

# Ludwig Van Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Mass in D, Op.123

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In 1819, Ludwig Van Beethoven began the composition of what he later believed to be his best work: the Mass in D major, or *Missa Solemnis*, Op.123. He left himself only nine short months to complete the mass, which was intended to honor the elevation of his good friend and long-time pupil, the Archduke Rudolph. However, the *Missa Solemnis* was not completed until four years later - evidence of Beethoven's intense, obsessively meticulous composing. "He was in fact as committed to his music as a saint to his God," writes author Edward Larkin, in his essay on Beethoven's medical history (461). Despite the grandiosity and apparent genius of the *Missa Solemnis*, it has not been widely popular for performance over the years. Similarly, it has not been a popular work for formal technical analysis (Kerman 1). This is most likely due to its complexity, but more importantly, it is probably due to its unorthodox treatment of the traditional mass text. Yet it is for this exact reason why Beethoven's Mass in D major proves to be such an original and innovative masterwork.

The influence of the text in the *Missa Solemnis* is vitally important to the composer. Beethoven, after all, was a man who said that the prayer for peace at the end of his mass (*Dona Nobis Pacem*) was "a prayer for outward as well as inward peace" (Tovey 166). To Beethoven, the text of the mass was not simply an opera libretto, or a song text. The words held a deeper meaning to him, and he was intent on sharing the poignancy of these words with his listeners. Author Donald Tovey writes,

The way to grasp the form of this Mass is... to... take each clause of the text and find out to what themes that clause is set. Where we find these themes recur, we shall find either that the composer has returned to the words associated with them, or that he has some more than merely conventional reason for reminding us of those words (166).

The influence of the text is perhaps the most important formal element in Beethoven's mass. The importance of this element is consistent throughout the entirety of the work, but for the purposes of this essay, we shall confine our investigation to the Credo.

When examining the Credo, we are left to speculate Beethoven's own religious beliefs from his treatment of the text with regard to his music (Cooper 241). For example, the section beginning with *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum* contains the important doctrinal list of beliefs, which is fundamental to organized Christianity. Most mass settings treat this section with deliberate attention given to the doctrinal items, yet Beethoven rushes through these thirty-seven words in twenty-two bars of *Allegro ma non troppo*. Even more bizarre is the fact that most of these words are sung only once, and only by a single voice from the choir (Kerman 2). Contrary to this, however, are the words *Credo, credo* (I believe, I believe), in which Beethoven scores for the choir to sing

multiple times, and with an almost jolting power. “Sheer intensity of belief, Beethoven seems to be saying, outweighs belief in any particular proposition,” writes author Joseph Kerman (2). Through his music, Beethoven manages to share his own personal beliefs with those who are privileged to listen with receptive ears. However, the influence of the text does not end here.

In the Crucifixus section of the Credo, the words express the crucifixion of Jesus: *Crucifixus etiam pro nobis, sub Pontio Pilato passus, et sepultus est* (He was crucified also for us, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was buried). For this, Beethoven employs a dramatic, and at times devastating, *Adagio espressivo* setting. Prior to this, however, Beethoven places much emphasis on *Et homo factus est* (and was made man) in a section of *Andante*. Author Martin Cooper acknowledges that here, Beethoven repeats the word ‘man’ with seeming amazement. With this attention, “the truth seems to dawn on [Beethoven]” that man, as well as humanity, is synonymous with suffering. Suffering, says Cooper, is “objectively, an evil because it diminishes human potentialities” (248). Interestingly enough, it is then not surprising that Beethoven chooses diminished harmonies to follow in the Crucifixus section. Cooper writes,

[it is] a symbol of that diminishing, narrowing, confining aspect of suffering that is reflected etymologically in the word ‘anguish’ just as the physical tortures of the crucifixion are reflected rudely in jolting sforzandos, the shuddering demisemiquaver figures in the strings, and the broken or syncopated rhythms of the woodwinds (248).

In listening to this section of the Credo, the action of the crucifixion is illustrated in the sounds. The music *feels* torturous, and as a listener, you can almost *see* the pain of Jesus’ death. Beethoven is a master of creating sensuous sonorities that allow his audience to participate actively in his music.

After the Crucifixus section, it was the expectation of Beethoven’s audiences to hear a joyous *et resurrexit* (and rose again) immediately to follow. However, Beethoven avoids this expectation, and isolates the *et* in the tenor, and sets the *resurrexit tertia die secundum scripturas* (the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures) in an a cappella section for the choir. Interestingly, this is the only unaccompanied choral passage in any mass of the time period (Tovey 173):



By avoiding the expectations of his audience, Beethoven shows his mastery of the element of surprise, as well as his commitment to expressing traditional ideas in novel and rewarding ways. Author Warren Kirkendale writes,

Today we see that [Beethoven] not only retained traditional thought to an unexpected degree [i.e. his use of the fuge, his Palestrina-like harmonies, his Classical influence, etc.] but... with an incomparably freer, personal vocabulary. And this is perhaps nowhere so profoundly [seen] as in his *Missa Solemnis*, the work which belongs to the oldest musical tradition [the Catholic Mass], the work which he believed to be his greatest (666).

Thus, the argument for Beethoven being both a Classicist, as well as a Romanticist, holds true. Though he retained the use of older musical ideas, he expressed those ideas in innovative and original new ways. The *Missa Solemnis* is merely one of the works in which Beethoven employs both genres of musical thought.

A discussion of the Credo of Beethoven's Mass in D would not be complete without an investigation of the immense fuge that ends the movement. A fuge, according to the New Harvard Dictionary of Music, is "the most fully developed procedure of imitative counterpoint, in which the theme is successively stated in all voices of the polyphonic texture" (327). Beethoven's ending fuge lasts an impressive five minutes; its length was probably intended to symbolize the idea of eternity (Kirkendale 684). Philip Downs writes that the fuge "... demonstrate[s] the composer's complete mastery of eighteenth-century techniques, for he is one of the very few capable of making the fuge an expression of man's most elevated sentiments" (623).

The evidence of Beethoven's mastery of the fuge – the "most fully developed procedure of imitative counterpoint" – is impressive, yet ironic, considering Beethoven's own claim to knowing little about the technical aspects of counterpoint. " 'If I, a composer, knew as much about strategy as I do about counterpoint,'" Beethoven once said to a French General, " 'I would soon send you packing'" (Downs 624). Nevertheless, the fuge at the end of the Credo illustrates Beethoven's genius in its purest form.

The words of the fuge, *Et vitam venturi saeculi* (And the life of the world to come) present an interesting subject for analysis. This section of the Credo is set with a leisurely tempo (*Allegro con moto*) and with subdued dynamics – strange for the expected grandiose ending. Author Warren Kirkendale suggests that the reason behind this, is that for Beethoven, everlasting life is "envisioned not in the traditional manner as a vigorous physical existence, but as peace, removed from the bustle and noise of life on earth" (684). The final words of the Credo, which comprise the entirety of the fuge, also suggest Beethoven's contemplations on his own life after death (Kirkendale 684). The sonorities of this section imply an almost 'victorious peace,' the kind fit for a composer of his magnitude.

In conclusion, the Credo section of Beethoven's Mass in D, is not meant for traditional formal analysis. It is perhaps better understood in terms of the influence of the text, as well as a brief fugal analysis for the concluding section. The *Missa Solemnis* took Beethoven four years to compose, which is evident of his commitment to musical perfection. He was known to have been extremely emotional regarding his music, and thus it is perhaps more appropriate to analyze his works (this Mass especially) in terms of his musical intent, rather than his musical form. When giving piano lessons to students, "... wrong notes hardly excited comment from him," writes Downs, "but any failure to observe marks of expression would make him angry" (568). Music was not merely sounds to Beethoven – music was an expression of the deepest of human emotions, the greatest of "human potentialities." To analyze Beethoven's art for anything other than his comment on the human condition is to disregard the intent of one of the greatest composers in history of mankind. Beethoven's music is not merely about *how* it is put together and formed. His music is about the emotions of man, and about the powerful and poignant expression of those emotions.

## Works Cited

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