

THE MISSA SOLEMNIS.

BY BARON VON DER PFORDTEN.*

NOT every man is inclined to render an account to himself and to others with regard to the stand he takes on the most important questions of life; and yet each one must possess an answer which corresponds to his own personality. This is certainly true of Beethoven whose idealism sprang fundamentally from deep religious conceptions of which we have sufficient evidence, for it was exactly the moral force of his character which was the guiding principle of his life and finally led him to victory. We must expect Beethoven to have perceived and established his relation to God and to the riddles of existence with the conscious power which breathes through his whole nature. And indeed this is the case. Were we to state how Beethoven's religion or philosophy,—the name makes no difference—is to be represented, we would have to say that it was before all else peculiarly his own.

Beethoven was baptized and educated a Catholic, but he was not what would be called a believing Christian; that is to say, his faith was not founded upon traditional revealed religion, nor even upon Christianity alone. From many different directions he received religious stimulation and philosophical intuition. He had read much and was remarkably susceptible to the intensification and expansion his own experience received from his reading. We know that he underscored passages which especially affected him. He even copied many of them and certain ones he kept always before his eyes. The specialist can state exactly whence every religious and philosophical idea of Beethoven originated, so it has become customary to call him in general terms a deist. This term admits a scientific foundation but within it lurks the danger of a misunderstanding. It may mislead us into thinking that we have a religious and philosophical thinker before us. I would surely be the last man to undervalue

* Translated from the German by Lydia G. Robinson.

Beethoven's powerful spiritual abilities. He certainly delved with spiritual keenness also in religious and philosophical problems, though not as an investigator and scholar, but as a man and artist, as the emotional dramatist with whom we have become fully acquainted. This is decidedly important.

Through his art Beethoven felt himself closely linked to the best and noblest souls. Art and science were his warrant for the imperishable worth of eternity, as we might say, and belief in a higher life. His "spiritual realm," his "art heaven" are not simply phrases. With the wings of Daedalus he rises above this world to the prescience and presentiment of a future world that is better, larger, and more beautiful; but the main thing is that he does not lose the ground beneath his feet. He builds no castles in the air. He not only stands as a king in his realm, but, as Schiller expresses it, he exercises the supreme right of kings, priestly authority, and becomes a mediator between God and humanity. "There is nothing higher," he writes, "than to come closer to God than other men and from that point of vantage to spread abroad the beams of divinity among the human race." Here we have everything at once—his art, his religion, and his ethics, the summit and foundation of his greatness.

Thus Beethoven is entitled to venture the most remote and highest things and hold a service of worship with his fellows. His *Missa solennis* means nothing else than this and nothing less. This work is remarkable in every respect; Beethoven himself declared it to be his best.

First of all we can not help wondering that Beethoven should compose a mass at all. After becoming familiar with his very personal religion we must ask, how could he choose this text in which he did not believe? The mass is a Christian, ecclesiastical, Catholic treatment intended for divine service; its text is sanctified by tradition, its significance dogmatically assured. What could Beethoven hope to find in it?

As we have clearly established, Beethoven was not a believing Christian in the confessional sense; he was not, as we say, a true son of his church, and yet he was no hypocrite. Is there not a contradiction here? Let us carry it out to its full conclusion. Why did he not depart from the Catholic church and become a free thinker? How could he, at the end, receive the Last Sacrament? Was this a death-bed conversion? These matters are not at all to the point. The solution is found much more easily.

Beethoven's religion was neither Catholic nor Protestant,—not

even purely Christian in the most general sense, but neither did it contradict Christian teaching and Christian sentiment. The believing Christian may regret that Beethoven did not permit himself to receive from revealed religion all that he sought and longed for; such a one may feel that Christianity could have supplied Beethoven with everything much more richly and more surely than his personal religion, if only he had been able to have made it his own in faith. About this there is no doubt; but never does the positivist Christian have occasion to take offense. What counts for him as truth was also sacred to Beethoven, only not so exclusively and not with the claim of unconditional precedence. Let us say he has humanized Christianity but not sanctified it. Thus he could remain a Catholic without hypocrisy, for he denied nothing, he simply did not believe everything. Who can not understand this from an artistic point of view can never comprehend it. Goethe, in the second part of *Faust*, has done in his way what Beethoven has accomplished in the *Missa solennis*. Christianity, especially in its Catholic garb, is not conceived as religion itself but as a religious manifestation with sacred symbols which are capable of becoming the expression of the highest ideality.

It avails nothing for us to cite Bach and his Mass in B Minor. There we have the very different question, how can a believing Protestant compose a mass? and the answer briefly is that he expresses what is common to both confessions, what is Christian, and pays no heed to what separates the two, especially transubstantiation. Therefore through the Protestant temperament the underlying Christian sentiment may be heard. On the other hand the *Missa solennis* like Beethoven's religion is neither Catholic nor Protestant. Especially is it not ecclesiastical, nor Christian, but just Beethovenian. It is not a mass at all in the real sense of the word. It does not lend itself to divine service, either externally according to compass and difficulty, or intrinsically according to conception and expression. It should rather be said that it is a powerful dramatic phantasy to which Beethoven was inspired by the text of the mass.

By mere chance we are able to learn the history of the origin of the piece. Archduke Rudolf was to be installed as archbishop of Olmütz, and for this purpose Beethoven wished to write a ceremonial mass. Thus it is an occasional composition. Though composed for his most important friend, patron and pupil with a serious purpose, and for an important motive, it is nevertheless an occasional composition! This indeed sounds like a disenchantment.

Accordingly the mass was not the creation of a free impulse,

not a direct embodiment of his own nature, not a work of his own volition, but the fulfilment of a given form, perhaps with powerful expression, perhaps with new content but not with an unheard of and incomprehensible aim. Yes it might have come to us in this way. Thus it began, thus it was intended, we would better say that thus the master thought he intended it. We might have obtained a mass like the earlier one in C Major though correspondingly more significant and magnificent, but it would not have been the *Missa sollemnis*. It is especially important to know this. We not only hear but we can even point out that this work has become something very different than it was to become.

It has *become*—emphasis must be laid upon this. All that we praise in it is not intended, not desired, not accomplished, not even suspected. Beethoven went about the task to compose a mass, and what he accomplished was *his* mass, because he had to, because he could not do differently. Far removed from any caprice or calculation, far removed from plan or program, this work became by compelling necessity that which we now have. It was not ready in time for the purpose it was intended to serve. It had to abandon its original motive. While the master was at work upon it his genius and δαίμων made him forget everything, himself and the world, archbishop and church and only create from his own being. This is the reason that we have so many tales of his extraordinary behavior during this time while he was composing the *Missa sollemnis*.

He seemed removed from the world, yes actually obsessed. To this period belong the stories which circulate as worthless anecdotes, but in this light receive full significance: how in his room he poured one bucketful of water after another over himself and did not notice that he was causing a deluge; or how on a stormy night he would wander around God knows where and return home wet through and hatless. All this must have horrified his neighbors, and in this connection arise the strongest contrasts, and from the sublime to the ridiculous seems only a step. Everything combines to make the stage setting supremely dramatic.

In the same period Beethoven experienced annoyance and worry, trouble and disappointment to an extraordinary degree. Everything was at the highest tension. What we have observed before in particular cases we must here imagine gathered together in the strongest *fortissimo*. It is the decisive battle of the Beethoven soul-drama. Now or never will his entire personality be revealed to us, and we have a drama of peculiar greatness. Yes, we are standing at the

boundary line; truly a fearful thought. Will the ethics of power stand the test? Will the hero be also the conqueror? Thank God he is not vanquished. He has been able to overcome the dreadful agitation and to adapt it to artistic use. In the *Missa solemnis*, it sounds forth to us not without form nor incomprehensible. He presents to us a work that we can enjoy sympathetically, and we do not have to pay for what it has cost him. If we go at it with sacred seriousness, but without anxious hesitation and with faithful confidence to let it work upon us, this is the great promise to men of good will.

Mit Andacht stands above the first movement, the Credo, an *adagio sostenuto* in D Major, like a motto for the whole. Thus we can recognize the dramatic setting at the start. The solo voices stand out against the chorus with particular prominence as we shall realize better later on. The sacred treatment begins with a simple invocation to God: *Kyrie*, "Lord"; then the alto voice takes up the theme, *eleison*, "have mercy upon us." It is absolutely necessary to follow the words of the text. Who is not familiar with Latin will do well to have the whole thing literally translated, for we will find not only the sense of the sentences, but often the individual word, yes, even the single syllable, expressly sounded; it is well to note this in the beginning.

The second part, *Christe eleison*, is softer and more sustained, B Minor; then the first part is repeated so that we have a clear consecutive arrangement. Even this first movement contains powerfully expressive passages; Beethoven feels profoundly the prayer for divine mercy and takes it very seriously. It is much more than the usual approach to the Most High with hasty reverence; it is a prayer from the dust, humble, devout and at the same time energetic. Upon faith in God's mercy rested Beethoven's entire religion, and so in this case also all the rest of the mass.

Like a flourish of trumpets sounds forth the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, "Glory to God in the highest," D Major, an *allegro vivace* which is rolled up and flung forth like a waving banner. The rhythm cannot be sharp and definite enough; the tempo must not be hurried. In the greatest contrast to this stands, *et in terra pax*, "and on earth peace," with the beautiful concluding *hominibus bonae voluntatis*, "for the men of good will."

Similarly but still stronger contrasts the jubilant *laudamus te, benedicimus te*, "we praise thee, we bless thee," with the *adoramus te*, "we worship thee," in a thrilling *pianissimo*. It is as if, terrified at his boldness in singing so loud to God, man suddenly becomes

dumb in adoration. All the more powerfully the *glorificamus*, "we glorify thee," comes in. The continuation is finally modulated from C Minor to B Major, and in a *meno allegro* follows the gentle and heartfelt melody by the tenor, *gratias agimus tibi*, "we give thanks to thee," *propter magnum gloriam tuam*, "for thy great glory." Then in *tempo primo* at a rapid *crescendo*, *domine Deus rex coelestis*, "Lord God, Heavenly King," *Deus pater omnipotens*, "God the Father Almighty." This last word is given extreme emphasis, the chorus *fortissimo*, the orchestra in full movement, the trumpets crashing in for the first time. So greatly is Beethoven impressed by the omnipotence of God! After the *omni*-, "all," has been drawn out to the utmost, the *potens*, "mighty," breaks off in *unisono* as the expression of an undoubted, unconditioned power about which no more words need be lost. So great, so majestic, is God, so strong his arm!

But now again we have a complete contrast: *domine fili unigenite Jesu Christe*, "O Lord, the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ," soft and consoling. Then *agnus Dei*, "Lamb of God," is simply named but not carried further, and the note lingers upon *filius patris*, "Son of the Father."

Then begins the *largetto* in F Major; *qui tollis peccata mundi*, "Thou who takest away the sins of the world." The chief emphasis is not laid upon the burden and guilt of sin, but upon the petition, *miserere nobis*, "have mercy upon us." The soloists sing it with constantly new turns of expression; the chorus repeats it but once. Then it takes up the *qui tollis*, and the soloists continue with *suscipe deprecationem nostram*, "receive our prayer." Now the imposing *qui sedes ad dexteram patris*, "that sittest at the right hand of God the Father," one of the much dreaded passages with high B repeated six times for the soprano of the chorus, and a wonderful rendering of the *miserere nobis*. Beethoven felt this beseeching petition so passionately that he inserted a swelling "Ah" at the end. If our editions contain *O miserere* instead, it is of course correct Latin, but Beethoven wrote "Ah," as he had become accustomed from the Italian, an unconscious reminiscence of the opera which shows us how dramatically inclined he was even here.

Especially famous has become the passage five measures before the last tenor solo, where the six-four follows directly upon F Major from F Sharp Minor, and the entire conclusion expresses "if thou helpest not we are hopelessly lost." But He must help because He can help.

It passes into an *allegro maestoso*. *Quoniam tu*, "for thou,"

sing the tenors of the chorus with all their might, in order to come down a steep octave into *piano* with the *solus sanctus*, "only art holy." Some have tried to complain that this passage does violence to logic; that one should not cry out the subject ("Thou") and whisper the predicate ("art holy"), but right here is revealed the expression of Beethoven's feeling that makes him change in the middle of the sentence. With desperate energy God is invoked according to the preceding anguish and need, and in the midst of the cry of the soul reverence before the holiness of God seizes man and hurls him to the ground. But he collects himself in *quoniam tu solus altissimus*, "thou only art Most High," which again demands a gigantic effort from the chorus. Now follows the magnificent fugue, *in gloria Dei patris. Amen.* "In the Glory of God the Father. Amen." The trombones join in the theme, then the solo voices take it up above a *cantus firmus* of the bass chorus. It swells into a mighty *unisono*. Finally the *Gloria* is repeated.

The *Credo* follows. Very firmly and positively the theme starts out. *Credo*, "I believe," it says to us with unflinching assurance. I do not understand why its explanation has been distorted to mean that this energy was only a borrowed one, that Beethoven wished to stifle doubt in the germ in his soul and ours, so that he repeats strong and loud again *Credo*, "I believe"! What is the need of such an effort at interpretation? He was not an unbeliever, not anti-Christian, as we have pointed out from the beginning. He believes in a personal God, and here he puts it in song. *In unum Deum*, "in one God," it is emphasized, while *patrem omnipotentem*, "the Father Almighty," swells out so majestically that the chorus can hardly accomplish the high B again. Noteworthy are two short passages: *et invisibilem*, "(Creator of all things visible) and invisible," and *ante omnia saecula*, "before all worlds," both mysterious but the second much more mystical than the first. Triumphantly sounds the *Deum de Deo*, "God of God"; strongly emphasized is *genitum non factum*, "begotten, not made," with an almost threateningly repeated *non* against every contradiction; and expressively intoned is the thrice repeated *per quem omnia facta sunt*, "by whom all things were made."

But now comes one of the chief passages. The orchestra leads softly and beautifully in D Sharp Major, and the chorus sings with wonderful feeling: *qui propter nos homines*, "who for us men," *et propter nostram salutem*, "and for our salvation," which we, wretched that we are, so greatly need and which only His love can give us, *descendit de caelis*, "came down from heaven." Here Beethoven

gives expression to his love for humanity, his most intense sympathy with all human sorrow and misery. For these a Saviour must arise. In the same way he is impressed by the thought that this Saviour must come down from the heights of heaven. How far removed heaven is from earth is made visible to us with the distinctness of a painter, from high B down and finally up again.

The next part is the most splendid. The tenor solo has a miracle to announce; *et incarnatus est*, "and was incarnate," he sings in an indescribable *adagio* which in a mysterious melody accompanied only by the viola is modulated after the fashion of ancient church music. *De spiritu sancto*, "by the Holy Ghost," then wonderfully soft, *ex Maria*, "of Mary," and finally *virgine*, "the Virgin." How the D Minor triad trembles on the wooden wind instruments can not be described in words. The other soloists take up the theme above which floats a flute solo representing the dove as symbol of the Holy Ghost. But the chorus—and here we have a dramatic scene—repeats the whole movement *pianissimo* on the empty fifth, A:E more whispering than singing. The multitude cannot com-



CRUCIFIXUS IN THE MISSA SOLEMNIS.

prehend the miracle. They remain upon their knees in trembling devotion. They can only repeat what is told them but do not understand its import; only a miracle can make them grasp it.

But now comes the solution. How it happened, how it could happen, the singer can not explain, but what the result is he proclaims aloud: *et homo factus est*, "and was made man." Then the chorus sings it loudly after him, for now it can follow, *Homo, homo* is repeated alternately by soloists and chorus, and infinitely much lies in this dialogue. "A man, just think, a man!" Truly? A man? Is that so? Dare we believe it? That would be beyond all imagining! Then we would have the Saviour of whom we are in need; then indeed would we be succored! And is it indeed no dream, no legend? Are you telling us truly that it is a fact? Yes, I repeat it to you, it is a fact"—*factus est!* Something like this is the impression that this passage makes upon us. The proclamation continues. An *adagio espressivo* in D Minor brings the *crucifixus etiam pro nobis*, "and was crucified also for us." The Saviour has become

not only a man but a martyr. *Pro nobis*, "for us," the choir repeats in a frightened query; "then we are guilty of it?" And as if memory suddenly recalled something formerly learned, *sub Pontio Pilato*, yes that is right, it was "under Pontius Pilate," how could we have forgotten it? Indescribably again is sung the *passus*, "he suffered," by soloist and chorus. The Saviour has suffered for all humanity, and how he has suffered! The orchestra has a wailing theme in C and C Sharp which I can only compare to the Saviour's lament in Wagner's "Parsifal." Only he who himself has borne anguish of spirit can fathom it. *Et sepultus est*, "and was buried," concludes this part in a touching cadence in which soprano and bass vividly describe the sepulture with a sustained C.

Then after a painful oppressive pause, the tenor chorus comes in with *et*, "and," that means "Give heed! it is not yet finished"; and on the same note, high G, *resurrexit*, "he rose again." At one stroke the bonds are broken. It continues *allegro molto; et ascendit in coelum*, "and ascended into heaven," depicted realistically in rapid scales until in the great F Major in which all sopranos of the chorus sustain a high A, all heaven opens before us. Then the last judgment is magnificently presented. We hear the trumpets with which it opens, and then comes *judicare*, "(He shall come again) to judge," in a second chord of threatening majesty. And again in the sharpest contrast *vivos*, "the quick," *et mortuos*, "and the dead," the first piercingly as if they wished to defend themselves, the latter dull and gloomy in an empty harmony difficult to catch. *Cujus regni non erit finis*, "whose kingdom shall have no end," arranged in a fugue, finally throws in again an inimitable *non non* in answer to every doubt.

The section which treats of the Holy Ghost is more quiet. Then follows the concluding fugue: *et vitam venturi saeculi*, "And (I believe in) the life of the world to come." That Beethoven here makes use of every advantage a fugue can possess is very apparent, but he does it in order to bring about a climax which may be considered unparalleled. If the chorus, especially the sopranos, meets all these requirements it can produce a most effective performance. Eternal life in which Beethoven believed, as we know, is not described here, but it is observed and foretold. It is very unique when, following upon the immense chorus passage, the *grave*, the solo voices carry us with their *Amen* above this world into the future world which is not only promised here but is made accessible. Therefore they waver *pianissimo* in light chords as if in celestial

heights, and the chorus remains far below and permits itself to be carried up by them and the orchestra.

Must we not fear lest at this point a disappointing anticlimax may follow? Or do we now hear voices in "the choir invisible"? Once more Beethoven writes the instruction, *Mit Andacht*. We are to prepare ourselves to look upon God face to face. The orchestra begins a melody in a solemn *crescendo* with splendid instrumentation, and the alto soloist sings *sanctus*, "Holy." A theme of three notes D, E, A, proves sufficient to draw us to our knees. Here we can be sure that Beethoven was devout in the truest sense of the word. He prostrates himself and us before the all-holy God. Even the soloists hardly dare to sing, and at last they only falter, supported by the orchestra. Who is able to look upon God without being affected in the depths of his soul? Man must perish before God's face. In the small ninth chord everything seems to become extinct. Then the soloists, not the chorus, tear themselves away, to the jubilant *pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua*, "Heaven and earth are full of thy glory," and a resounding hymn of praise brings relief from the depression: *Hosanna in excelsis!* The *presto* in which it is given forth bears testimony to the fact that the deaf master heard inwardly what it was hardly possible to express to others. The piercing notes cause sharp discords.

A prelude follows, *sostenuto ma non troppo*, G Major.

Whether Beethoven really composed this transition just at this point I dare not affirm. At any rate now approaches the most wonderful moment. God not only is seen and divined and extolled, he lowers himself to men; he holds communion with us. In the highest tones, the violins start in and glide slowly down the scale in twelve-eighth time. It is incredible what an effect is attained by this simple mode of expression. The hearer has indeed nothing to be ashamed of whose eyes become moist as he listens. Again the representation becomes dramatic; the bass chorus sings *piano* on the one note D as if receiving a gift of grace: *benedictus qui venit in nomine domini*, "Blessed is he who cometh in the name of the Lord." How can we describe this mood? The most faithful cannot receive the sacrament in a more devout frame of mind. Now the the violins play the tenderest melody that Beethoven ever sung; the soloists take it up and the chorus enters upon it first shyly, then more confidently, and a movement is performed in which all humanity, filled with its God, seems exalted and inspired.

But we are still upon earth; we are still men. Infinite is God's

mercy, immeasurable his power, but terribly great and heavy also is our guilt. The B Minor *adagio* makes us feel this. Terribly does the burden of the transition from the second to the third measure weigh upon the soul. Heavy and serious begins the bass solo: *agnus Dei qui tollis peccato mundi*, "Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world," the sins of the entire world which give us a glimpse into the terrible abyss of destruction. When he now sings *miserere nobis*, "have mercy upon us," the men's chorus takes it up in an equally hopeless lament. Then follows the alto and finally all four soloists, and the penitential prayer becomes more and more impressive, more and more humble. Then finally a change *pianissimo* on the sixth chord of A Major like an irresistibly beseeching, "Wilt thou then not hear us?" And now follows the last portion, *dona nobis pacem*, "Grant us thy peace."

At this point Beethoven permits himself to do a very peculiar thing. He writes above the *allegretto vivace*, D Major: "Petition for inward and outer peace." In so doing he does violence to the text of the mass which contains nothing of the sort, nor can it be read out of the mass. It must first be put in it. It is easy to see how Beethoven was misled. Hitherto he had conceived the words, if not exactly in the ecclesiastical interpretation, at any rate very ideally. What he is now doing arouses a justifiable feeling of surprise, and he is not easily understood by his hearers. At first the petition for peace is spun out into a richly lyrical movement with a beautiful theme, but suddenly we hear, *allegro assai*, B Major, martial music in the distance—the enemy approaches! Perils of war break into the midst of the religious service. The soloists cry out anxiously. It is and always will be an unexampled piece of daring to throw in such a scene in so realistic a dramatic setting, but it makes no difference to us. Our fancy has to follow whithersoever it is led.

In the following repetition of the *dona*, the theme is very much in Handel's style, and it is more than probable that Beethoven wished thus to offer tribute to his highly honored master. Still another surprise awaits us. A *presto fugato alla breve* starts in and is carried on by the orchestra up to the despairing cry of the whole chorus, *agnus Dei*. This is evidently intended to indicate the absence of internal peace for which relief is now sought in prayer. This demand on our emotional fancy and earnestness is still stronger than the preceding because here no stopping point is offered from without. With full voice the soprano soloist now starts in with the *dona* on high B, then sustains high A sharp in order to obtain *pacem*.

“peace,” or rather to accomplish it by force. Finally the terrible suspense is allayed, and we return to *tempo primo*. Peace is won and assured. It sounds as if all wished to ascertain it for themselves. Now for the first time it becomes really quiet, and we have soft *piano* passages. Finally the main theme stands out large and brilliant, and the orchestra closes with the most definite confirmation.

This last movement is undeniably a surprise to the impartial hearer. Many will be disappointed who expected a harmonious end. It is a matter of individual feeling. One thing is clear, that the *Missa solemnis*, as we have said before, is a powerful dramatic phantasy, a religious service of the soul which represents Beethoven's inmost emotions. We have the impression that form and medium of expression were hardly sufficient for him; he goes to the limit of the possible. Still the conviction is forced upon us that we are enjoying a work of art complete in itself—a conviction which cannot be shaken. I might point to many individual details, but however passionately they might be advocated they do not cause the whole to lose its unity.

Its construction may be comprehended formally and intrinsically. The general impression is decisive. Were we to indicate with one catch-word the nobility of the soul which here celebrates a consecration of idealism, we would say that Beethoven's mass is the canticle of his sincerity. This is the reason that everything is so genuine and on so large a scale, and this is the reason that it is in keeping with the motto which he inscribed upon his score: “Written from the heart—may it again reach the heart!”