



COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*: Das 'größte Werk, welches ich bisher geschrieben'

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The year 2020 will enter the history books for many things – but probably not for Beethoven's two hundred and fiftieth birthday in December. Around the world, concerts, projects and conferences had to be either cancelled or postponed. On the other hand, some day one will probably remember the years 2021 and 2022 as the longest Beethoven year ever, with all postponed events now slowly being caught up on. One of these was a conference organized by Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen (Universität Zürich) at the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung in Cologne. The conference focused on the *Missa solemnis*, a notoriously contentious composition, the *pièce de résistance* of Beethoven's late style, a work whose reception vacillates between the highest superlatives on the one hand and frank rejection on the other. The first superlative was spread by Beethoven himself, who famously referred to the *Missa* as his 'greatest' work. It is a moot point (and so it was at this conference) whether this should be considered a reference to the spiritual qualities of the work, or rather a reference to its mere outer dimensions – or just as sales talk altogether. And this is where the stakes still seem to be in discussions of the *Missa*, returning periodically to the question of whether Beethoven composed this piece for specific (liturgical) circumstances and necessities or, rather, against them. If that is a question to be answered, it can certainly only be answered from a multi-dimensional perspective, combining documentary studies, reception history, and aesthetic, liturgical and methodological issues, and that was the aim of Hinrichsen's conference, which brought together scholars from these different fields.

The event opened with Jürgen Stolzenberg (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg), who drew a picture of the philosophy of religion 'between reason and sentiment' in Beethoven's time. Stolzenberg avoided positioning Beethoven within this field, as reliable documents are missing, but made a strong point that one should not hastily identify Beethoven's position with Kant's rational religion (*Vernunftreligion*), notwithstanding his acquaintance with some of Kant's ideas. Stolzenberg suggested including Johann Michael Sailer and Ignaz Aurelius Feßler in the picture, as writings of both authors were present in Beethoven's library. While Feßler did follow Kant's philosophy of religion, all in all he stands for a more eclectic version of it, and Sailer, though in some senses an 'enlightened' Catholic, was an anti-Kantian: he argued that a pure *Vernunftreligion* is deprived of two substantial components, *Gefühl* and *Liebe* (feeling and love).

Was Beethoven maybe more Catholic than we would like him to have been? That was the question behind the presentation on Beethoven and church music by Julia Ronge (Beethoven-Haus Bonn). She presented a wealth of documents that shed light on Beethoven's lifelong contact with Catholic institutions. It was late nineteenth-century German musicology, with its anti-Catholic agenda, that had tried to wipe out the Catholic traces in Beethoven's life and works. Since Beethoven could not be turned into a Protestant, he was at least turned into a non-involved Catholic, who preferred private or rational religion over institutional faith. As Ronge demonstrated, however, there are no documents from Beethoven's own hand that prove this to be true, and the

frequently quoted anecdotes in support of this picture should be treated with the same care as numerous other Beethoven anecdotes, many of which have turned out to be questionable or actual fakes. Iris Eggenschwiler (Hochschule der Künste Zürich) scrutinized Joseph Haydn's influence on the *Missa*. While we do have clear evidence of Haydn's influence from the time of Beethoven's earlier Mass in C major, there are no explicit traces from the time of the later *Missa solemnis*. Eggenschwiler argued, though, that the military music in the 'Dona nobis' of the *Missa solemnis* was inspired not only by Haydn's *Missa in tempore belli*, but also by Haydn's general delight in contrasting the pastoral with the sublime. Interestingly, Beethoven's 'Dona nobis', while heavily criticized within Beethoven's own environment, found open ears with English critics – perhaps because of a more lively Haydn culture in England.

Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen continued with a closer investigation of the *Agnus Dei*. While Beethoven himself spoke of the 'inner and outer peace' ('äußerer und innerer Friede') that he planned to depict in this movement, a review by Ignaz von Seyfried speaks of 'eternal' peace (*Cäcilia* 9 (1828), 230). This might be more than a slip of the pen, as Hinrichsen argued, and he invited the audience to hear the 'Dona nobis' in the light of Kant's idea of an 'eternal peace', which is actually a peace guaranteed by law. Birgit Lodes (Universität Wien) took the discussion back to the questions of biographical circumstance and artistic autonomy, criticizing a common narrative that considers the *Missa solemnis* to be a work that defies its original occasion: the coronation of Archduke Rudolph as Bishop of Olmütz. Lodes outlined the circumstances of the celebration in Olmütz and argued that Beethoven kept an eye on aspects of liturgy and ritual. She also presented her research on Beethoven's personal Latin dictionary, with which he translated the text of the Mass Ordinary word by word (his rudimentary knowledge of Latin leading to some mistakes). Why Beethoven undertook this work, even though he had already composed a Latin mass years before, remains unclear.

Barry Cooper (University of Manchester) followed with a presentation on 'Beethoven's Theological Approach to the Text of the *Missa*'. Beethoven, Cooper argued, controlled every detail of the composition in order to reach his self-declared goal: 'to arouse and sustain religious sentiments in both the singers and the listeners'. Cooper presented a summary of some more obvious examples of tone-painting on the one hand and some compositional elements that can be seen as indicating a more theological awareness on the other. He linked this discussion to his findings that Beethoven wanted the soloists to sing 'col coro' at the beginning of the *Credo* (where by doing so everyone literally confesses their faith) and that the beginning of the *Sanctus* should be sung by the choir (and not by the soloists), which he finds more adequate for both musical and textual reasons. William Kinderman (University of California Los Angeles) presented new insights into the genesis of the *Missa solemnis*. After an overview of the large number of surviving sketches, he demonstrated how Beethoven changed his conception of some transitions in the piece, sharpening rather conjunct transitions into more disjunct ones, especially at the central 'Et incarnatus': a huge interpolation, as Kinderman argues, that does not subvert the impression of the *Credo* being one integrated whole.

In my own presentation (Felix Diergarten, Hochschule für Musik Freiburg) I tried to shed new light on the 'old' musical languages famously employed in the *Missa solemnis*. My first point was to widen the perspective beyond the obvious and notorious passages in the centre of the *Credo* (the Dorian 'Et incarnatus' and the Mixolydian 'Et resurrexit'). As can be seen from compositional manuals of the time, the 'old' style could be referred to by much simpler means, on a smaller scale, and Beethoven not only did so throughout the *Missa*, but had already done so in his earlier Mass in C. My second point was to see these 'old' languages not so much as contributions to an emerging historicism and associated discussions about the nature of 'true' church music, but as compositional tools to achieve Beethoven's specific expressive and rhetorical goals. Thomas Seedorf (Hochschule für Musik Karlsruhe) focused on Beethoven's vocal writing: 'did Beethoven compose "for or against voice"?' was Seedorf's rhetorical question, summarizing criticisms of Beethoven's 'impossible' vocal

writing in the *Missa solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony. Beethoven was absolutely conscious of what he was doing, Seedorf argued – accusations of ‘impractical parts’ only came up when lay choruses started to perform the *Missa*. Jan Assmann (Universität Heidelberg) presented ideas from his recent book *Kult und Kunst: Beethovens Missa Solemnis als Gottesdienst* (Munich: Beck, 2020), especially his idea that the composer integrated elements of the liturgy into his music and thereby emancipated his artwork from its liturgical origin, transforming it into an oratorio for the civil concert hall.

As for Beethoven reception, Matthew Gardner (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen) spoke on the *Missa solemnis* in relation to Franz Schubert’s late church music. Schubert’s interest in the first performance of parts of the mass in 1824 is well documented, and he could have had access to the first print (1827), so it could at least have influenced his last mass of 1828. The influences of Beethoven, Gardner argued, cannot be tracked down in specific reminiscences in Schubert’s score; they remained on a more general level and were integrated into the composer’s own style. Scott Burnham (Princeton University and City University of New York) came back to a critical question in his talk ‘Beethoven’s *Hauptwerk*? On the Import and Impact of the *Missa solemnis*’. Burnham asked why the *Missa* stands apart from the other late works in general perception. When contemplating its contrasts, the intense text-setting, the extended lyricism, the ecstasy, the disregard for performers’ difficulties, and matters of religion and morality, one should rather consider the *Missa* the most untimely of Beethoven’s late works – and thus the epitome of lateness. Beethoven’s *Missa solemnis*, as this conference showed, still provokes intriguing questions – beyond the old discussion concerning its ‘autonomous’ as opposed to its ‘heteronomous’ aspects. In whatever sense one may find the *Missa* ‘great’, it continues to challenge us.

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