

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra  
2019-2020 Mellon Grand Classics Season

April 17 and 19, 2020

MANFRED HONECK, CONDUCTOR  
SIMONE ŠATUROVÁ, SOPRANO  
SASHA COOKE, MEZZO-SOPRANO  
NICHOLAS PHAN, TENOR  
MICHAEL SUMUEL, BASS-BARITONE  
THE MENDELSSOHN CHOIR OF PITTSBURGH  
MATTHEW MEHAFFEY, DIRECTOR

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN      Mass in D major for Soloists, Chorus and Orchestra,  
Opus 123, "Missa Solemnis"  
I.      Kyrie  
II.      Gloria  
III.      Credo  
IV.      Sanctus  
V.      Agnus Dei  
         **Ms. Šaturová**  
         **Ms. Cooke**  
         **Mr. Phan**  
         **Mr. Sumuel**  
         **The Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh**

*This concert will be performed without intermission.*

## PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

### LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Mass in D major for Soloists, Chorus and Orchestra, Opus 123, "Missa Solemnis" (1818-1823)

**Ludwig Van Beethoven was born in Bonn on December 16, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. He composed "Missa Solemnis" from 1818 to 1823, originally planned for the installation ceremony of Archbishop Rudolph in 1820, but ultimately delayed until 1824 due to artistic struggles, personal problems, and health concerns. The premiere took place in St. Petersburg on April 7, 1824, sponsored by Prince Nicholas Galitzin. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed "Missa Solemnis" at Syria Mosque with Music Director William Steinberg, soloists Frances Yeend, Elsa Cavelti, Joseph Laderoute and Mack Harrell, and the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh in April 1954. Most recently, the Pittsburgh Symphony performed the mass with conductor Lorin Maazel, soloists Nina Rautio, Linda Finnie, Richard Leech and Paul Plishka, and the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh in May 1994. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings. Performance time: approximately 81 minutes**

In 1818, rumors began to circulate around Vienna that the Archduke Rudolph, youngest son of Emperor Leopold II and brother of Emperor Franz, was going to be elevated to the highest levels of the Austrian Church hierarchy. Beethoven was especially interested in the rumors, since he had been associated with Rudolph for nearly twenty years as his teacher of piano and composition. (The piano part of the "Triple" Concerto of 1803-1804 was written for Rudolph.) For his part, Rudolph seems to have revered his teacher, carefully preserving over a hundred of his letters and assembling a collection of first editions, autographs and fair copies of his compositions. In the years after 1809, he became one of the composer's most important patrons, and received in gratitude the dedications of fifteen important works, including the Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos, Op. 97 Piano Trio ("Archduke"), two piano sonatas (Op. 106 and Op. 111) and *Grosse Fuge* (Op. 133). The rumors concerning Rudolph were substantiated when he was elected Cardinal in April 1819 and Archbishop of Olmütz two months later. As soon as he heard the news, Beethoven sent congratulations to the new Archbishop, and offered to compose a grand new Mass for his installation ceremony, scheduled for March 20, 1820. "The day when the solemn Mass by myself is performed as part of the ceremonies for your Imperial Highness," he wrote in June 1819, "will be the happiest day of my life, and God will inspire me so that my poor gifts may contribute to the glorification of this solemn day." As it turned out, Beethoven was more than three years late in fulfilling his promise.

It was not only divine inspiration but also artistic crisis and wrenching personal problems that kept the *Missa Solemnis* as the central musical concern of Beethoven's life for nearly five years. He was ill for much of the time from 1818 to 1823, and his hearing had gone completely except for a few brief episodes during which the veil of silence was lifted — always, it is worth noting, during music, never during conversation. He was also deeply involved in a legal battle to wrest custody of his nephew Karl from the boy's incompetent (in Beethoven's opinion) mother, the composer's sister-in-law. The eventual settlement in 1820 was painful for Beethoven, not because he lost the suit (he won, but alienated the boy), but because the proceedings revealed that he was without noble ancestors, a life-long belief he held tenaciously until it was publicly exploded in court. With declining health and family turmoil sapping so much of his energy during those years (Beethoven turned fifty in 1820), the composition of such monumental scores as the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony is testimony to the resilience of his spirit.

The artistic crisis that paralleled Beethoven's domestic difficulties during those years was both religious and musical. His belief in God was profound, but not dogmatic. Though born a Roman Catholic and gladly receiving last rites on his deathbed, he had no interest in organized religion. His God was simply too pervasive, too omnipotent, to be trapped by mere human ceremonies. "God above everything! For an eternal all-knowing Providence guides the fortune and misfortune of mortal men," he scribbled into his personal notes in 1818. The ancient text of the Mass served almost as the radioactive core from

which the catalyst of Beethoven's genius caused an explosion of visionary grandeur in the *Missa Solemnis*, equaled in all sacred music only by Bach's *Mass in B Minor*. Beethoven's vision of an all-powerful God was incarnated into music of awesome power whose central goal, he told Andreas Streicher, "was to awaken and permanently instill religious feelings not only into the singers but also into the listeners." The specific crisis for Beethoven around which the creation of the *Missa Solemnis* revolved was his acceptance of his own mortality — his need to create a great document of religious humanism that would be an enduring testament to the ardor of his faith. For this reason, he never felt that the score fully matched the ambition of its purpose, and he continued to revise it for the rest of his life. It was not published until after his death.

The musical crisis that influenced the *Missa Solemnis*, and all the other important works of Beethoven's last decade, was the simultaneous striving for both greater concentration and greater expansion. The vast extension of expression and resources in the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony involved not just increasing the external dimensions of the works' forms, but also evoking an unprecedented range of emotions through the use of more distant and more dramatic key relations. The element of concentration, which at first seems inimical to that of expansion, actually is inextricably allied with it. Through complex counterpoint and exquisite control of motivic figuration, Beethoven increased enormously the density of this music — its specific emotional gravity. It is this joining of apparent opposites — the vast extension of form alongside the heightening of measure-to-measure expression — that makes the late works of Beethoven the most profound, challenging and moving in the entire realm of music. He arrived at this new method only after the most ferocious labor (his early biographer Anton Schindler said he never saw him "in such a state of absolute withdrawal from the world" as during the composition of this work), and it reached fruition in the *Missa Solemnis*.

With all the personal problems and artistic struggles that Beethoven endured during the composition of the *Missa Solemnis*, and with the massive proportions the work ultimately assumed, it is small wonder that it was not ready for Archbishop Rudolph's installation in 1820. Rudolph himself encouraged Beethoven to take his time with the work. Alexander Wheelock Thayer, the composer's indefatigable biographer, wrote that the *Missa* was not fully sketched until the beginning of 1822; he worked on the orchestration throughout that entire year. Beethoven sent a magnificent manuscript copy of the score to Rudolph on March 19, 1823, the third anniversary of his investiture. He continued to work on it steadily until at least the middle of that year, however, and tinkered with the score frequently thereafter. The *Missa Solemnis* was first heard on April 7, 1824 in St. Petersburg, six years after it had first been proposed, at a concert sponsored by Prince Nicholas Galitzin, a devoted admirer and patron of the composer. Plans for the Viennese premiere on May 9th met with difficulties, however, since the Church authorities, through the Imperial Censor, were opposed to the performance of the sacred text of the Mass in a secular theater. One of Beethoven's most influential patrons, Count Moritz Lichnowsky, was called upon to effect a compromise: the concert would be allowed to proceed, it was decided, if Beethoven would replace the sacred Latin texts with German-language translations. Because of the length of the program, which also included the recent *Consecration of the House Overture* and the premiere of the "Choral" Symphony, Beethoven chose to omit the *Gloria* and *Sanctus* movements, and billed the remaining *Kyrie*, *Credo* and *Agnus Dei*, with the Censor's permission, as "Three Grand Hymns for Solo and Chorus."

In his later years, Beethoven became interested in researching older music for solutions to his compositional problems. His study in preparation for the *Missa Solemnis* was the most extensive he ever undertook, and the finished work displays many influences, both ecclesiastical and musical, all intended to give the richest and most moving expression to the text. He not only had a meticulous German translation of the Latin verses made so that he could consider the meaning and effect of each word, but he also studied the ancient tongue to learn its rhythms and stresses. He frequently consulted his friend August Friedrich Kanne, an expert on the history of the Mass. In addition to his textual studies, Beethoven also undertook a surprisingly wide examination of earlier sacred music, from the ancient chants of the monks and the theoretical treatises of the 16th-century Italian pedagogue Gioseffo Zarlino, through the works of Palestrina and the oratorios of Handel (Beethoven copied out several choruses from *Messiah* and let it be known that he considered Handel the greatest of all composers), to the Mass settings of Bach, Mozart and Joseph and Michael Haydn. A wide variety of styles was consequently absorbed into the *Missa Solemnis*, and one of its chief wonders is the unity the piece ultimately achieves.

There have been many explications of the *Missa Solemnis*, though these often are more exegesis than analysis. There are two principal conclusions at which these writings mostly arrive, however, and those general observations rather than a detailed discussion will have to suffice here. The first one is that the most vivid possible expression of the text was the motivating force behind every note Beethoven inscribed into this score. His careful matching of tone to word arose from things pictorially descriptive (for

example, the flying scales at “et ascendit in coelum” — “and ascended into heaven”), things liturgical (the hushed *Praeludium* preceding the *Benedictus*, which would accompany the elevation of the Host), or things personal (the pastoral and martial sections inserted into the *Agnus Dei*, which were called “a prayer for inner and outer peace” — Beethoven knew little of either during his life in Napoleonic Europe). The second conclusion of the commentators is that the abstract, purely musical processes of the *Missa* are a culmination of those in all his previous works, that the musical vocabulary and the profound formal structures he had perfected in his earlier compositions (especially in the symphonies) through the control of harmony and figuration were here used to bring a logical and completely abstract continuity to this work with sung text. *Kyrie II*, for example, is not a simple repetition of *Kyrie I*, but a reworking of the earlier motives, a kind of symphonic development with voices.

It is not difficult to see why Beethoven regarded the *Missa Solemnis* as his greatest composition. It represented the confluence, the culmination really, of his life-long concerns with joining music and philosophy, with infusing mere tones with profound thought and deep emotion. The *Missa* is superhuman in its vision, and almost beyond the performing abilities of mortal musicians. (The greatly learned British musicologist Sir Donald Tovey called the “et vitam venturi” the most difficult choral passage ever written.) Indeed, part of the power of the work lies in the very sense of struggle its performance demands and the unparalleled joy of its obstacles overcome. This is music in which performer and listener alike can always find spiritual nourishment and an inexhaustible humanity. The French composer, theorist and teacher Vincent d’Indy said it succinctly in his biography of Beethoven. Eschewing qualification, he wrote of the *Missa Solemnis*, “We stand in the presence of one of the greatest masterworks in the realm of music.”

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