

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

80 minutes

1770–1827

Missa solemnis in D major, Op. 123

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.



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Version 1, 7 October 2026