

BEETHOVEN'S PRAYER FOR PEACE – THE MISSA SOLEMNIS'S DONA NOBIS PACEM

For the ASO Chorus

by Jeffrey Baxter

January 4, 2011

THE PROBLEM OF PEACE

For many, the final movement (or more specifically, the final pages of the final movement) of Beethoven's *Missa solennis* prove problematic: After the volcanic "finales" of the Gloria and Credo movements (each an elaborate choral-symphony), the Dona nobis pacem section seems somewhat of a let-down; some say it feels unfinished. Is this a flaw of the *Missa*, or was it intentional on Beethoven's part? In such a carefully crafted masterwork from the composer's late-period (where the *Missa*'s composition and revisions continued long past the intended due-date), surely Beethoven had not grown impatient or cut anything short. So, what does it "mean?" There are clues in the music, in the composer's written indications and in the historical and artistic context.

BEGINNINGS – AGNUS DEI

The *Missa*'s final movement, the Agnus Dei, begins appropriately in a dark and somber tone (in the relative minor; B-minor), with voices and instruments in their low registers. The bass soloist and male chorus recall the somber mood of the prisoners' brief glimpse of daylight in Beethoven's sole opera, *Fidelio*, the chorus "O welche Lust!" *Fidelio* is a clear progression from dark to light, from injustice to justice, whereas the answers do not come as easily in Beethoven's *Missa*. This artist nearing his end has had a rougher, longer and less clearly defined path than the characters in *Fidelio*. Any justice (or justification) Beethoven sought in life ultimately had to come from within – a hard truth made all the more poignant by his social and artistic withdrawal, largely due to his complete deafness. Surely the plural in "Miserere - " and "Dona nobis" spoke to him – and allowed him to speak for us.

DONA NOBIS PACEM

The move to the prayer for peace – "Dona nobis pacem," at m. 96 – ensues as expected liturgically, but musically it stammers, with overlapping lines suspended over delayed downbeats and transitional harmonies. A solid return to D-major does not occur until twelve measures later (m. 107), and then there is no strong melodic statement. What follows are wildly varied forms of a prayer for peace that are at points interrupted by cries of war, dissent and chaos.

–But we do get a written clue from Beethoven at this point in the score. He writes in the vernacular (German) – as he did a few other places in the *Missa* – something to clarify his intent. Above the Italian tempo indication of *Allegretto vivace* [a lively little Allegro], he inscribes "Bitte um innern und äussern Frieden" [prayer for inner and outer peace]. Robert Shaw has interpreted this as Beethoven's description of the two different types of melodies (and their two differing musical textures) for "Dona nobis pacem:"

Melody #1 (and each of its variants) is the little rollicking 6/8 tune we hear first – a child's skipping song:



This tune and its accompanying countersubjects, with emphasis on eighth-note movement, are given polyphonically. They represent the "inner," or individual, peace.

Melody #2 is a congregational, homophonic "hymn," representing "outer," or communal peace:

f

do - - - - - na no - - - - bis pa - cem.

The repeated cries of “pacem” at ms. 154-163 seem to belie a simple, childlike conclusion of acceptance. Indeed, they sound more like demanding shouts and foreshadow what is to come musically.

AGNUS REPRISÉ

What appeared to be an unfolding peaceful conclusion is now interrupted by distant drumbeats and trumpet fanfares that evoke the sound of an approaching army. Beethoven reprises the text of “Agnus Dei” with the solo voices in a melodramatic fashion, in the style of his other great musical politico-dramas, *Egmont* and *Fidelio*. This martial music, however, bears a more direct influence: that of Franz Joseph Haydn’s great “Missa in tempore belli” [Mass in Time of War], or as it is sometimes called, “Paukenmesse,” for its dramatic use of the timpani (or “Pauken,” in German). The longed-for “outer” peace was for Haydn (and later Beethoven) not only peace for the soul, but peace among the nations. In the *Missa solennis*, this is the first of two interruptions of the “Dona nobis pacem.” The second, even more startling and menacing, begins at measure 266, Figure [Q], or our pages 110-112. Might this be the brutal orchestral answer to the enormous energy of the Credo’s final “et vitam venturi” – the life to come?

Incidentally, this page (p. 111) more than any is the one that scares the living daylights out of me in every performance I have sung. It is harder to follow than the entire Credo is to sing! There is good reason: Beethoven intentionally used the ambiguity of obscured downbeats and irregular periodicity (phrase-structure) to effect an aura of chaos – the disorientation and dislocation that both a war-within and war-without causes. Mercifully, Robert Shaw has diagrammed above the staves in our scores some guidelines as to the structure: the pyramid lines indicate lop-sided three-bar phrases, and the brackets, two-bar ones. Add the two phrases together and you get five (another irregular musical phrase). On page 112 Shaw has even drawn larger bar-lines every four measures to indicate the *alla Breve* feel (larger duple division) and to help the chorus come in at the correct time. I still sweat.

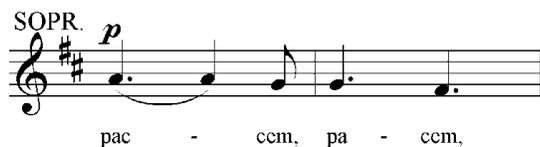
Of course the real miracle in this section is Beethoven’s thematic transformation of the little six-note skipping tune into a frenzied, jagged violent bass-line (see brackets):



The lilting prayer for peace becomes the chaotic accompaniment to a call to arms.

CONCLUSION?

-And what about the ending? Donald Runnicles notes that at ms. 410 and following (after the trumpets and drum, the “machinery of war”), the chorus’s prayer for peace has become a whimpering cry for peace:



-And ultimately, is the final four-bar statement of the chorus, or even the perfunctory (by comparison to everything that has preceded it) six-bar postlude of the orchestra a true conclusion to so monstrous a mass-setting? Robert Shaw summed it up best:

“There is no answer to those who feel that the *Missa solennis* is ‘unfinished,’ other than to say that the extraordinary variety and repetition of the prayers for peace – from simple child-like game-songs to shouts of despair and frustration, together with the abiding presence of pastoral comforting musical qualities add up to the truth – as Beethoven saw it. There is no assurance – not even for God Himself – that peace will come as a quiet end...

...His final message is that in spite of Nature’s ills and Man’s inhumanities, there are baser and nobler options of action, and it is a part of being human to choose the nobler.

War may continue to exist – we will continue to sing.”