

Klaus Mäkelä conducts Beethoven's Missa solemnis

Wednesday, March 10, 2027 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw

Klaus Mäkelä, conductor · Chen Reiss, soprano · Wiebke Lehmkuhl, alto · Andrew Staples, tenor · William Thomas, bass · Netherlands Radio Choir, choir
approximately 80 minutes

Ludwig van Beethoven

1770–1827

80 minutes

Missa solennis 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

In 1819 Beethoven learned that Archduke Rudolph of Austria was to become Archbishop of Olmütz (Olomouc) in Moravia. Rudolph had been his pupil for years and was the most important of his patrons, as well as a friend. Beethoven set out to write a solemn mass for the installation. The ceremony took place on 9 March 1820. The mass was nowhere near ready.

It occupied him, on and off, from 1819 into 1823, the years in which the Ninth Symphony was also taking shape. To prepare, he went back to older church music: Palestrina, Handel and Bach. What he produced lasts between seventy and eighty minutes and asks for four soloists, a large chorus and an orchestra with organ. It is too long and too demanding for any ordinary service, and it has lived in the concert hall almost from the start.

The first complete performance was given in St Petersburg in April 1824, arranged by Prince Nikolai Golitsyn, a Russian admirer and patron of the composer. Vienna heard only part of it. On 7 May 1824, at the Kärntnertor Theatre, the Kyrie, Credo and Agnus Dei were sung as three ‘hymns’, because the censors did not allow a mass in a theatre. The same concert ended with the first performance of the Ninth Symphony.

On the score Beethoven wrote a line that has become attached to the piece: ‘From the heart: may it go to the heart again.’ He said his chief aim was to awaken and leave lasting religious feeling in singers and listeners alike. What kind of believer he was is still argued over, but nobody doubts how seriously he took the words.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Kyrie is marked ‘Mit Andacht’, with devotion. Its opening is broad and calm. In the middle section, ‘Christe eleison’, the music turns to the minor, the four soloists come forward and the texture grows busier.

The Gloria breaks in at full speed and rarely lets up. Beethoven follows the text phrase by phrase, changing tempo and texture as he goes, and ends with a fugue. The Credo opens with a firm two-note figure on the word itself, repeated like a slogan. Listen for the hush at ‘Et incarnatus est’, where the harmony turns archaic and modal, the tenor’s ‘Et homo factus est’ (and was made man) in a burst of D major, the stabbing accents of the ‘Crucifixus’ and the sudden unaccompanied shout of ‘Et resurrexit’. The movement closes with a long fugue on ‘Et vitam venturi saeculi’ (and the life of the world to come), whose theme returns at about twice the speed. It is among the hardest passages a chorus is ever asked to sing.

The Sanctus begins quietly, with the soloists and without the chorus. Before the Benedictus the orchestra plays a dark, slow Praeludium, and then a solo violin enters very high and floats downward, like something descending from above. The violin sings with the voices for the rest of the movement.

The Agnus Dei starts in B minor, with men’s voices alone pleading for mercy. When the music turns to D major for ‘Dona nobis pacem’, Beethoven adds a heading of his own: ‘Prayer for inner and outer peace’. Twice the prayer is cut off. First come distant trumpets and drums, the sounds of war, and frightened cries of

‘miserere’ from the soloists; later a restless passage for orchestra alone. The mass does not end in triumph. The plea for peace comes back, and the close is brief and plain.

Tonight’s artists

Chen Reiss *soprano*

The soprano line sits at the top of the solo quartet and often at the top of the whole texture, above the chorus in the Gloria and the Credo. Beethoven writes for the four soloists as a group far more than as individuals, so Chen Reiss is heard chiefly in ensemble, in the ‘Christe eleison’, the Sanctus and the Benedictus.

Chen Reiss, born in Israel in 1979, is an acclaimed lyric soprano with a particular affinity for the Viennese Classical repertoire. After early studies in Israel and vocal training in New York, she built her career in Europe, joining the Bavarian State Opera in Munich (where Zubin Mehta became a mentor) and appearing regularly at the Vienna State Opera and with the world’s leading orchestras. Admired for the purity, warmth and refinement of her voice, she is ideally suited to the tender consolation of the soprano solo in Brahms’s Requiem.

Wiebke Lehmkuhl *alto*

The alto part gives the solo quartet its warmth in the middle. In the Agnus Dei, where Beethoven again gives the soloists the leading part, the plea for mercy becomes a personal one.

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’.

Andrew Staples *tenor*

The tenor has one of the most exposed moments in the mass: the announcement ‘Et homo factus est’ (and was made man) in the Credo, which Beethoven gives to a single voice as the music brightens into D major.

Andrew Staples is an English tenor, a former chorister of St Paul’s Cathedral who went on to King’s College, Cambridge, and became the first holder of the Peter Pears Scholarship at the Royal College of Music. His repertoire runs from Handel and Mozart to Britten, whose operas he sang as a student in the college’s Benjamin Britten International Opera School. His clear, flexible, finely articulated tenor, heir to a distinctly English tradition, suits the role Britten conceived for Peter Pears, voicing Wilfred Owen’s poems with the chamber orchestra in dialogue with the baritone.

William Thomas *bass*

The Agnus Dei opens in B minor with men’s voices only, the darkest page of the score. The bass soloist, William Thomas, is at the centre of that sound, and of the solo quartet throughout.

William Thomas is a fast-rising British bass, admired for the depth, richness and nobility of his voice. A graduate of the opera course at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, he has won a string of major prizes, including the Kathleen Ferrier Award, the John Christie Award and the Veronica Dunne International Singing Competition, and his recent and forthcoming engagements include Daland in *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Opéra national de Lorraine and house debuts at the Staatsoper Berlin and Cologne Opera. His sonorous, weighty bass is well suited to the grave, authoritative roles of the Priest and the Angel of the Agony in *Gerontius*.

Netherlands Radio Choir *choir*

The chorus carries most of the Missa solennis, and the writing is notoriously hard: long stretches at the top of the voice, sudden drops from loud to soft, and two large fugues. The Netherlands Radio Choir (Groot Omroepkoor) sings it in Amsterdam on 10, 12 and 14 March, and travels with the orchestra to Brussels on 11 March and to the Easter Festival in Baden-Baden on 22 March.

The Netherlands Radio Choir (Groot Omroepkoor) is the only professional choir in the Netherlands devoted to the great choral-symphonic repertoire; it was founded shortly after the Second World War and is based in Hilversum. A regular partner of the Dutch radio orchestras and of visiting ensembles, it is celebrated for the power, precision and tonal richness it brings to the great choral-orchestral repertoire, from oratorio and opera to large-scale twentieth-century works: exactly the forces needed for the massed choruses of Alexander Nevsky.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

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 places the mass beside the Ninth Symphony and the late sonatas written in the same years, and explains plainly how each movement is built.

DEEPER **Beethoven: Missa solennis**

William Drabkin, Cambridge University Press 1991

The Cambridge Music Handbook on this one work: how it came to be written, how it relates to the older mass tradition, and an analysis movement by movement.

SOURCES

1. Beethoven's Missa solennis, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/calendar/beethovens-missa-solemnis-2027-03-10/>
2. On tour: Beethoven's Missa solennis (Brussels, 11 March 2027), Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/calendar/on-tour-beethovens-missa-solemnis-2027-03-11/>
3. On tour: Beethoven's Missa solennis (Baden-Baden, 22 March 2027), Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/calendar/on-tour-beethovens-missa-solemnis-2027-03-22/>
4. Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest & Mäkelä, Bozar Brussels. <https://www.bozar.be/en/calendar/koninklijk-concertgebouworkest-makela-0>

5. Beethoven: Missa Solemnis, Festspielhaus Baden-Baden. <https://www.festspielhaus.de/en/program/beethoven-missa-solemnis/93>
6. Missa solemnis (Beethoven), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missa_solemnis_\(Beethoven\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missa_solemnis_(Beethoven))
7. Beethoven: Missa Solemnis, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/beethoven-missa-solemnis>
8. A Movement by Movement Analysis of the Missa Solemnis, California Institute of Technology. https://www.its.caltech.edu/~tan/BeethovenMissaSolemnis/analysis_of_missa_solemnis.html
9. Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780544245587>
10. Beethoven: The Music and the Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780393326383>
11. Beethoven: Missa solemnis, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521378314>



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