LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
Symphony No.4 in B flat, Op.60

Adagio – allegro vivace / Slow – fast and lively
Adagio / Slow
Allegro vivace / Fast and lively
Allegro ma non troppo / Fast, but not too fast

The castle of Count Franz von Oppersdorff (1778-1818) was (and is) is located in the Silesian countryside just outside the town of Oberglogau (today, Głogówek in southern Poland). It was an easy day’s journey from Prince Lichnowsky’s country estate near Troppau; and given the two noblemen’s shared love of music, it was unsurprising that they should become friends. Or that when, in 1806, Lichnowsky invited Ludwig van Beethoven to spend the summer as his guest, he should introduce them. Beethoven and Lichnowsky made the journey to Oberglogau, where Oppersdorff – who refused to employ any servant who could not play a musical instrument – greeted them with a full orchestra and a superb performance of Beethoven’s Second Symphony.

Oppersdorff, like Lichnowsky, was no mere dilettante; he was knowledgeable about, and committed to, contemporary music. Beethoven didn’t make life easy for his patrons; later that summer he quarrelled with Lichnowsky and stormed out rather than agree to play the piano for some visiting French soldiers. But Oppersdorff was willing to back up his own enthusiasm with cash, and commissioned two new symphonies from Beethoven. The Fifth Symphony may or may not have been originally intended as
one of the pair; but the Fourth – which Beethoven actually dedicated to Oppersdorff – certainly was. In February 1807 Beethoven wrote a receipt for 500 florins to the Count (roughly equivalent to £6000 today) for “a symphony I have written for him”.

He may actually have composed it during that summer in the country (the sketchbooks have been lost so we don’t know for sure) – and it’s possible that the symphony’s modest scoring was devised with Oppersdorff’s multitasking staff in mind. With only four brass players and seven woodwinds, the Fourth uses the smallest orchestra of any of Beethoven’s symphonies. But there’s nothing small about the music itself, even if, between the epic grandeur of the Eroica and the volcanic inspiration of the Fifth Symphony, the Fourth is sometimes described as “light”. (It’s also pretty much obligatory to quote Robert Schumann’s description of the symphony as “a slender Grecian maiden between two Nordic giants”). Light, though, doesn’t mean lightweight: even if the symphony’s clear, open textures (the solitary flute really gets to dance), and its key of B flat (also the key of Beethoven’s most brilliant piano concerto, the Second) certainly make it sparkle. And although the Fourth Symphony is often graceful – and superbly proportioned – it’s anything but demure.

First movement  In fact, it’s charged with energy from the very opening – a spacious, deceptively sombre Adagio introduction, its background rhythm ticking away like a timer – before two mighty flourishes, and an Allegro vivace melody that seems to rev its engine, pull back, and then rocket forward with unstoppable velocity. What follows is pure exhilaration – though there’s room for jokey woodwind exchanges, and the quiet power of those background rhythms never quite stops motoring along.

Second movement  That restlessness is there in the opening bars of the Adagio, too, jerkily ticking away, punctuated by drums and trumpets even as Beethoven unfolds one of his warmest and most rapturously songful symphonic slow movements.
Third movement  Only Beethoven’s buccaneering cross-rhythms and mysterious harmonic sideslips keep it in check in the Allegro vivace third movement (the woodwinds quietly open up great vistas in its serene, courtly central section).

Fourth movement  And then in the finale it rushes quietly up out of nowhere and swells into a rollicking, racing moto perpetuo in which Beethoven takes the knockabout wit of his old master, Haydn and magnifies it to explosive proportions. The electricity that drives the whole symphony finally discharges its way to earth: the ending comes with a final sly joke and a bravura flourish. Pure sunlight: in the sense that the sun is universe’s mightiest source of energy, illumination and – of course – life.

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Missa Solemnis in D major, Op.123
for four voices, chorus, orchestra and organ

Kyrie: assai sostenuto (mit Andacht) / Kyrie: very sustained (devoutly)
Gloria: allegro vivace / Gloria: fast, lively
Credo: allegro ma non troppo / Credo: fast, but not too fast
Sanctus: adagio (mit Andacht) Sanctus: slow (devoutly)
Agnus Dei: adagio / Agnus Dei: slow

For many listeners, Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis has been eclipsed by the more immediate rewards of works such as his Ninth Symphony. Yet the composer himself considered the Missa Solemnis to be his greatest achievement. Beethoven wished this work to inspire religious feeling in singers and audiences alike; his desire was to get closer to the Divine through that most divine medium, music. It was this impulse that prompted Beethoven to inscribe on the score one of his most famous declarations of intent: “From the heart – may it in turn go to the heart”.


Beethoven had initially hoped that the Missa Solemnis would serve as an occasion piece for the induction of Archduke Rudolph as Archbishop of Olmütz (in Moravia) on 9 March, 1820. Rudolph, who was the son of Emperor Leopold II, had begun his acquaintance with Beethoven as an enthusiastic piano and composition student, but in time had become Beethoven’s friend and most supportive patron. It is possible that Beethoven also entertained hopes of becoming Rudolph’s Kapellmeister, and this may have been the practical, as opposed to spiritual, motivation behind the composition of this Mass. Neither hope was realised; the Missa Solemnis was a much more laborious undertaking than Beethoven had anticipated, and would occupy him for five years, between 1819 and 1823, its gestation overlapping with that of the Symphony No.9 (1822-1824).

The Kyrie was sketched out by May 1819, and the Gloria between June and December of the same year. The Credo took up much of Beethoven’s time between January and July 1820, with the Benedictus following, written between November 1820 and February 1821. Not until 1822 did the Agnus Dei and ‘Dona nobis pacem’ come to fruition, after which Beethoven revised the entire score.

One of the greatest challenges faced by Beethoven in composing such a work was the lack of a recent precedent that lived up to his ideals. Whereas the choral masterpieces of Bach, Handel and, going even further back, Palestrina, were accepted as paradigms of sacred choral music, contemporary trends had absorbed popular taste with, in Beethoven’s view, vulgar results. He dismissed these more recent works as having “degenerated into opera music”. Given Beethoven’s own struggles with writing opera, this may have been a particularly painful reflection.

Beethoven’s oratorio of 1803, Christus am Ölberge (‘Christ on the Mount of Olives’), inspired by Haydn and written in a few weeks, lacked the necessary gravitas to provide a useful model. His
Mass in C major of 1807 had balance issues owing to his unconventional emphasis on the voices, to the detriment of the orchestra. Even the sacred works of Haydn and Mozart did not entirely meet the case; Beethoven strove towards the modern as well as the profoundly spiritual.

This apparent lack of a helpful precedent was a challenge compounded by Beethoven’s own creative and personal difficulties in the preceding few years, which had been tumultuous. Uncertain about the direction his art should take, Beethoven suffered a creative block, broken only by the masterful ‘Hammerklavier’ Sonata, Op.106, in 1818. This breakthrough resonates in the Missa Solemnis; both works share a searing intellectual force and masterful depth of expression. In the Missa Solemnis, Beethoven at last succeeded in combining spiritual weight and powerful choral textures with symphonic orchestral writing that, far from being incidental or accompanimental, plays a crucial role in the unfolding of the Mass.

Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis was premiered on 7 April 1824 in St Petersburg, at a Philharmonic Society concert given in aid of the widows of its former members. The Kyrie, Credo and Agnus Dei were then performed in Vienna on 7 May 1824, grouped together under the heading, “Three great hymns with solos and chorus”. Performed alongside The Consecration of the House Overture and the Symphony No.9, the occasion should have been an unmitigated success. Yet the takings were unimpressive – Vienna was infatuated with Rossini and Italian opera – and, more poignantly given the work’s conception, Archduke Rudolph and his family were absent. The Missa Solemnis was published by Schott in Mainz in April 1827, just a few days after Beethoven’s death.

The set Latin text of the Mass might, at first, appear a rather rigid framework for a composer. Yet within this unchanging collection of prayers is an almost endless array of nuances that can be explored by each composer in their own unique way. The choice
of which words to emphasise, which to illustrate, which to down-play, may shift the tone of the Mass setting enormously, while simultaneously revealing much about the composer’s own spiritual focus. In Beethoven’s case, there seems to be an almost insurmountable distance between the glory of God and the futility of man, reflecting his complex philosophy combining reverence, even fear, with substantial doubts.

Kyrie   This contrast is felt, albeit subtly, from the very opening of the Kyrie. In later parts of the Mass, those sections of text that emphasise the power of God are treated with extreme force: high pitches in the voices at an unflinching fortissimo, with massive orchestral power and often daring harmonies, contrasted with ‘lowlier’ sonorities to reflect man’s humility. The opening chords – loud, then soft – of the Kyrie, act as a pre-emptive summary of this. Yet the Kyrie beguiles us with its expansive choral opening, gently offset by intricate writing for the soloists at ‘Christe eleison’ and a beautifully tranquil ending. There are moments of more extreme contrast, with the taxing requirement that the first two syllables of ‘Kyrie’ be performed forte or with an emphatic sforzando, followed by the final syllable sung piano. The benign mood prevails, however; either Beethoven intended to reserve greater spiritual angst for later sections of the Mass, or he felt, when writing the Kyrie, that the prayer, ‘Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy’, could be expressed with the focus not on penitence, but on a gentle confidence in the receipt of that mercy.

Gloria   The Gloria opens with an elegant interplay of different lines in a rather lilting triple meter, before increasing in speed and energy. The importance of the orchestra is emphasised in the Gloria: its opening statement proves pivotal, with an ascending motif returning at the vigorous ‘Domine Deus’ section, while the choir’s acclamation is layered over the top. With the ‘Miserere’ section of the Gloria comes a moment of spiritual searching, including lyrical writing for winds, with the soloists accompanied by a pared-down orchestra. At ‘Quoniam tu solus sanctus’, Beethoven builds to ecstatic choral declarations, rather similar to
climactic moments in the Ninth Symphony; an instance of extremity used to emphasise God’s greatness: ‘You alone are the Holy One’. Another way in which Beethoven chose to stress certain portions of text over others was by dwelling on those passages at length, as opposed to the quick dispatch of words he found less significant. The Gloria features a key example of this, with the extended fugue at ‘In gloria Dei Patris, Amen’, words that again focus on the glory of God.

Credo  Juxtaposed with this vast exploration of a few words is the Credo, with its heady rush through several doctrinally important tenets of the Christian faith. In 22 bars, Beethoven covers 37 words, some of them expressed using only a single voice in the choir, whereas the word Credo is repeated more prominently by the other voices. Beethoven seems to focus on the value of faith itself, rather than belief in specific doctrines. The birth and death of Christ are treated to music of haunting, mesmerising stillness, at once meditative and sincerely prayerful, and unusual harmonic twinges and blustery string textures provide necessary pathos. Unremittingly joyful spiritual works can have a shallow ring, but if darkness is acknowledged, light becomes hard-won, and the more beautiful for it. There follows another vast fugue exploring only a single phrase: ‘Et vitam venture saeculi, Amen’. Again, this is not about detailed aspects of the Christian faith, but more about hope in something less clearly defined: ‘the life of the world to come’.

Sanctus  The Sanctus opens with wonderful nobility, like a symphonic slow introduction, before the more exuberant counterpoint that follows for the ‘Osanna’. The beautiful orchestral Praeludium, before the Benedictus, mingles pastoral serenity with darker harmonic shadings to create a sense of profound mystery. This music is transcendental, an effect heightened by the ethereal, soaring violin solo intertwining with two flutes. This leads into what is essentially an operatic aria for the four solo vocalists, with chorus. The violin bridges the gap between the spiritual realm and the worldly, as though Beethoven
wished to depict the Holy Spirit, represented by the violin, descending and bestowing its benediction on the expectant people.

Agnus Dei  Beethoven’s exploration of his spiritual beliefs and doubts reaches its apotheosis in the Agnus Dei, which begins with a stark Adagio setting in which very few words are repeated, even by the bass solo. The orchestral writing reflects this introspective tone; it is less spacious than in the Praeludium, for example. The orchestra unfolds a melody that is only picked up by the vocal soloist half way through, in what seems to be a deliberately unsettling skewing of conventional expectations. The desolation continues as the second and third ‘Agnus’ sections are repeated with minimal development; more soloists are added, but the minor-key bleakness is unremitting.

Hope creeps in during another extended section, with the entreaty for peace at ‘Dona nobis pacem’. Echoing the finale of the ‘Pastoral’ Symphony, No.6, Beethoven ushers in a tentatively hopeful section that develops into a self-contained sonata structure, with varied choral textures including a striking passage performed a cappella. This harks back to traditional church music, and to Beethoven’s earlier assertion that “pure church music should be performed only by voices”. There is also a quotation from Handel’s Messiah; Beethoven was acknowledging and paying tribute to that earlier masterpiece, as well as alluding to its crucial message: ‘And He shall reign’.

There follows an extraordinary juxtaposition of this call for peace with vivid orchestral depictions of military warfare, including drum-rolls, fanfares and marching music. Beethoven’s prayer for peace is both worldly and divine; as in the Benedictus, his vision embraces both heaven and earth. Although it is the peaceful material that ultimately prevails to end the Missa Solemnis, some nagging doubts remain, articulated by soft timpani rolls that subtly question the sublime music in the upper strings and woodwinds. As a man who had endured so much in his life, it was
increasingly difficult for Beethoven to comprehend the prospect of eternal solace. Hope remained, but mingled with doubt, making this an astonishingly honest way to end this masterpiece.

It was in the Ninth Symphony’s Ode to Joy that Beethoven would at last find a text that married his desire for both worldly and heavenly peace, as articulated so vividly in the Agnus Dei of the Missa Solemnis. Schiller’s poem reflected Beethoven’s own mindset in its fusion of the spiritual with a more humanist approach, emphasising man’s ability to overcome struggle, yet celebrating with a God who, far from being pinned down by doctrine, embraces millions from “beyond the canopy of stars”.

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