

A Choral Director's Guide To Beethoven's Missa Solemnis

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From many aspects, Ludwig van Beethoven's Missa Solemnis is a unique masterpiece. The most important facet of this singularity is, of course, the extra-ordinary grandeur of the music itself. Few other extended works in the repertoire can match the sublime level of expression found here. Yet performances of the Missa Solemnis are rather uncommon, for like a sleeping Brunhilde, Beethoven's choral masterwork is surrounded with forbidding obstacles.

Technically, the demands upon choristers are manifold:

1. A large working range. Soprano, c¹ to b² (Example 1) with B flats frequent and exposed. Alto, g to f sharp² (Ex. 2). The C to F range is used extensively. Tenor, c to a¹ (Ex. 3), with many exposed solo entrances at the top of the range. Bass, F to f sharp¹ (Ex. 4), occasional but crucial use of E flat - F.

2. Vocal flexibility. Much of the Gloria and Credo requires a highly competent chorus, presupposing vocal training on the part of individual members. The concluding Credo fugue stretches technical facility to the limits of most singers.

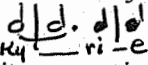
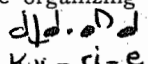
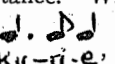
3. Stamina. Missa Solemnis requires a commitment in sheer physical effort: Sustained full-throated passages of heroic proportions, lines with sudden gymnastic skips, unexpected rhythmic thrusts, dynamic contrasts often appearing from measure to measure. An active, intense vocal and intellectual involvement is the composer's demand. Coupled with the factors already mentioned (plus the ones not yet mentioned) and months of rehearsals, the problem of stamina is a real one to be met by the conductor in planning rehearsals and in gauging his singers' capacities.

The ultimate challenge is a stylistic one. When a choir prepares a Bach cantata or a group of spirituals, each member (and the conductor) subconsciously draws upon related experiences as performer to bring to his effort a grasp of the style in question. But there is no choral precedent for Beethoven's creative methods in Missa Solemnis. The earlier Mass in C, Mount of Olives and the Choral Fantasia are thoroughly within the Viennese Classical tradition. Composers who followed him and drew from his orchestral style did not apply it to their vocal writing. For example, Brahms as symphonist owes much to Beethoven but Brahms the choral composer looks instead to Bach and to Schubert. Thus the Missa Solemnis (and to some extent, its companion piece, The 9th Symphony) stands alone. So does the singer as he grapples with it.

Since the composer does set the complete text of the Catholic Mass, the overall structure of each large section follows a pre-determined and generally predictable course. It is the inner structure, i.e. of the individual phrase, that is conceived instrumentally. Singers (after they get over the initial hurdles of notes, rhythms, etc.) are usually excited by the new experience this work affords them. They must contend with short phrases, sometimes imitative of brass and woodwind effects; the destiny of a concise motivic idea often taking precedence over lyrical expansion. One can argue that next to the Baroque masters, this is hardly vocal music, but the same argument could be applied to The Baroque when comparing that music with its own predecessors of The Renaissance. What really matters here, or anywhere else, is an abstracted creative validity.

My experience has shown that while the choir is enthralled, the symphony men are usually disappointed. They are used to a Beethoven with all of the ends carefully wrapped up within the body of an orchestral package. Now their music is incomplete, for a standing and singing orchestra behind them often completes the phrases they begin. To no one does Missa Solemnis sound quite so glorious as to an audience, where the sum far exceeds the compilation of all the parts.

The remainder of this article will deal with specific problems as they occur within the music itself. This writer has been fortunate to study and perform the Missa Solemnis under Hugh Ross, Leonard Bernstein and Robert Shaw. More recently I have prepared two organizations (The Handel Choir of Baltimore and The Harford Choral Society) for performances of Missa Solemnis with The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. It is from the combined experience of these events that the following suggestions have evolved. I suggest the reader follows along with a vocal score. G. Schirmer and Peters both publish excellent editions.

The *Kyrie* presents few problems. An opening rhythm,  assumes prime organizing importance. When it appears in diminution as  or , the

dotted characteristic will be lost against the orchestra unless the first two notes are allowed some separation and the "ri" syllable is pronounced with a rolled "r". *Christe* employs two contrasting ideas: A rhythmic motive (Ex. 5) that is used sequentially and a lyrical counter, (Ex. 6). As long as the first remains poco marcato and the second legato, the composer's intentions will be heard with clarity. The concluding phrase of *Christe* requires altos to enter pianissimo on an exposed C sharp. (Ex. 7). The conductor might consider giving this to the sopranos and then return each to their own part.

In the *Gloria*, (Ex. 8) the opening entrances need support from other sections. The entire soprano section can double the alto line. The continuing tenor part should be re-enforced by altos on the last two notes, unless one is blessed with the choral rarity of an extra robust tenor section. On paper, my last suggestion looks strange, but the sound is smoother than the look. One aid in "cutting through" the orchestra on this phrase is to substitute a light "h" sound for the natural "y" that occurs on the last syllable of the word "gloria." This enables the singer to punctuate a basically instrumental line in a manner competitive with the capacities of the wind instruments that play the same phrase. And since the opening "gloria" motive is very prominent in the entire movement, this technique will also make the phrase chorally evident. It should be employed throughout. The text, *qui sedes ad dexteram patris*, brings sopranos to repeating high Bbs. (Ex. 9). The tone is most easily supported if they do not form the "x" and "m" sounds in the word "dexteram". The rest of the choir, which has simultaneous rhythms, must of course enunciate with usual precision.

The coda, which follows a massive fugue, contains many moments in which the choir must produce crucial harmonic changes over full orchestra, but on continuing vowel sounds. In the example of this given here, the conductor will note that the power of this writing requires a *reiteration* rather than a continuance of each vowel, as the harmony changes. (Ex. 10). Sopranos beware the octave B naturals on "Deo". They must be sung *detache* and without diphthong, or the exposed octave drop will sound ludicrous.

The *Credo* is by far the most complex movement. It contains enough first rate musical material to have sufficed the earlier Beethoven for a couple of symphonies. The variety of these ideas, along with the speed of change from one to another, creates a problem of controlling and correlating a musical abundance. The first section is indicated *Allegro ma*

non troppo, in common time. Finding the proper tempo necessitates study of the entire section. For "Patrem omnipotentem" Sopranos sing: (Ex. 11). The tempo must be fast enough to allow them a sustained sound through the end of the phrase. "Ante omnia saecula" needs space to breathe — if it is to remain a placid island among the tumultuous surrounding sounds. (Ex. 12). The lyrical "Qui propter nos homines" along with the following 20 or more measures implies an alla breve motion, and your opening measure of *Credo* (in four) must be conditioned by this as well. (Ex. 13). Thus, the initial tempo will have to take into account and reconcile these and other factors. The easy solution, i.e. modifications of the basic tempo in order to accommodate such disparate elements

compromises the built-in strength of the music. No metronome suggestion is given here, because I do not believe that my tempo is the only one, yet I am convinced that the principle of one tempo is the best approach.

Other problems in the first section, (Ex. 14): The "et" which follows "omnium" is neither part of the preceding phrase nor connected to the following one. It is Beethoven's subjective infusion of "and there is still more to my belief!" into one short word. Thus "et" must be articulated separately and with pronounced emphasis, here and in the many other instances in *Credo* when a similar technique is used.

I have used extensive doubling for "Deum de Deo" (Ex. 15) to bring out the brilliance and surprise element of the

EDITOR'S NOTE: Due to their varying length and size, the musical examples are slightly rearranged out of numerical sequence to achieve a more compact form.

8 *ff*

Glo - ri - a in ex - cel - sis De - o, - o, - o,

9 *Larghetto.*

qui se-des ad dex-te - ram pa - tris,
qui se-des ad dex-te - ram pa - tris,
qui se-des ad dex-te - ram pa - tris,
qui se-des ad dex-te - ram pa - tris.

1 **2** **3**

4 **5** *Christe,*

6 *e-lei-* **7** *Christe,*

10 *Presto.*

in excel-sis, in ex - cel - sis De - o.
in excel-sis, in ex - cel - sis De - o.
in excel-sis, in ex - cel - sis De - o.
in excel-sis, in ex - cel - sis De - o.

11 *p cresc.*

pa - trem, pa - trem om - ni - po - ten - tem.

12 *pp*

an-te om-ni-a, om-ni-a sae - cu - la,
an-te om-ni-a sae - cu - la,
an - te, an-te om-ni-a sae - cu - la,
an - te, an-te om-ni-a sae - cu - la,

13 *p*

Qui pro - pter nos ho - mi - nes,
Qui pro - pter nos ho - mi - nes,
Qui pro - pter nos ho - mi - nes,
Qui pro - pter nos ho - mi - nes,

phrase. It requires some split second shifting from staff to staff, but the added strength is more than compensating for any inconvenience to the singer. The tenor and alto entrances during the fugato on "consubstantialem patri" should also be doubled in order to overcome heavy brass unisons.

"Et incarnatus est" begins with a dorian melody, indicated as tenor solo, but because of the affinity between the modal character and men's voices, it is often performed by the entire tenor section. The effect is beautiful, but when followed by the solo quartet (which elaborates on the same melodic line) a dubious balance is created. "Et resurrexit" features tenors once again on a high and exposed solo entrance. Altos can double this line until their own entrance two measures later. All tenor and alto entrances from "sedet ad dexteram patris" through (and most importantly, including) the alto "judicare" should be re-inforced and sung marcato. A similar procedure is suggested for "cujus regni".

The subito piano at "in remissionem" will continually catch some choir members by surprise and needs rehearsing from its forte approach. (Ex. 16). For the sopranos, the characteristically instrumental line of the two preceding measures causes intonation problems. I have had the women sing this non forte, with total concentration on breath support and the intervals reaching the high "A" with light tone.

The subject of the first "et vitam venturi" fugue must begin leggiero. The (Ex. 17) staccato indicated in full score is not meant to create a dry or disjointed line. The counter subject must be sempre legato. (Ex. 18). Singers have a tendency to produce the last syllable within the counter subject staccato particularly the tenors in this development of the phrase (Ex. 19). The soprano subject entrance of high B \flat is best supported if the "m" and "n" sounds are omitted. (Ex. 20). This fugue, and in particular, the alto and tenor parts, contains the most difficult interval problems of the Missa and requires extensive rehearsal.

The counter subject of the concluding fugue is the greatest purely technical situation in Missa Solemnis. Here are a few examples of this theme and its developed treatment: Soprano: (Ex. 21); Bass: (Ex. 22); Tenor: (Ex. 23); Alto and Soprano: (Ex. 24). Rehearse these slowly on "na na" or "la la" until the syncopations are mastered. Then, *detache* on the vowel at increasing speeds. Even when learned, this line must remain *detache* to be produced with clarity. The performance tempo for the fugue must be considered pragmatically: the faster the tempo in which your singers can clearly negotiate the counter subject, the closer you will be to Beethoven's intentions.

Perhaps the state of total deafness left the composer unconcerned with or unaware of the performer's problems, but at the same time it did free him for unfettered musical thought and thus led to the creation of a music which bristles with amazing life and energy.

Sanctus begins with music for solo quartet. The following "Pleni sunt coeli" and the first "Osanna" are both very

choral in conception, and they are accompanied by full orchestra. Yet the score does not indicate any change from the solo voices listed at the opening of the movement. There is no doubt that it sounds better with full chorus. To follow the written scoring is not necessarily an adherence to the composer's intention, for this might have been an oversight — so obvious is the choral nature of the music. No musical integrity is sacrificed when the composer's primary intention, i.e. letting his music be heard, is fulfilled.

Benedictus through the concluding "Osanna" is easy music, but it needs a choral sensitivity to the ethereal violin obligato. An awareness of and reaction to the violin solo will only come at the orchestra rehearsals, since representation of the melody line on the piano is in no way acoustically comparable to the orchestrated effect.

The transition in mood from *Agnus Dei* to *Dona nobis pacem* — one of the miracles of Missa Solemnis — offers subtle challenges to the interpreter as a musician and as a human being. If one could verbally describe the relationship between the mystical "marche funebre" quality of *Agnus Dei* and the tender warmth of the following *Dona nobis* (Beethoven called it "Prayer for inward and outward peace") then where would be the justification for using the language of abstract sound? The conductor must immerse himself in a study of the score and correlate for himself what changes must occur in the character of the beat, tone production and tempo.

Much has been written on the highly subjective nature of the remaining moments: the impassioned "war music" and the final enigmatic measures. Musically, except for the driving syncopations in the "dona nobis pacem" fugato, it is not very difficult. The military intrusions are considered by some to be out of character with the Mass, but certainly its dramatic insistency is compatible with the character of the man. And Beethoven, the master of the brilliant coda, chooses to leave us with the sounds of a serene but resigned plea. (Ex. 25). It is important for the conductor to leave this music alone! The intended effect, much like a sustained plagal cadence, must not be distorted to approach a tension equal to the *Gloria* coda. The line is to remain warm and without pronounced accents; the final forte sung lyrically. After one hour and a half of monumental intensity, only this moment of simple beauty remains.

Let us face the fact that a perfect performance of Missa Solemnis is unlikely. The grandeur of conception humbles the interpreter and the uncompromising ideal of Beethoven's inner ear remains technically forbidding to this day. The composer's writing for wind players was also too much for its own time, but the 19th century saw many improvements in these instruments. Even a close examination of The Darwinian Hypothesis will not reveal a comparable evolutionary advance for the singer.

Thus the statue remains a broken one, but with dedicated effort we can produce a colossal fragment. ❖

16



cre - do, cre - do, cre - do, cre - do in re-mis-si-o-nem pec - ca - to - rum, pec - ca - to - rum, pec - ca - to - rum, Con - fi-te-or u-num Ba-ptis-ma in re-mis-si-o-nem pec - ca - to - rum, pec - ca - to - rum, etc.

17

Allegretto ma non troppo.



et vi-tam ven - tu - ri sae - cu-li, A - men, a - men. a - men. a - men.

MOORHEAD STATE COLLEGE CHOIR TO TOUR EUROPE IN 1967

In a recent trans-Atlantic telephone conversation with Dr. Paul Koutny, director of the Extension Division of the Institute for European Studies, Earnest Harris, director of the Moorhead, Minn., State College Concert Choir was chosen by the Institute to be sponsored in a European tour this next summer. The Institute, which accepts a few organizations for sponsorship and makes all arrangements for concerts, publicity and travel details, selected the Moorhead choir on the basis of the recording it made last year and recently reviewed in our Record Review by A. C. Cappadonia. Plans are under way at present for the group to sing in London, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Lucerne, Como, Venice, Innsbruck, Vienna, Prague, West Berlin, Cologne and Frankfurt.

Send us news with your dues!

ACDA Convention Schedule

EASTERN: February 9-13 at the Sheraton-Boston in Boston.

SOUTHWESTERN: March 9-12 at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs.

WESTERN: March 19-22 at the Convention Center in Las Vegas.

NORTHWEST: March 29-April 1 at Sentinel High School, Missoula, Mont.

NORTH CENTRAL: April 13-16 at Cobo Hall in Detroit.

SOUTHERN: April 26-29 at the Marriott in Atlanta. (ACDA Day, April 27).

The sixth annual Church Music Workshop is being held Saturday, Jan. 28, on the Alma, Michigan, College campus with Margaret Hillis as guest conductor. She is being assisted by Miss Miriam Bellville, workshop chairman and organist; Dr. Ernest Sullivan, choir director and chairman of the Music Department; James Upton, instrumental director; and Dr. Paul Russell, workshop coordinator, all members of the Alma faculty.

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14

om-ni-um et,
om-ni-um et,
om-ni-um et,
om-ni-um et,

18

A - - - men, a - - - men

19

a - - - men, a - - - men, a - - - men, a - - - men,

20

et vi - tam ven - tu - ri sae - - - eu - li,

Allegro con moto.

21

a - - - men,

22

a -

23

a

24

a - - - men

15

De-um de De-o, De-um de De-o, De-um de De-o, De-um de De-o, lu-men de lu-mi-ne,

25

do- - - na pa - cem, pa-cem.
do- - - na pa - cem, pa-cem.
do- - - na pa - cem, pa-cem.
do- - - na pa - cem, pa-cem.