

CONCERT 10TH August 2020

Dear WHO and friends,

In last week's letter I said I would spend two weeks on Beethoven as it was his special anniversary. Let me tell you more about the man, his troubles and failings leading up to his two mammoth works, Missa Solemnis and the Ninth Symphony. Today let's concentrate on the lesser known of the two, the Missa Solemnis.

Beethoven had moved to Vienna in 1792 and when his father died two months later, he was joined by his two brothers, Carl in '94 and Johann, the youngest, in '95. Johann became an apothecary's assistant and he and his eldest brother had little to do with each other. Carl, however, was put in charge of Beethoven's business affairs and handled any dealings with his publishers. That was until he was found to be passing off some of his brother's compositions as his own and was dismissed. Beethoven also had no time for Carl's wife, Johanna, who had a certain reputation in Vienna before Carl married her in 1806, pregnant with their child Karl van Beethoven. In fact Ludwig called her 'Queen of the Night' after the character in "The Magic Flute" opera. He unfairly accused her of prostitution and flaunting herself in public, leading to her despising him and setting the scene for things to come.

Karl was the only child born out of the three Beethoven brothers and his father Carl was persuaded to appoint his elder brother as sole guardian of his nine-year-old son, as he was terminally ill with TB. The Will excluded Johanna, the boy's mother, from having any part in his upbringing. But wait, there are many more twists to come. Hours before Carl's death in November 1815 Johanna discovered the Will and persuaded Carl to add her name making her co-guardian. Beethoven was enraged and took Johanna to court to gain sole custody of Karl and shut his mother out. Up to now he had regarded Karl as a son, and had apparently pleaded with him to call him "father" after Carl's death. Ludwig envisaged him as the next generation's "Beethoven". In fact, Karl was ruined by his uncle's court action against his mother and bore the scars for life. During the court case he had to go into the witness box and to satisfy his uncle, testify against his mother.

Beethoven took legal action in the "Landrect" or court of the nobility, won, and was appointed sole guardian of Karl. After three years of misery living with his uncle, Karl ran away to his mother. Used as grounds for an appeal Beethoven lost and suffered public humiliation when it was discovered that he was not of aristocratic birth. A year later Beethoven appealed again and finally won guardianship of Karl. All this occurred over a four and a half year period during which there was little creative output except for the Hammerklavier Sonata of which I spoke last week. The final irony in this whole tawdry affair was that Carl Czerny (well known to all pianists) reported, much to Beethoven's disbelief and displeasure, that Karl (Beethoven's nephew, whom Czerny had been asked to teach) "exhibited no musical talent whatsoever!".

During this awful, angry and tumultuous period in Beethoven's life, overridden with increasing illness and loss of hearing, he found himself isolated from his remaining friends. Even his most loyal friend of all, Stephan von Breuning, is absent from the scene. In hindsight, one visitor Beethoven received in August 1817 in all this turmoil, (Karl was recuperating from a hernia operation, Beethoven himself was ill and had remained in bed for nearly a month) did have an unpredicted effect on the rest of his life. The guest was Thomas Broadwood, founder of one of the most prestigious piano manufactures in the world. He told Beethoven that his firm was developing a six octave, tripled-stringed, heavy action grand piano and would send one to him as a gift. What a gift! From the first fortissimo fanfare of the Hammerklavier to his last three piano sonatas, it profoundly broadened Beethoven's palate of sound. The instrument was now capable of realising Beethoven's vision. He was never in doubt about the importance of the Hammerklavier Sonata. He wrote to Czerny "what I have now written bears no resemblance to anything I have written in the past: it is better."

Beethoven was not a religious man outwardly. However, around 1819 he began to make passing remarks about Christianity in his letters, naming Saints, which he had not previously done. The Mass in C was a dozen or more years in the past when his great patron, the Archduke Rudolph, was

appointed Archbishop of Olmütz. Enthronement was to take place in March of 1820. Beethoven decided to set the Mass Ordinary, a huge undertaking and for which he had to set aside two works he had already begun. The first of these was the Diabelli Variations. In Spring 1819 the Austrian music publisher and composer Anton Diabelli wrote a waltz theme for piano and invited all the major composers in Vienna to compose a single variation on it. After deep reservations, Beethoven did begin. He later put it aside for the Missa Solemnis, but when that was completed he produced 33 variations in what is his longest and most complex set of piano variations. The second little ditty put on the back burner was the Ninth Symphony, which he had already started and in fact traced some ideas years before in the “Choral Fantasy Op. 80”, which WHO performed in China. John Grayling was our soloist along with the fantastic Shaoxing University Choir and Soloists. The “Choral Fantasy” was the final piece in the epic concert (which included the fifth and sixth symphonies and more) that Beethoven organised on the occasion of his last public performance.

Archduke Rudolph was a fine musician in his own right. He was a virtuoso pianist and the only composition pupil Beethoven ever accepted. He was instrumental in securing an annuity for Beethoven to keep him in Vienna. In return Beethoven dedicated more compositions to him than any other individual.

The Missa Solemnis stands alone as the only sacred work of Beethoven’s final decade. It was more than just a gift for Rudolph. I believe it was a vehicle through which Beethoven reflects his new spirituality and understanding of past wrongs. He studied liturgical works of the old masters but the structure of the work is almost symphonic and has been criticised for its secularity. Indeed the beautiful violin solo, concerto like, in the Benedictus, and the representation of war in the Agnus Dei, have been criticised as being out of place in a sacred work.

The first performance took place in the Kärntnertor Theatre. Only three movements were heard as the censors of the time banned the whole work from being performed anywhere other than in a church. At the head of the manuscript Beethoven inscribed “From the heart may it return to the heart.” The Missa Solemnis took Beethoven, with other works in progress, four years to complete, far longer than any other composition. He of course missed the enthronement by a mere three years! There are many great recordings of the Missa Solemnis Op. 123. The one on YouTube I enjoyed most was with the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century conducted by Daniel Reuss. The Alto soloist is Messo soprano Norwegian, Marianne Beate Kielland. What a voice one of my favourites of all time. You may enjoy the Sir Colin Davis LSO prom concert version but be beware, the adds that pop up are so irritating.