LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN was baptized in Bonn, Germany, on December 17, 1770, and died in Vienna on March 26, 1827. The composition of the “Missa Solemnis” stretched from the spring of 1819 (possibly even from late 1818) to the middle of 1823. The work received its first performance on April 18, 1824, in St. Petersburg, under the auspices of Prince Nikolai Galitzin (who commissioned three of Beethoven’s last string quartets). Billed as “Three Grand Hymns,” three movements of the “Missa Solemnis”—the Kyrie, Credo, and Agnus Dei, but with texts sung in German—were performed in Vienna on May 7, 1824, on the same concert that included the premiere of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

THE SCORE OF THE “MISSA SOLEMNIS” calls for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass soloists, mixed chorus, and an orchestra of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, organ, and strings. The organist in these performances is James David Christie.

THE HISTORY
The material circumstances surrounding Beethoven’s writing of the Missa Solemnis can serve as little more than a backdrop against which to attempt an understanding of the music. Beethoven’s decision to compose the work was with a view toward a specific occasion: the Archduke Rudolph of Austria, the son of Emperor Leopold II and one of Beethoven’s most important patrons, for many years a student of Beethoven in piano and composition, dedicatee of fifteen works by the composer—including the Fourth and Fifth piano concertos, the Hammerklavier and Opus 111 piano sonatas, the Opus 97 piano trio (the Archduke), and the Grosse Fuge, Opus 133—was to be installed as Archbishop of Olmütz in Moravia on March 9, 1820. Upon hearing of Rudolph’s election, Beethoven wrote to him that “the day on which a High Mass composed by me will be performed during the ceremonies solemnized for Your Imperial Highness will be the most glorious day of my life...” Beethoven did not complete the Mass in time for the ceremony that March of 1820. Though he began formulating ideas for the Kyrie by the spring of 1819 (anticipating the official announcement that June 4 of the Archduke’s election), the Mass did not reach completion until December 1822, and during the period of its creation Beethoven was also concerned with the last three piano sonatas, the Diabelli Variations and the Opus 119 Bagatelles, the Consecration of the House Overture, and the Ninth Symphony.

Many images of the composer dating from the time of the Missa Solemnis are familiar: Anton Schindler, friend and not entirely reliable biographer of the composer, describes Beethoven at work on the fugue of the Credo, “singing, yelling, stamping his feet...The door opened and Beethoven stood before us, his features distorted to the point of inspiring terror. He looked as though he had just engaged in a life and death struggle with the whole army of contrapuntists, his everlasting enemies.” Another incident is related by Alex ander Thayer in his crucial biography of the composer: in this instance, we read of Beethoven awakening early one morning, dressing, slipping on an old coat but no hat, apparently losing direction during the course of his walk, peering in at the windows of nearby houses, and looking so like a beggar that he was arrested and imprisoned for an entire day, until he finally prevailed in having someone brought to identify him late that night. These stories strengthen our image of the composer heedless of the world around him, wrestling with his craft. Maynard Solomon refers to the Mass as “Beethoven’s absorbing passion for four years, replacing Fidelio as the great ‘problem work’ of his career,” and Schindler states that never before or after this period did he see Beethoven “in such a condition of ‘Erdenentrücktheit,’” oblivion of earthly matters.

But Beethoven did have “earthly matters” to contend with as well. Not the least of these was the lawsuit over guardianship of his nephew Karl, a five-year struggle that ended in April 1820 with Beethoven winning the boy away from his mother Johanna, widow of the composer’s brother Caspar Carl. And then there were matters pertaining specifically to the Missa Solemnis: his double-dealings with seven different publishers in an attempt to receive the highest possible fee for his work, and his offering of prepublication manuscript copies to whatever patrons would pay his price. There was the
matter, too, of the premiere. Beethoven was anxious that the completed Mass and Ninth Symphony be heard. The original plan was to introduce the two works on the same concert, but fortunately this notion was scrapped: the program on May 7, 1824, in Vienna’s Kärntner Theatre consisted of the Consecration of the House Overture, the Kyrie, Credo, and Agnus Dei of the Mass (billed as “Three Grand Hymns with Solo and Choral Parts”—liturgical music was not permitted in the concert hall), and the symphony. Beethoven never witnessed a complete performance of the Missa Solemnis, though the first one was given in St. Petersburg on April 18, 1824, under the auspices of Prince Nikolai Galitzin, a Russian admirer of Beethoven who had purchased one of the prepublication copies of the work and for whom Beethoven wrote his string quartets Opp. 127, 130, and 132.

So much for history. As suggested at the outset, this very brief account of names, dates, and places stands apart from consideration of the music itself. The question of Beethoven’s religious beliefs might seem of some relevance, and the composer’s diaries and notebooks include phrases copied from philosophical and religious tracts. And we know that, in preparing to compose the Missa Solemnis, Beethoven studied music of Palestrina and his contemporaries, of Handel, and of Bach; that he had the Mass text carefully translated so that its implications would be entirely clear to him; and that the resulting musical product uses images and patterns that may be traced to long-standing traditions and conventions in music written for the church service.

But still, the music makes its own statement, and it seems best to understand that statement as one of an individual who has come to terms with himself over a long period of time, and whose individual message will ultimately be distilled into the compositional essence of the final piano sonatas and string quartets. Martin Cooper writes that “as a young man Beethoven was indeed both proud and self-sufficient, and it was only the experience of his deafness that broke this pride, slowly and painfully turning the heaven-storming, largely extrovert composer of the early and middle period works into the self-communing and contemplative visionary of the last ten years...Beethoven moved from a position of militant stoicism...to an acceptance which, what ever his everyday life may have been, bears in his music the unmistakable character of joy, that unearthly joy such as is only achieved through suffering.” The Missa Solemnis speaks of joy and of suffering, of faith, hope, and trust. But it speaks, too, of self-awareness, of knowledge of one’s place, and of awe in the face of greater powers and events.

THE MUSIC

Some brief observations on the music. It has been said that the Missa Solemnis is out of place in the concert hall and yet too big for the church. It is probably too big for any mortally prescribed space. Beethoven wrote at the start of his score: “From the heart—may it go to the heart,” and he stated that his chief aim was “to awaken and permanently instill religious feelings not only into the singers but also into the listeners.” The opening Kyrie is marked “Mit Andacht” (“with devotion”); for the more direct, personal appeal of the Christe, the soloists predominate and the texture is more active. The unified intent of orchestra, chorus, and soloists is spelled out at the very beginning: the woodwinds, in singing phrases, give out the musical idea to which the initial words of the Kyrie will be sung, and this same technique of instruments anticipating vocal material will occur again for the “Gratias agimus tibi” and the “Qui tollis peccata mundi” of the Gloria.

The sweep of the Gloria is overwhelming in its impact, and the overall impression is one of power and inevitability, so much so, in fact, that the combined effect of Kyrie and Gloria can leave the listener drained, almost unable to cope with or understand what is still to follow. In keeping with its statement of faith and trust, the Credo is affirmative in tone. The sense of musical motion in the Credo is rather different from that of the Gloria—part of the reason for this lies in the more specific attention Beethoven gives to word-painting and the emphasizing of key text phrases: for ex ample, the burst of D major at the words “Et homo factus est,” the sforzato stabs at “Crucifixus,” the stressing of “passus,” the descending and ascending motion at “de scendit de coelis” and “et ascendit in coelum,” respectively.

The Sanctus, like the Kyrie, is again marked “Mit Andacht,” and is the first movement in which solo voices are heard before the chorus. This is in keeping with Beethoven’s reserving the soloists for special moments of intimacy, awe, and/or supplication (consider the “miserere nobis” of the Gloria,
and the intensification of that plea for mercy to “ō, miserere nobis” by, first, the tenor solo. The sense of “Sanctus” is one of mystery, with the chorus silent, held in reserve.

The Benedictus is preceded by a solemn orchestral Praeludium, and a tender, dolce cantabile violin song descends from above: “Benedictus, qui venit in nomine Domini!” The mood, fittingly, is that of a solemn processional, and it is essential that the solo instrument be a part of, and not, concerto-like, stand apart from, the sense of ceremony that pervades the whole. The threefold prayer of the Agnus Dei is dark-hued, and the prominence again given the soloists makes the entreaty a moving and personal one. The choral “Dona nobis pacem” bears the inscription “Prayer for inner and outer peace,” and this prayer is threatened by intimations of war in the form of trumpet-and-drum alarums and fearful currents in the strings. Soloists and chorus renew the appeal for mercy, and the prayer for peace returns, this time interrupted by a jagged fugato for orchestra. But the ultimate message is one of hope. The last statement of the words “dona nobis pacem” is set to a musical phrase heard several times earlier but only now set apart to emphasize its particular breadth of feeling, and the orchestra’s response is at once simple, affirmative, and concise.

Marc Mandel

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THE EARLIEST KNOWN AMERICAN PERFORMANCE of the “Missa Solemnis” took place in New York’s Steinway Hall on May 2, 1872, with the Church Music Association under the direction of Dr. James Pech.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA PERFORMANCE of the “Missa Solemnis” served as the closing work on the Symphony Hall inaugural concert of October 15, 1900. Wilhelm Gericke conducted, the solo quartet consisted of Clementine DeVere, Gertrude May Stein, Evan Williams, and Joseph S. Baerenstein, and the chorus was the Cecilia Society. Serge Koussevitzky led the next BSO performance, which opened a Beethoven Centenary Festival on March 22, 1927, with Olive Marshall, Jeanne Gordon, Tudor Davies, Arthur Middleton, and the Harvard Glee Club and Radcliffe Choral Society. Koussevitzky also conducted the work on six other occasions (Pension Fund concerts in 1927, 1938, 1941, and 1948; a pair of subscription concerts in 1938; and a Tanglewood performance in 1941), subsequent BSO performances being led by Charles Munch (an April 1950 Pension Fund concert), Leonard Bernstein (at Tanglewood in August 1951, August 1953, and July 1971, each time in memory of Koussevitzky), Colin Davis (in December 1975 and August 1976), Roger Norrington (February/March 1993 and July 31, 1993, the BSO’s most recent Tanglewood performance), Seiji Ozawa (who opened the 2000-01 subscription season with the entire work, then included the Kyrie in the Symphony Hall Centennial Gala that October 14), and James Levine (the most recent subscription performances, in January 2006 with soloists Christine Brewer, Jill Grove, Ben Heppner, and René Pape). The Tanglewood Festival Chorus, John Oliver, conductor, has participated in all of the BSO’s “Missa Solemnis” performances since December 1975, singing the work under Davis, Norrington, Ozawa, and Levine.

Beethoven, Religion, and the “Missa Solemnis”

The following is excerpted from a program note on Beethoven’s “Missa Solemnis” written by former BSO Director of Publications Michael Steinberg originally for the San Francisco Symphony and included in his program note compilation “Choral Masterworks–A Listener’s Guide” (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Although brought up Roman Catholic, Beethoven had probably not entered a church since childhood unless to play music or listen to it...Never an orthodox churchman, though glad to receive extreme unction on his deathbed, he was profoundly religious, especially in his later years.
His diaries and notebooks are full of prayers and invocations. Nature was the most nourishing of forces for him: he saw it, as did the theologian Christoph Christian Sturm in this passage that Beethoven copied out, as

a glorious school for the heart....Here I shall learn wisdom, the only wisdom free from disillusionment. Here I shall learn to know God and enjoy a foretaste of heaven in that knowledge. Among such occupations, my earthly days will flow peacefully by until I am taken up into that world where I shall no longer be a student but a possessor of wisdom.

Another passage from Sturm that he cherished reads: “I will humbly submit to all of life’s chances and changes, and put my sole trust in Thy immutable goodness, O God!”

From Schiller’s essay *The Mission of Moses* he copied and kept framed on his desk these words: “I am that which is, I am all that is, that was, and that will be. No mortal man has raised my veil. He is solely from Himself, and all things owe their being to Him alone.” To Rudolph [i.e., the Archduke Rudolph, whose installation as Archbishop of Olmütz provided Beethoven the incentive to compose the work] he wrote soon after completing the *Missa Solemnis*: “There is no loftier mission than to come nearer than other humans to the Godhead and to disseminate the divine rays among humankind.”

In *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, J.W.N. Sullivan writes: “Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* shows that some of his most important experiences could be contained within the shell of words provided by the Mass.” Martin Cooper, whose book *Beethoven: The Last Decade* offers the best brief account of the composer’s religious attitudes and beliefs, is thinking along the same lines when he writes that Beethoven was

a deeply religious man who was brought up formally as a Catholic and never formally renounced his Church membership, but only came at the end of his life, through misfortune and illness, to understand the close connection between the religious sentiments and often unformulated convictions of a lifetime and the fundamental teachings of the Church, to which he had been for the most part indifferent or hostile.

In contrasting the *Missa Solemnis* with Bach’s B minor Mass, Robert Shaw, who must have conducted more performances of it than anyone else in the work’s history, always referred to Beethoven as someone who, unlike Bach, was forever on the quest of re-inventing God. That is deeply true, but the greatness of the *Missa Solemnis* derives in a very special way from the tension between that self-imposed quest and the powerful structure—the text of the Ordinary—within which Beethoven chose to work, however much he subjectified it in detail.

Michael Steinberg