

Beethoven's Missa solemnis, Two Hundred Years On

Saturday, March 20, 2027 · 15:30 · Musikverein

Franz Welser-Möst, conductor · Golda Schultz, soprano · Deniz Uzun, mezzo-soprano · Daniel Behle, tenor · Adam Palka, bass · Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien, 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

Beethoven set the Latin mass twice. The first setting was the Mass in C major of 1807. The second took him about four years and outgrew the occasion it was meant for.

It began with a deadline. Archduke Rudolph of Austria, a son of Emperor Leopold II, had been Beethoven's piano and composition pupil for years and was his most important patron. In 1819 it became known that Rudolph was to be made Archbishop of Olmütz (now Olomouc) in Moravia, and Beethoven set out to write a solemn mass for the ceremony. The installation took place on 9 March 1820. The mass was not ready, and would not be for another three years. Sketches go back to the spring of 1819; the score was finished in 1823.

Part of the delay was study. Beethoven went back to plainchant and to the church music of Palestrina, Handel and Bach, and he had the Latin text translated word for word, with its accents marked, so that he could be sure of the sense of every phrase. The mass grew alongside the last piano sonatas and the Ninth Symphony, and it shares their appetite for fugue. At the head of the Kyrie he wrote “From the heart: may it go again to the heart”, and over the first bars the instruction “Mit Andacht” (with devotion). In a letter of 1822 he called it his greatest work.

Vienna did not hear it whole. The first complete performance was given in St Petersburg in April 1824, arranged by his Russian patron Prince Nikolai Galitzin. A month later, on 7 May 1824, the Kyrie, Credo and Agnus Dei were sung at the Kärntnertor Theatre in Vienna in the concert that also gave the first performance of the Ninth Symphony. The censors would not allow a mass to be sung in a theatre, so the three movements were announced as “hymns”.

The score calls for four vocal soloists, mixed chorus, and an orchestra of pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, organ and strings. A performance lasts between 70 and 80 minutes. The choral writing is famously hard: tempo, metre and dynamics change abruptly, sometimes from one syllable to the next, and two of the five movements end in large fugues.

Beethoven died in Vienna on 26 March 1827. The last of these three performances is given on that date, two hundred years later.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Kyrie. Three broad chords of D major, then quiet. The woodwinds sing the melody before any voice has entered, and when the chorus calls “Kyrie”, a soloist answers each time. The middle section, “Christe eleison”, turns to B minor and a more flowing pulse, and belongs mainly to the solo quartet. The opening returns to close the movement, which is the calmest and most traditional of the five.

Gloria. The orchestra races upward and the chorus throws out the word “Gloria”. That gesture works as a motto and keeps coming back. Between its returns Beethoven follows the text phrase by phrase: a gentler “Gratias agimus”, introduced by the woodwinds, and a slow “Qui tollis” in which the soloists plead “miserere nobis”. The close is a fugue on “In gloria Dei Patris,

Amen". When it seems to be over, Beethoven brings back the shout of "Gloria" from the beginning, faster than before, although the liturgy asks for nothing of the kind.

Credo. The word "Credo" is set to a blunt two-note figure that returns like a refrain. The heart of the movement is quiet. For "Et incarnatus est" Beethoven writes in the old Dorian mode, an archaic sound in 1823, while a solo flute flutters high above the voices. The tenor then announces "Et homo factus est" (and was made man) and the harmony opens into D major. Hard accents mark the "Crucifixus". The chorus proclaims "Et resurrexit" with no instruments at all, and the orchestra answers with rising scales. The movement ends with a double fugue on "Et vitam venturi saeculi" (and the life of the world to come), which starts gently and comes back at about twice the speed.

Sanctus and Benedictus. The Sanctus is again marked "Mit Andacht". It begins low and dark, without flutes, oboes or violins, and with the four soloists in place of the chorus. "Pleni sunt coeli" and "Osanna" are short and fast. Then the orchestra alone plays a slow, veiled passage headed "Praeludium", standing where an organist would once have improvised during the service. Out of it a solo violin enters at the top of its range and slowly descends. It stays for the whole of the Benedictus, singing above the voices.

Agnus Dei. The prayer for mercy opens in B minor with the lower voices, slow and dark. When the music turns to D major for "Dona nobis pacem", Beethoven adds a heading: "Prayer for inner and outer peace". Twice the peace is threatened. First, drums and trumpets sound a march and the soloists cry out again for mercy. Later the orchestra breaks in with a jagged fugal passage of its own. Each time the chorus takes up its plea again. The ending is brief: a last "pacem", a few bars from the orchestra, and nothing more.

Tonight's artists

Golda Schultz *soprano*

Schultz sings the top line of the solo quartet, which Beethoven uses less for display than for the intimate moments of the text: the “Christe eleison”, the opening of the Sanctus, 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.

Deniz Uzun *mezzo-soprano*

Uzun sings the alto part. The orchestra's listing names her for all three performances.

Deniz Uzun is a Turkish-German mezzo-soprano. She studied at the Mannheim University of Music and Performing Arts and at the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University, and was then a member of the opera studio of the Bavarian State Opera in Munich. From the 2016/17 season she belonged to the ensemble of the Zurich Opera, where her roles included Ino in Handel's *Semele*, Sonetka in Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Krista in Janáček's *The Makropulos Case* and Lucilla in Rossini's *La scala di seta*; she moved to the ensemble of the Komische Oper Berlin in 2022. She won the Eva Marton Prize in 2021 and the Elizabeth Connell Prize in 2022, and her concert work includes appearances with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.

Daniel Behle *tenor*

The tenor has one of the pivotal lines of the Credo, “Et homo factus est”, and leads the pleas for mercy in the Gloria.

Daniel Behle is a German tenor and composer, born in Hamburg in 1974. He studied trombone and composition at the Hamburg academy of music and trained as a singer alongside, partly with his mother, the soprano Renate Behle. His first engagements were at the Oldenburg State Theatre and the Vienna Volksoper. His repertoire runs from Baroque music and Mozart to Wagner: he made his Bayreuth Festival debut in 2017 as David in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. He is also a song recitalist, often with the pianist Oliver Schnyder, and has recorded widely. As a composer he has made arrangements for tenor and piano trio and written the operetta *Hopfen und Malz*, first staged in 2023.

Adam Palka *bass*

The bass soloist opens the Agnus Dei. The orchestra, the Musikverein and the Vienna tourist board all list Palka for these concerts.

Adam Palka is a Polish bass. He studied at the Gdańsk Academy of Music and in the opera studio of the Zurich Opera, and joined the Baltic Opera in Gdańsk in 2005. Since the 2013/14 season he has been a member of the Stuttgart State Opera, where his roles have included Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, Sir Giorgio in *I puritani* and Méphistophélès in Gounod’s *Faust*. He has sung Méphistophélès at the Vienna State Opera and the Grand Théâtre de Genève as well, the title role in *Boris Godunov* at La Scala in Milan, and the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni* and Timur in *Turandot* at the Royal Opera House in London.

Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien *chorus*

The Singverein, whose director since 1991 has been Johannes Prinz, sings all three performances: the two subscription concerts on 20 and 21 March and the concert of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde on 26 March, the two hundredth anniversary of Beethoven’s death. The Gesellschaft counts members of the society, forerunners of today’s choir, among the singers at the Vienna concert of May 1824 where parts of the mass were first heard, and Welser-Möst is an honorary member of the Singverein.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

Jan Swafford, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014

A full-length life that follows the mass from the promise to Archduke Rudolph through the years of work that followed, and asks what Beethoven himself believed.

ACCESSIBLE **Beethoven: A Life in Nine Pieces**

Laura Tunbridge, Penguin Books 2020

A short life told through nine works, each paired with a theme; the Missa solemnis is the piece Tunbridge chooses for Beethoven and the spirit.

DEEPER **Beethoven: Missa solemnis**

William Drabkin, Cambridge University Press 1991

The Cambridge Music Handbook devoted to this one work: how it was composed, how it relates to the mass tradition, and an analysis movement by movement.

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