

## Program Notes by Ed Wight

### MASS in C MAJOR, OP. 86 (1807) by Ludwig van Beethoven

The remarkable masterpieces of Beethoven's maturity continued to flow from his pen in 1807 and 1808. Those two years witnessed the composition of his Mass in C Major, the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the "Choral" Fantasy, *Coriolan* Overture, the two Op. 70 Piano Trios, four settings of Goethe's *Sehnsucht*, and the Op. 69 Cello Sonata.

He had recently written two extraordinarily powerful works: Symphony no. 3 "Eroica" (the longest symphony ever written by anyone to that point) and the F Major String Quartet, Op. 59 no. 1 – at over 1300 bars, the longest string quartet written by any composer at that time.

The majesty of such spacious and dramatic works from Beethoven's "Heroic" decade, however, often obscure another important aspect of his style – pieces that are equally expansive, yet "primarily lyrical and intimate" (Beethoven biographer Lewis Lockwood). Such middle-period works as the Violin Concerto, the Fourth Piano Concerto, the "Pastoral" Symphony, the Op. 69 Cello Sonata, and the *Archduke* Piano Trio reflect a more gentle, "lyrical and intimate" style. Beethoven chose to set the C Major Mass in that style as well.

Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy II annually commissioned masses to celebrate his wife's name day (Princess Maria Hermenegild), and approached Beethoven in 1807. Beethoven's only previous major religious work was the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. This would be his first attempt at mass composition, and he was all too aware of Haydn's six celebrated masses for the Prince. Mixed within Beethoven's sketches for the *Gloria* of the Mass are his copies of passages from Haydn's *Creation Mass* of 1801.

From the start, Beethoven chose a style "different from the Holy Roman grandeur of Haydn and Mozart" (critic Rene Saller). Beethoven wrote in a letter, "I believe I have [set] the text as it has seldom been treated before." Every major section of Beethoven's *Kyrie* opens in a soft, devotional style.

Not so the *Gloria*, however; Beethoven lets it rip *fortissimo* right from the start! Haydn rarely used such a loud dynamic (only once in his *Mass in Time of War* from 1796), while Beethoven employs it in every movement except the *Agnus Dei*. He fashions extreme dramatic contrast between *fortissimo* and *piano* in consecutive bars ("*adoramus te*") and sudden *forte* choral interjections amidst soft solos ("*Deus omnipotens*," the all-powerful God). The *Gloria's* traditional closing fugue on "*Cum sancto spiritu*" lasts disproportionately longer than those in Haydn's masses. Such power characterized many prominent Beethovenian works, and this was perhaps what Nikolaus expected throughout the mass.

But the *Kyrie*, *Credo*, and *Sanctus* all open *piano* (or *pianissimo* - another dynamic rarely found in Haydn), and the *Agnus Dei* both opens and closes *pianissimo*. Like the other movements, the *Agnus Dei* includes powerful *forte* passages and another dramatic word painting passage introducing "*miserere*," four consecutive bars of weak-beat *sforzando* accents on dissonant

minor 9<sup>th</sup> chords. However, Beethoven avoided the quasi-operatic style of his oratorio, and set the mass with remarkable restraint overall.

Most scholars share the assessment of Lewis Lockwood: “The singular gentleness of style in parts of the Mass in C, on which Beethoven himself remarked, evokes a sense of piety he had never attempted before...[There is] an intimacy in the text setting for the most heartfelt passages...that removes the work from the more traditional settings that Beethoven knew...an affirmation of his personal religiosity and his broad belief in humanity’s relationship to God.”

The piety was broad and non-denominational. When Breitkopf published the Mass in 1812, Beethoven urged that a German translation be set under the Latin, so that Protestant audiences could enjoy it as well. And though he rarely attended church, Beethoven’s care over the precise expression of his religious sentiments led him to a different translation for the 1823 Breitkopf reprint.

The extent of his *stille Andacht* (quiet devotion) did not please Prince Nikolaus, who conveyed such sentiments to Beethoven. Thus while he had dedicated the 1807 performance score to the Prince, Breitkopf’s 1812 first edition bore the dedication to Prince Kinsky, a generous Beethoven patron. Overshadowed for generations by Beethoven’s monumental *Missa Solemnis* of 1823, the Mass in C Major has finally found a welcome and deserved popularity.

### **LUX AETERNA** (1997) by Morten Lauridsen

Morten Lauridsen was born in Colfax, Washington in 1943 and grew up in Portland. His mother introduced him to music and taught him piano. After attending Whitman College in Walla Walla, Lauridsen joined the music faculty at University of Southern California in 1966, where he continues teaching to this day. He served as head of the composition department 1990-2002, became composer-in-residence for the Los Angeles Master Chorale 1994-2001, and founded the USC Film Scoring program.

Winning international acclaim for his choral compositions, over 200 CDs are devoted partly or entirely to his works. The National Endowment for the Arts named him an “American Choral Master” in 2005, and in 2007 he received the National Medal of Arts Award from President Bush in a White House ceremony. He now divides his time between teaching in Los Angeles and his home in the San Juan Archipelago off the coast of Washington.

The final illness and death of his mother led to the composition of his five-movement *Lux Aeterna* in 1997. Lauridsen’s setting of both the first movement (*Introitus*) and finale (*Agnus Dei / Lux Aeterna*) of the Requiem text frame his work. But like Brahms’s Requiem (written in memory of *his* mother), Lauridsen also fashions a personalized requiem. *Lux Aeterna* translates as “eternal light,” and Lauridsen says he chose sacred Latin texts “each containing references to light...giving me strength to cope with the situation.”

While both composers avoid the *Dies Irae* “Day of Wrath,” Lauridsen also avoids Brahms’s depiction of the overwhelming power of death. His gentle setting instead more closely resembles Faure’s *Requiem*, which emphasized healing and consolation. Steve Ledbetter writes that both requiems celebrate a peaceful ending of life, “welcoming death as the step towards eternal life.”

His setting of the *Introitus* opens with a *pianissimo* passage for orchestra that soon crescendos to forte. This sets the stage for the hushed *a cappella* entry of the choir, also *pianissimo*. To further reflect the sacred text, Lauridsen employs frequent metric shifts and repeated-pitch motives, evoking Medieval *plain chant* style. Central to Lauridsen’s message, the text includes the phrase “let perpetual light shine upon them.” So it comes as no surprise that he saves the only *fortissimo* outburst – *a cappella* - for “Hear our prayer!” (*exaudi orationem meam*).

For the second movement, Lauridsen turns to a 1677 Nuremburg songbook. He opens with a *cantus firmus* from “*Herzliebster Jesu*” (Dearest Jesu). It begins with an oboe and clarinet motive soon stated several times in the choir, the final time to the text “a light has risen in the darkness for the upright. Have mercy upon us, O lord.”

Over the past two decades, Morten Lauridsen has become the most performed American choral composer. So it comes as no surprise that in the third movement, he states the primary message of this work, *O Nata Lux* (Oh light born [from light] , *a cappella*. He reaches across the eras: Medieval chant-like rhythms with the Renaissance polyphony of Josquin Desprez and rich contemporary harmony in this tender, hauntingly beautiful centerpiece for this five-movement memorial.

Turning to a more joyful style, Lauridsen draws upon *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* (Come, Holy Spirit) – “a spirited, jubilant canticle” (Ledbetter). Once again, a special choral effect, unison singing for “*O Lux beatissima*” (O most blessed light), highlights the primary message. As in the first movement, the choir returns to *pianissimo* to begin the *Agnus Dei* finale. Soon the orchestra also returns to its very opening passage, leading to the choir’s initial passage, now set to the text of the title, *Lux Aeterna*.

The parallel between the two pieces on today’s program is striking. Beethoven employed a similar technique, drawing on the tradition of employing the opening music from the Kyrie for the final bars of the mass. Both composers chose primarily gentle works, ending *pianissimo*, to emphasize the role of humanity in the sacred spirit.