

Kirill Petrenko conducts Beethoven's Missa solemnis

Thursday, January 28, 2027 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Kirill Petrenko, conductor · Golda Schultz, soprano · Wiebke Lehmkuhl, contralto · Sebastian Kohlhepp, tenor · David Steffens, bass · Rundfunkchor Berlin, chorus

approximately 80 minutes

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

80 minutes

Missa solemnis in D major, Op. 123

THE COMPOSER

Beethoven needs little introduction, but the period in which he wrote his Second Symphony does. Born in Bonn in 1770 and trained in Vienna under Haydn, by 1800 he was already one of the most talked-about pianist-composers in Vienna. Around the same time, Beethoven had to face an alarming truth: his hearing was deteriorating, and would never recover. By 1802 he had retreated to the village of Heiligenstadt outside Vienna, where, in a state of suicidal despair, he wrote the famous letter to his brothers known as the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, in which he confessed his condition and his agony. The letter, never sent in his lifetime, was found among his papers after his death.

ABOUT THE WORK

The *Missa solemnis* began as a present. In 1819 Beethoven learned that Archduke Rudolph of Austria, a son of Emperor Leopold II, was to be made Archbishop of Olmütz in Moravia. Rudolph had been his piano and composition pupil for years and was the most loyal of his patrons; the “Archduke” Trio and the “Emperor” Concerto are among the many works dedicated to him. Beethoven promised a new mass for the ceremony and wrote to Rudolph that the day on which it was performed would be “the most glorious day of my life”.

The ceremony took place on 9 March 1820. The mass was nowhere near ready. Beethoven had begun sketching in the spring of 1819, but the work kept growing, and he did not finish it until 1823. It occupied him for about four years, the same years in which he wrote his last three piano sonatas and the *Diabelli Variations* and started the Ninth Symphony. He prepared with unusual thoroughness. He studied

plainchant and the old church modes, looked closely at the sacred music of Palestrina, Handel and Bach, and had the Latin text of the mass translated word by word so that he could be certain of its meaning and accents.

What came out of this is unlike any earlier mass. It keeps the traditional five sections of the liturgy, and it uses many of the conventions of Austrian church music, but on a scale and with an intensity that no church service could contain. The demands on the chorus are notorious, and the fugues are among the hardest in the repertoire. At the head of the Kyrie, Beethoven wrote the words “From the heart: may it go again to the heart.”

He never heard the whole work. The first complete performance was given in St Petersburg in April 1824, arranged by his Russian patron Prince Nikolai Galitzin. In Vienna, on 7 May 1824, three movements (the Kyrie, Credo and Agnus Dei) were sung at the concert in the Kärntnertor Theatre that also brought the premiere of the Ninth Symphony. Because the censor did not allow a mass to be sung in a theatre, they were advertised as “three grand hymns”.

Beethoven died in Vienna on 26 March 1827. These performances fall in the two hundredth year since his death.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Kyrie. The mass opens with broad chords in D major, marked *Mit Andacht* (with devotion). The woodwinds sing the melody before any voice enters, and when the chorus comes in with “Kyrie”, solo voices emerge from it one at a time. The middle section, “Christe eleison”, is more active and belongs mainly to the soloists.

Gloria. An eruption: the orchestra rushes upward and the chorus hurls out the word “Gloria”. The movement keeps this energy for long stretches, pausing for a gentler “Gratias agimus” and a slow, pleading “Qui tollis”, where the soloists lead the cries of “miserere”. It ends with a huge fugue on “In gloria Dei Patris, Amen”, after which Beethoven, not content, brings back the opening shout of “Gloria” at even greater speed. The chorus has the last word, alone, after the orchestra has stopped.

Credo. The chorus declares “Credo, credo” on a blunt two-note figure that returns as a refrain. The centre of the movement is its quietest music. For “Et incarnatus est” Beethoven turns to an archaic church mode, with a flute trilling high above the voices; the solo tenor then announces “Et homo factus est” (and was

made man) in a warm D major. The “Crucifixus” is marked by stabbing accents, and “Et resurrexit” bursts out from the chorus without any accompaniment. The movement closes with a long double fugue on “Et vitam venturi saeculi” (and the life of the world to come), which begins gently and returns at twice the speed.

Sanctus and Benedictus. Instead of the usual blaze of sound, the Sanctus begins in near darkness, with low instruments and the four soloists singing in hushed awe. After a brief, fast “Pleni sunt coeli” and “Osanna”, the orchestra plays a slow, shadowy interlude that Beethoven called a *Praeludium*. Then a solo violin enters at the very top of its range and slowly descends, joined by two flutes. It stays for the whole of the Benedictus, playing a long, serene melody above the voices. It is one of the most famous passages in the work.

Agnus Dei. The bass soloist begins the final prayer in a dark B minor, and the other soloists and the men of the chorus join him. When the music turns to D major for “Dona nobis pacem”, Beethoven adds a heading: “Prayer for inner and outer peace”. The peace is twice threatened. First, distant drums and trumpets sound a military signal, and the soloists renew the plea for mercy in frightened recitative. Later the orchestra breaks in with a violent, jagged fugal passage. Each time the chorus resumes its plea. The work does not end in triumph: the last “pacem” is followed by a few short bars from the orchestra, and it is over.

Tonight's artists

Golda Schultz *soprano*

Golda Schultz sings the soprano solo, the voice that crowns the quartet in the Kyrie and the Benedictus.

Golda Schultz is a South African soprano. She trained at the Juilliard School in New York and in the opera studio of the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, and then joined that company's ensemble. Her international career took off with Sophie in *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Salzburg Festival in 2015, followed by Countess Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro* at Glyndebourne and the Vienna State Opera, Vitellia in *La clemenza di Tito* in Salzburg and Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Later roles include Agathe in *Der Freischütz* in Munich, Micaëla in *Carmen* at the Paris Opera and Madame Lidoine in *Dialogues des Carmélites* at Glyndebourne. She is equally active as a concert singer and recitalist.

Wiebke Lehmkuhl *contralto*

Wiebke Lehmkuhl sings the alto solo, heard most exposed in the recitatives that answer the drums and trumpets in the *Agnus Dei*.

Wiebke Lehmkuhl is a German contralto admired for the depth, evenness and dark beauty of her low register, a true alto in an age when the voice type has grown rare. Born in Oldenburg in 1983, she studied in Hamburg with Ulla Groenewold and Hanna Schwarz, joined the ensemble of the Zurich Opera in 2008, and went on to sing Erda in *Das Rheingold*, to appear at the Salzburg Easter Festival and, from 2016, at Bayreuth. She has since become a sought-after concert artist, particularly in the great alto parts of the Austro-German repertoire, from Bach's Christmas Oratorio and Mozart's Requiem to Beethoven's Ninth and Mahler. Her singing is prized for its steadiness and gravity rather than display, qualities that make her an ideal voice for the hushed metaphysics of Mahler's 'Midnight Song'.

Sebastian Kohlhepp *tenor*

Sebastian Kohlhepp sings the tenor solo, which has one of the key moments of the Credo: the announcement “Et homo factus est”.

Sebastian Kohlhepp is a German tenor. He was an ensemble member of the Vienna State Opera and of the Stuttgart Opera before becoming a freelance singer. Mozart is at the centre of his stage repertoire, with Tamino at the Vienna State Opera, Ferrando at the Bavarian State Opera, Don Ottavio in Zurich and Belmonte at the Salzburg Mozartwoche. He has also sung David in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* under Christian Thielemann at the Salzburg Easter Festival, Narraboth in *Salome* at La Scala, and Manolios in Martinů’s *The Greek Passion* at the Salzburg Festival. He is in demand as a concert singer in oratorio and the choral repertoire.

David Steffens *bass*

David Steffens sings the bass solo, who opens the *Agnus Dei* alone.

David Steffens is a German bass who grew up in Bad Reichenhall in Bavaria. He studied at the Mozarteum in Salzburg with Horiana Brănişteanu and in the song class of Wolfgang Holzmair, and in 2011 received the Lilli Lehmann Medal as the outstanding graduate of his year. He spent the 2011/12 season in the International Opera Studio of the Zurich Opera and took part in the Salzburg Festival’s Young Singers Project in 2012. Since the 2015/16 season he has been a member of the Stuttgart State Opera, where his roles have included Sarastro, Figaro, King Heinrich in *Lohengrin* and Gremin in *Eugene Onegin*. As a guest he has sung Osmin in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and Baron Ochs in *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Rundfunkchor Berlin *chorus*

The Rundfunkchor Berlin takes on one of the most demanding choral parts in the repertoire, including the great fugues that end the *Gloria* and the *Credo*.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

Swafford gives a long, clear account of the years Beethoven spent on the *Missa solennis* and of what the composer, no conventional churchgoer, believed.

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: The Music and the Life**

Lewis Lockwood, W. W. Norton 2005

Lockwood sets the mass beside the Ninth Symphony and the late sonatas written in the same years, and is a reliable guide to how the piece is built.

DEEPER **Beethoven: Missa solennis**

William Drabkin, Cambridge University Press 1991

The Cambridge Music Handbook on this work: its genesis, its relation to the mass tradition and a movement-by-movement analysis.

SOURCES

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3. Beethoven: Missa Solennis, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/beethoven-missa-solennis>
4. Golda Schultz, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golda_Schultz
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7. Sebastian Kohlhepp, Wikipedia (German). https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sebastian_Kohlhepp
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10. David Steffens, Salzburg Festival. <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/a/david-steffens>
11. Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780544245587>
12. Beethoven: The Music and the Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393326383>
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Version 1, 7 October 2026