

October 13, 2010

Dear ASO Chorus...

If you've been like me in these *Glagolitic* rehearsals, you've been struggling with the "language," both the Old Church Slavic and Janáček's musical language (his harmonic vocabulary and compositional voice).

With Beethoven also in our folders, I've been noticing and thinking about the connections between the composers of the *Missa* and the *Msa*. Below are a few thoughts on this (also posted on our Janáček resource-page and the BlogSpot of our website: http://www.asochorus.org/ASOC_BlogSpot.asp).

Hope you enjoy.

-Jeffrey Baxter
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Janáček and Beethoven – Coming to Terms

Struggling with the "Language"

Any choral singer who has tackled Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass* has struggled with the "language," both the Old Church Slavic and Janáček's musical language (his harmonic vocabulary and compositional voice). I am not immune.

(Aside to the ASO Chorus: since embarking on our choral life after Robert Shaw, I knew that we would eventually encounter or revisit some of the lesser known and/or lesser performed works in the Western canon – works that quite honestly I was dreading encountering, like *Kullervo*, the *Sea Symphony* and the *Glagolitic Mass*. To my delight, thanks to the great care of Norman Mackenzie and passion of Robert Spano, my eyes were opened to the expressive possibilities and beauties of these works. I am counting on the same this month with all of you and this Janáček work.)

I was therefore delighted that, during the ASO Chorus' simultaneous preparations of Janáček's and Beethoven's solemn mass settings, some odd similarities made themselves apparent – similarities in the two works, composers and even their geographies.

Austro-Czech Connections

Beethoven's three major patrons were Prince Kinsky, Prince Lobkowitz and the Hapsburg emperor's youngest son, Archduke Rudolph. Princes Kinsky and Lobkowitz had palatial estates in Vienna and Prague (the Lobkowitz Palace in Prague, now a museum, houses many Beethoven manuscripts).

Beethoven conceived of his "Missa" for a specific liturgical purpose: to celebrate the installation of his friend, pupil and patron Archduke Rudolph as archbishop of Olmütz (Olomouc) in Moravia in 1820. He missed the deadline, delivering the manuscript two years later. Interestingly enough, Janáček was raised in Moravia and returned there to compose his large-scale orchestral Mass.

Aside from some biographical and geographical coincidences – and in spite of the wildly differing sound worlds of their Mass settings – Janáček and Beethoven came to some similar approaches to the musical setting of liturgical texts.

Beethoven Meets Janáček

1. Symphonic *stretto*

Like all composers born in the 19th century, Janáček could not escape influence by the figure of Beethoven – either by his mythic status as the *Ur-Romantic* or as the ultimate symphonist. Beethoven's mastery of symphonic Sonata-Allegro form loomed large, especially in the century-long shadow that his Ninth Symphony cast. His influence on Janáček's *Mass* is most apparent at the end of the *Slava* [Gloria], where the composer employs a Beethovenian race-to-the-finish with *stretto* technique (an ever increasing tempo, while piling theme

upon theme in quick succession) It is a hallmark of Beethoven's style, best seen in the Coda sections of the final movements of his Fifth and Ninth Symphonies.

Not only did Janáček beautifully incorporate this *stretto*-technique from the finale of the Ninth, but he even borrowed (subconsciously?) an actual melodic theme. The original in the Beethoven Ninth is the triple-meter "Seid umschlungen" theme:

Andante maestoso

Seid um - schlun - gen, Mil - li - o - nen!

that gets "sped-up" to a four-note *Prestissimo* theme in the finale (accompanied by the triangle from the "Turkish" march variation):

Prestissimo

Seid um - schlun - gen, Mil - li - on - nen! Die - sen Kuss der gan - zen Welt!

Inspired by Beethoven, Janáček begins with a triple-meter "Amin" [Amen]:

Allegro

A - min, a - min. a - min, a - min.

that also gets "sped-up" to a four-note *Presto* theme in the finale (complete with accompaniment by Beethoven's "Turkish" triangle):

Presto

A - min, a - min, a - min, a - min.

—ending the *Slava* movement [Gloria] in an ecstatic whirlwind of praise.

2. Symphonic Voice

Like the *Missa solennis*, the "Glagolitic" is symphonic in scope, with motivic development like that mentioned above. But also as in the *Missa*, the orchestra has its own "voice," apart from the text-setting. Janáček, perhaps inspired by Beethoven's wordless "Praeludium" in the *Missa*, employs an anguished orchestral tone poem in the *Věřuji* [Credo] movement after the text, "I voplti se ot Duchu sveta" ["et incarnatus est"]. It builds to an almost unbearable climax before "raspet že zany" ["crucifixus"]. The "crucifixus" is not the traditional self-contained choral section, but rather a sudden shouted exclamation describing the violence of what has just transpired orchestrally.

At the beginning of the *Svet* [Sanctus] Janáček also recalls the mood of Beethoven's delicate, soaring violin solo (used allegorically in the *Missa solennis* as a musical depiction of the "Dove descending" and structurally to link the Sanctus with the Benedictus).

3. *Soli vs. tutti*

One of the hallmarks of Beethoven's *Missa solennis* is the total integration of the solo and choral voices. Janáček takes a similar approach in the "Glagolitic," though more operatic and naturalistic (more about his naturalism below). The most lengthy texts *Slava* [Gloria] and *Věřuju* [Credo] inspired Janáček to utilize this technique, often in strange ways. Words are sometimes sputtered out, shouted, intoned and even tossed off, between chorus and soloists, such as at "I v jedinogo Gospoda" [et in unum Dominum] in the *Věřuju* [Credo] and at "Ty jedin Svet" ["quoniam tu solus sanctus"] in the *Slava* [Gloria]. One of the most beautiful instances of the integration of voices occurs in the opening statements of *Svet* [Sanctus] where the chorus three times overwhelms the solo voices in this angelic hymn of praise.

4. Ecstatic Exclamation

As in Beethoven's *Missa solennis*, Janáček achieves heightened expression through text repetition. Beethoven (like Mozart before him in the little F-Major *Missa brevis*, K.192.) repeats the word "Credo" and uses it as a unifying melodic motif throughout the entire movement. Janáček does the same, setting the word "*věřuju*" ["credo," or "I believe"] for four-part chorus with an imploring two-note melody in the soprano supported by a harmonically unstable alto, tenor and bass. The effect is disturbingly beautiful, and as Norman pointed out in rehearsal, comes across as "I believe... sort of." -Or maybe, "I believe... in spite of." Either way, like Beethoven Janáček cleverly uses this motto at key structural points in the movement.

Beethoven's heightened expression in the *Missa* is also seen in the repetition of words like "et... ET... homo factus est" or the added exclamation "O," as in "O, miserere!" Janáček utilizes the solo voices similarly in the "Glagolitic," but more often will repeat whole phrases rather than individual words, such as the bass solo at the end of *Věřuju* [Credo], on the words "I života buduštogo věka" ["et vitam venture saeculi"]. Most curious is Janáček's insertion of the text "amin" ["amen"], after the opening statement of the *Věřuju* [Credo]. This "amin" recalls the end of the *Slava* [Gloria] movement and gives emphasis to the dance-like folk tune underpinning the opening of the *Věřuju* [Credo] movement.

5. Grant us Peace?

Like the haunting opening of the Agnus Dei of Beethoven's *Missa* (which he subtitled "a prayer for inner and outer peace") Janáček too seems to place emphasis on the entreaty, "miserere nobis" ["pomiluj nas"]. And while Beethoven continues in his *Missa* (much to the criticism of some contemporaries) to evoke images of battle followed by a seemingly purposely unresolved "dona nobis pacem," Janáček omits these words entirely. As in the Beethoven, whatever (if any) peace is achieved comes at a price.

6. Doubt vs. Faith

Beethoven's mix of eastern and western philosophies, as well as his lifelong struggle between doubt and faith, manifested itself in his transcendent late period works (like the *Missa*). His well-known solace in Nature, especially during the first years of his hearing loss, became a quasi Pan-Deism (i.e. a manifestation of God in Nature) – his most literal artistic expression of this being the Sixth, or "Pastoral" Symphony.

These sentiments were shared by Janáček and made their way into many of his works, including the *Glagolitic Mass*. Except for the pageantry evoked by the fanfares and the ecclesiastical association with the use of a pipe organ, the "Glagolitic" may be the most atypical mass setting ever, with its seemingly opposite styles of music at any given point in the liturgical text. Only Francis Poulenc – decades later and in a very different aesthetic – achieved something similar with his choral music on sacred texts.

Ultimately the *Glagolitic Mass* is a triumphant work (quite apart from Janáček's thoughts on religion) and much like his opera *The Cunning Little Vixen* celebrates the circle of life – not necessarily a vision of beatific life in the hereafter.

In March of 1928, Janáček said of his *Glagolitic Mass*: "I wanted to portray the nation's faith not on a religious basis but on a strong moral one which calls God to witness."

Beethoven included an inscription on his *Missa solennis*: "From the heart, may it return to the heart."

Janáček Meets the Mass

Of the many unique contributions to the mass setting by Janáček, a few of the most intriguing and original are:

1. Finales One and Two

Janáček eschews the established Austrian musical tradition (Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven) of big fugal settings at the end of the Gloria and Credo sections (“cum Sancto Spiritu” and “et vitam venturi”), opting for sweeping symphonic finales.

2. Grand Finale?

After what is normally the conclusion of a mass setting (the Agnus Dei), Janáček follows with two more instrumental movements. Additionally, as mentioned above, he omits the phrase “Dona nobis pacem” completely – perhaps acknowledging the finality of death, felt in the “Lamb of God’s” sacrifice. But as with creation, life doesn’t stop with one death and the Mass continues – with two more movements that are festive (almost aggressively so) in nature. Janáček seems to say: “Life must go on; we must persevere” or “Life goes on, with or without you.”

3. Organ

Janáček’s call for a grand pipe organ for three climactic spots in his mass setting is ingenious (and unfortunate for a concert hall without such an instrument). The composer was trained as an organist in Prague and had actual professional liturgical experience (unlike Beethoven). The organ in this Mass provides the bravura and upswell of praise at the end of the “Slava” [Gloria]. It also provides the violent climax of the orchestral tone poem in the *Věřuji* [Credo] before “raspet že zany” [“cruxifixus”] – introduced, by the way, with a sinister snare-drum roll. –And of course there is an entire solo movement for organ that follows the *Agneče Božij* [Agnus Dei]. It is a toccata with busy repeated figures and an unstable harmony. Its inexorable drive to the finish (with a final statement in the pedals) propels us forward. “Ite missa est?” “The mass is ended. Go in peace?” No. The orchestral *Intrada* [“Retiring Processional”] leads us out.

Incidentally, the published score of the Glagolitic Mass puts the *Intrada* at the end of the work. Research into Janáček’s manuscripts suggests that the *Intrada* was intended to be played at the beginning of the work as well at the end, creating a symmetric nine-movement form with the *Věřuji* [Credo] at its center. It is in this format Robert Spano will perform the piece with us.

4. Orchestral ingenuity

Janáček’s interesting use of separate purely instrumental movements is not only festive in nature (i.e. an elaborate musical setting of a liturgical text), but Wagnerian in style in that the orchestra has a “voice” that takes up where words leave off. He not only composed an *Intrada* [“Processional”], *Úvod* [“Prelude”] and organ solo movement, but a wordless tone-poem right in the middle of the *Věřuji* [Credo]. And in truth it is the orchestra alone who “sings” throughout the mass – chorus and soloists more often than not merely “declaim” the text in a speech-like manner, sometimes as an afterthought to the orchestral music that proceeds it.

5. Nationalism and naturalism

Czech nationalism is represented in the *Glagolitic Mass* not only by the composer’s choice of a Slavic text, but by his evocations of folk music idioms (Czech speech-patterns and dance rhythms), such as the opening measures of the *Věřuji* [Credo]. He also, like the generation of European composers before him, evokes the “music of the folk” as so often manifested in the many 19th Century amateur choral societies. He employs this texture in the *Věřuji* [Credo] at “I voskrse v tretij den” [“et resurrexit tertia die”] for female chorus and “sědit o desnuja Otca” [“sedet ad dexteram Patris”] for male chorus. This musical separation by gender also evokes the sound of singing in convents and monasteries.

But most ingenious is his sometimes strangely realistic musical recreation of the sounds of Czech life. –Strange because those sounds find a home in, of all places, a sacred setting. By doing so, he evokes a strong realism within an ancient liturgy that has long been one religion’s attempt to reconcile life (here, even everyday life) and death. Nick Jones, in the liner notes to our Telarc recording, writes:

“The unique sound world of Janáček was his own invention, crafted of bird songs, animal noises, mechanical sounds, and human speech patterns. He took dictation from everything, jotting down the sound of a creaky wheel or a barnyard fracas. He did not confine his notation of speech sounds to phrases said in Czech, for even languages he did not understand were music to him. He transformed all of this material, combining it with the modes and rhythmic patterns of Czech folk tunes to produce music sounding like that of no one else.”

Did Janáček succeed in his attempt to reconcile a world of opposite pairs, the sacred and the secular? Doubt and faith? Life and death? Even tonal and non-tonal musical styles? Each successive generation of audiences will have this to ponder, and undoubtedly their responses will differ – as is always the case with great art.

Sacred vs. Secular

One thing is certain: both Janáček's and Beethoven's Masses have outgrown (or eclipsed) the sacred ceremonies that inspired them. They now "live" in concert halls rather than churches, which raises another set of issues – questions that writer Michael Steinberg raises and examines in the preface to his book, *Choral Masterworks – A Listener's Guide*:

"Ought we to transport these towering musical achievements from the liturgical setting for which [an artist] imagined and composed them into the concert hall at all, or, thanks to recordings, into our living rooms? If we do take them into the concert hall, how should we respond? Or, to bring it more down to earth, how should we behave? Do we applaud? Is it right to have Chardonnay or a cappuccino between Parts I and II of the *Saint Matthew Passion* rather than a sermon? Also... do atheists, agnostics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus even have a right to listen to this music, let alone claim that they can make meaningful contact with it?

"...The great works of sacred art are not exclusive. In that sense, too, they are transcendent. And if we have had creative musicians who were deeply religious, as Bach and Stravinsky were, I have always derived a certain pleasure from remembering that some of the most transfiguring of sacred compositions were created by composers who never darkened the doors of a church unless to perform or listen to music, who subscribed to no orthodoxy, whose faith was shaky or outright nonexistent, who were engaged in an unceasing struggle to reinvent God, who were angry with him. I offer, in evidence, Handel's *Messiah*, the Beethoven *Missa solennis*, the Berlioz *Requiem*, Brahms's *German Requiem*, the Verdi *Requiem*... and Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass*. "Religion-loving atheist" [Steinberg's self adopted stance] – which we might expand to include "religion-loving agnostic" – fits some of these great composers also.

Steinberg continues:

"I love William Bronk's poem *The Conclusion* (in his collection *Silence and Metaphor*):

I thought
we stood at the door
of another world
and it might open and we go in.
Well,
there is that door
and such a world.

"Indeed, the door is there. It is not locked. When the Bach Passions and the *Missa solennis*... are sung and played, we are all invited."

-Jeffrey Baxter
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