethoven then depicts in his own compositional style. Talking about style in this way, nevertheless, may not be helpful because we are not interested in whether Beethoven’s style in the *Missa Solemnis* is successful in the representation of textual ideas

and older sacred music, but whether the work is successful as music, as art. Why this question seems reasonable to discuss in the present circumstance is because not all conductors conduct the *Missa Solemnis* in the same way; in many performances, the seams between the *Missa Solemnis*'s sections or parts (like the three sections discussed above) sound disjointed, forced, or like compositional exercises inserted into a larger framework rather than composed with an intent of adhering to the continuity mirrored in the liturgical text. For example, in instances where the horns are more evident in the “coelum” section of the *Credo*, the joy and unity of the section are lost and the musical thought feels broken, insincere, and awkward.

The style and depiction of the figures in E.T.A. Hoffmann's painting, which are described at the beginning of this article, are important because of the purpose of the painting in Hoffmann's narrative. The painting is subservient to the narrative and for this reason the painting does not really work as art. Its purpose is not there, because if it were, would it matter that the Virgin Mary was wearing a Turkish shawl? In a discussion of high art, Kreisler's critical judgment about style might actually come off as superficial.

A crucial element of the successful integration of styles in the *Missa Solemnis* is dependent on what kind of story a conductor wishes to tell with the *Missa Solemnis*. If it is to highlight the earlier styles of music in contrast to Beethoven's

style, then the parts of the liturgical text will easily come apart. Consequently, Beethoven's manipulation of earlier styles for the purpose of a higher gain, and not mere imitation, will be subsidiary to a conductor's desire to show what is different.

Beethoven composed the *Missa Solemnis* with great focus on the liturgical text. That text has many associations with narratives from the Bible, and with the tradition of the Ordinary of the mass, and it is tempting to discuss Beethoven's music as only demonstrating the meaning of the liturgical script. There are times when this is very much the case, as in the examples of word painting. But there are other times when the music goes to extreme lengths that it is difficult to justify it as representative of meaning that is in the text alone. Beethoven's recourse to older musical styles already sheds a peculiar light on the whole project because it underscores our understanding of what is old and what is new. When Beethoven uses an older style it seems that it dates those sections and separates those parts of the text stylistically and by content. The orchestra as a singular instrument, a unity that reflects the absolute, is one of the strongest undercurrents in the *Missa Solemnis* and its meaning, strangely enough, is not wholly dependent on the liturgical text. To determine the way the *Missa Solemnis* is able to portray this, however, begins with how we treat its compositional style, and the generous integrity we might offer the instrumental music.

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