The dumb ox and the deaf composer
Reflections on Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*

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The starting-point for the present essay is a number of semi-formal conversations between myself and the participants of a tour group organized by *Soli Deo Gloria* Inc. attending a performance and DVD recording of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* conducted by John Nelson (SDG's Artistic Director), with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and the Gulbenkian Choir together with soloists Tamara Wilson, Elisabeth DeShong, Nikolai Schukoff and Brindley Sherratt. What follows is an attempt to see this monument of Western sacred music from their different and, I hope, complementary viewpoints. I will begin from a musicological perspective, providing background material concerning the genesis of the *Missa* in relationship to Beethoven's life (drawing on the benchmarking biography of Maynard Solomon, 2003). The second layer of reflection deals with the philosophical and theological consideration of the significance of the work; here my dialogue partners are Thomas Aquinas, Theodor Adorno ('An alienated masterpiece', 1964) and Daniel Chua (*Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*, 1999 and 'Beethoven's Other Humanism', 2009). The third vantage-point, as will become apparent at various points in this essay, is that of a practising musician involved with the realisation of the piece in performance.

Certain broad presuppositions underpin the approach I am suggesting for an interpretative exploration of the *Missa*. Firstly, I am assuming that great works of music should not merely be appreciated as museum-pieces, but that we need to be attentive to the message that they transmit, not merely as vehicles for a verbal text but also through their impact on us in *aural reality* unfolding in time in the act of performance. Secondly, my belief is that a work such as the *Missa* has the capacity to critique verbal concepts through purely musical means, and that the tension between the liturgical text and Beethoven's composition is integral to that critique. Thirdly, I will suggest that orthodox Christian theology can benefit by hearing the voice of an artist who clearly dissented from orthodoxy, and that the challenging questions posed by the *Missa Solemnis* to a Christian world-view can only be answered, if at all, by a re-discovery of genuine Judeo-Christian tradition with all its paradox and mystery, as opposed to the rationalistic form of institutionalized religion against which Beethoven evidently rebelled.

Running through the following will be what I will term 'the dialogue of the dumb ox and the deaf composer'. I plead guilty to the charge of sounding obscure and facetious at this point, but what I have in mind here is an imagined conversation between Beethoven and traditional Christian theology as represented by the 'dumb ox', Thomas Aquinas, an epithet immortalized by St Albert the Great, with whom Aquinas studied in the thirteenth century. The young Dominican from Naples was given the nickname by his fellow-students on account of burly appearance his preference for silent listening over and against speaking. St Albert's retort to Aquinas's contemporaries is memorable for its prescience: 'You call him a Dumb Ox : I tell you that the Dumb Ox will bellow so loud that his bellowing will fill the world.'

For the unexpected appearance of Thomas Aquinas in a presentation about Beethoven I have to thank *Soli Deo Gloria* chairman Dick Gieser, who credited me in his introduction to my talk with bringing 'real scholasticism' to the organization. I'm fairly sure that he meant 'scholarship', but on reflection, it struck me that the idea of a confrontation between Christian 'scholasticism' and the composer of the *Missa Solemnis* is perhaps not as ridiculous as it may first seem. I will attempt to address this on two related levels, one technical, the other spiritual.

Historical background

One obvious question posed by the listener curious to learn more about the *Missa Solemnis* concerns its relationship to events of Beethoven's life. Needless to say, the external circumstances of the composition of the work are amply documented in all standard accounts of the genesis of the work. Beethoven originally intended to write a Mass for the enthronement of his pupil and court protector Archduke Rudolph as archbishop of Olmütz (present-day Olomouc in the Czech Republic) in Moravia, March 9, 1820, following his election on June 4, 1819. Rudolph was the son of the Emperor Leopold II and the brother of Emperor Franz, to whom Beethoven had already dedicated a series of works dating from 1809 onwards – Piano Concertos 4 and 5, 'Archduke' Trio Op. 97, Sonatas

Op. 81a, 106/111, Grosse Fuge Op. 133. A number of delays in the compositional process of the *Missa* meant that the score was only completed in 1821, then revised in 1822 (with modifications including the expansion of the *Dona nobis pacem*), with the first performance occurring in St Petersburg on April 7, 1824. Publication eventually fell to Schott in Mainz in 1825, but not after Beethoven had negotiated – demonstrating questionable integrity in the process - with a whole series of publishing houses.

Such are the uncontroversial bare bones of the genesis of the *Missa Solemnis*. What they do not convey is the startling disparity between the sublimity of the finished work and the abject disarray into which Beethoven's daily existence had sunk during the years of its composition. His deafness was now far advanced; although not technically total, as he retained some residual hearing in his left ear, it had ended his activities as a performance and doubtless was a major contributing factor to his increasing social estrangement. Equally important and inimical to Beethoven's happiness, however, was his bitter conflict with his sister-in-law Johanna over the custody of her son Karl, an acrimonious dispute lasting several years, in the course of which Beethoven displayed a substantial degree of paranoia, verging on a persecution complex.

On the untimely death in 1815 of his brother Casper Carl, who had advocated joint custody of his son by his widow and brother, Beethoven made a sustained attempt to deprive Johanna of parental rights, trying to discredit her on the grounds that in 1811 she had been convicted of embezzlement (having made a false declaration of the loss of a pearl necklace valued at the considerable sum of 20,000 florins). The composer's motivation was complex and cannot be reduced to the simple question of his distrust of his sister-in-law as a mother; the evidence of Beethoven's copious and exaggerated accusations suggests that he was primarily driven by a near-pathological desire for fatherhood, one that he had never been able to realize in the course of his famously tempestuous and ill-starred relationships with women. He came to view Johanna as the incarnation of evil and the instigator of plots against him, as the exalted tone of a legal report compiled by him in 1820 makes plain. With a typical penchant for self-pity, Beethoven describes himself as

> 'hunted on all sides like a wild animal, often treated in the vilest fashion, misunderstood, with innumerable worries, and in constant struggle against this monster of a mother who has persistently sought to stifle all the good work I have done.'

There are no grounds to support Beethoven's claim to have been hunted (and the verdict of history on his 'good work' with regard to Karl is less than kind), but he was certainly perceived in Vienna as something of a wild animal, as the following description of him by his friend(!) Nanette Streicher reveals. Writing to the English publishers Novello, she reported that 'he looked like a beggar, his clothes were dirty, he behaved like a grumpy, stubborn bear.' Indeed Beethoven was arrested by the Wiener Neustadt police in 1821/22 for staring into houses and generally resembling a vagrant. The composer's biographer Anton Schindler may have been exposed by recent scholarship as a source of limited reliability, but his depiction of the composer in his last decade matches that of Frau Streicher, speaking of Beethoven's 'unusually broad head [...] covered with long, greying, bushy and completely unkempt hair which made him look somewhat wild.' In addition, Beethoven's health was in rapid decline, not least on account of liver problems which may not have been uniquely caused by his immoderate wine consumption (it should be remembered that his father and paternal grandmother were both alcoholics) but were certainly exacerbated by it.

It is against this stormy, indeed sordid personal background that the *Missa Solemnis* was written. That these years in Beethoven's life should have seen the composition of his supreme spiritual expression in music is not the least significant enigma regarding what is, as we shall see, a highly enigmatic work.

Fugue and mortal combat

Musically, the *Missa* is also paradoxical, in that it is effectively constitutes a confrontation between two different and indeed conflicting styles. On one hand, there is Beethoven's own 'heroic', 'subjective' idiom as familiar from works such as the Third, Fifth and Seventh Symphonies : the embodiment of the ideals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, marked by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. On the other hand, the *Missa* is marked by a return to the polyphonic heritage of liturgical music dating back to Palestrina and beyond, which Beethoven

investigated by mining the musical treasures contained in Archduke Rudolph's library. As the musicologist and philosopher Theoder W. Adorno points out, this turn to the old 'scholastic' masters of Church music can be interpreted as symptomatic of a crisis not only in Beethoven's musical language but also in his belief in the power of Reason and the heroic bourgeois ideals of his time.

A graphic account given by Schindler of the composer's compositional process during the genesis of the *Missa Solemnis* makes it clear that Beethoven's engagement with fugue was indeed a spectacular confrontation :

> "Towards the end of August [1819] [...] I arrived at the master's home in Mödling. It was 4 o'clock in the afternoon. As soon as we entered we learned that in the morning both servants had gone away, and that there had been a quarrel after midnight which had disturbed all the neighbors, because as a consequence of a long vigil both had gone to sleep and the food which had been prepared had become unpalatable. In the living-room, behind a locked door, we heard the master singing parts of the fugue in the *Credo* [the dating suggests that this actually may have been the concluding fugue of the *Gloria*]--singing, howling, stamping. After we had been listening for a long time to this almost awful scene, and were about to go away, the door opened and Beethoven stood before us with distorted features, calculated to excite fear. He looked as if he had been in mortal combat with the whole host of contrapuntists, his everlasting enemies.'

The reason why this should have been 'mortal combat' for Beethoven can be explained by the difference in his perspective as a composer in 1819 from that of Bach a century earlier. With the fugal technique of the Leipzig Thomaskantor, it can be argued that the spirit of Scholasticism can be seen as reaching its ultimate musical fulfillment, if musical 'scholasticism' is taken as a term for a style derived not from the individual's drive to self-expression, but rather as part of the 'objective cosmos' of the Christian Middle Ages shaped by the idea of a divinely-ordained 'harmony of the spheres'. In Bachian counterpoint, supremely personal expression and strict objectivity are identical. In the case of Beethoven, however, fugal writing was no longer a self-evident component of musical style, but had to be *retrieved* and therefore re-learnt, as the years since Bach's death had seen the collapse of the Baroque idiom and its replacement by the Classical symphonic formal ideal of an attainment of harmony by the outworking of contrasting themes.

On the level of religious ideas, too, much had changed between 1750 and 1819. Given the context of our performances in Lisbon, it is impossible to ignore the fact that it was the earthquake in that very city on All Saints' Day in 1755 which triggered a radical questioning of Europe's faith in the omnipotent and benevolent Creator presupposed in Bach's entire output. Just as radically, the 'second earthquake' of the French Revolution would see this Creator dethroned in the very Holy of Holies, with Christian worship in Notre-Dame Cathedral replaced by the cult of human Reason. For Beethoven to reach back towards a liturgical musical tradition inherited ultimately from scholasticism (the world of Thomas Aquinas) was therefore to reach back across a gaping chasm to a lost world of religious certainty. Inevitably, this could be nothing other than a highly ambiguous venture, if for us also a fascinating one, as it brings us to an investigation of Beethoven's complex religious views.

A Mass for Unitarians ?

Scholarly opinion remains highly divided as to an appraisal of Beethoven's spiritual commitments. It seems clear, however, that two extreme judgments can be discounted. On one hand it is clear that, although baptized a Catholic, he was not a regular churchgoer. On the other, to label the composer an 'atheist', as Haydn once called him in a fit of pique, cannot stand up to any serious scrutiny. One objection against it is the fact that Beethoven agreed to receive the last rites from a priest in the final days of his life, even if this episode is sometimes taken, ironically, as proof of Beethoven's atheism on the grounds that, after receiving extreme unction, he remarked : 'Plaudite, amici, comoedia finita est' ['*Applaud, friends, the comedy is over*'], effectively mocking the sacrament. This seems a questionable conclusion to draw from the incident; it is by no means clear that Beethoven was scoffing at the Church rather than referring to the end of his own earthly journey. This second possibility would seem more likely for two reasons. One is that the word *comoedia* can and perhaps should be interpreted in the sense of Greek drama rather than pejoratively as 'comedy' or farce, which would accord with Beethoven's own view of his existence as a dramatic struggle. Secondly, in

the sketchbooks for the *Missa Solemnis*, the words 'Applaudite, amici' are found at the words of the Credo 'et vitam venturi saeculi'. This connection suggests that Beethoven's remark should be interpreted in terms of pointing to an eternity beyond the vale of sorrows with which he was all too well acquainted.

More important than this biographical detail, however, are the many statements on religious subjects to be found in Beethoven's diary (the *Tagebuch* of 1812-1818, an intriguing document charting his inner journey in the years immediately prior to the composition of the *Missa Solemnis*). Here we have evidence of a remarkable progression from the composer's Job-like cursing of the Creator in 1801-2 at the time when his increasingly awareness of the seriousness of his hearing loss brought him to open talk of suicide (as attested by the famous *Heiligenstadt Testament*). [1] The authoritative Beethoven scholar Maynard Solomon sees the philosophical stance of the young composer as 'characterized by an unquestioning reliance upon reason and a corresponding antipathy to what he regarded as mysticism, fanaticism, and superstition' (*Late Beethoven*, p. 176). What we find in the *Tagebuch* is a deconstruction of this opposition between mysticism and reason (an opposition of which Aquinas and early Christian tradition would also disapprove) as Beethoven is powerfully drawn to a notion of Divine transcendence that he finds in extremely disparate religious traditions. This is borne out by the words which he placed above his desk while composing, an inscription from an Egyptian temple copied from Champollion's *The Paintings of Egypt*:

"I am that which is. I am all that was, that is, and that
shall be. No mortal man has ever lifted the veil of me. He is
solely of himself, and to this Only One all things owe their existence."

This is of course a notion of the Deity with which our 'dumb ox' Aquinas, speaking in the name of Christian orthodoxy, would agree whole-heartedly – God not as a being among other beings but Being itself, the source of all existence. The correspondence between this Egyptian quotation and the Biblical God of the burning bush, who declares his name as 'I am', is striking, as is the parallel with the words of Revelation 1:8 : 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, who was, and is, and is to come'. Beethoven's *Tagebuch* clearly shows him to be searching many religions for analogous statements, notably the traditions of the East (Maynard Solomon attributes this to the influence of Masonic circles, claiming that the *Tagebuch* was exactly the sort of diary required to be kept by candidates for Masonic initiation, although he does not go so far as to suggest that Beethoven was a member of any lodge). Judging from the passages copied out by the composer, what interests him is the concept of God as wholly Other :

'O God ... You are the true, eternally blessed, unchangeable light of all times and spaces' (Diary, n. 61b, from a hymn in praise of Parabrahma)

A similar thought can be found in two verses transcribed by Beethoven from Sir William Jones's vedic *Hymn to Narayena* :

'Before Heaven was, Thou art :
Ere spheres beneath us roll'd our spheres above,
Ere earth in firmamental ether hung,
Thou sat'st alone.'

'Wrapt in eternal solitary shade
Th' impenetrable gloom of light intense,
Impervious, inaccessible, immense' (n. 62)

Again, Thomas Aquinas might well be nodding his head in approval at the paradoxical phrase 'impenetrable gloom of light intense', as this concept equally well be found in Christian neo-Platonic

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[1] 'More than once I have cursed the Creator and my existence. Plutarch led me to resignation.' (to Wegeler, 29.6.1801)

'Your B(eethoven) is very unhappy to live in dissent with Nature and the Creator. More than once I have already cursed the latter for exposing His creatures to the mercy of the slightest accident, so much so that the most beautiful flower is often reduced to perishing or being crushed.' (to Amenda, 1.7.1801)

thought, particularly that of the Areopagitic corpus, which particularly influenced St Thomas, with the notion of God as a 'deep and dazzling darkness'.

We were given practical illustration of this paradoxical concept during the rehearsals and performances of the *Missa Solemnis* at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon. Here it is perhaps worth saying a few words about conductor John Nelson's concept of the work. At the first rehearsal with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, a wonderful ensemble who had already recorded the *Missa* under Nikolaus Harnoncourt live at the Salzburg Festival in 1992, he advised the players to 'remember the difference between Beethoven and Schumann' (the orchestra having just given a top-quality performance of a Schumann symphony in the same venue), by retaining the intimacy and lyricism of the latter, but within the supremely dramatic, conflictual idiom of the former; this advice was mirrored by a view of the work privileging extremes of contrast. On one hand the performances were marked by a hushed intensity in the 'inner sanctum' of the Mass (the setting of *Et incarnatus est*, the opening of the *Sanctus* or the *Präludium* to a *Benedictus* marked by a rapturous sweetness of solo tone from the orchestra's leader Marieke van Blankenstijn), but these were set against brutal *sforzandi* (for example in the *Crucifixus* of the *Credo*), abrupt shifts of tempi and relentless motoric drive in the contrapuntal sections. This was especially evident in the concluding section of the *Gloria*, a *Presto* taken at superhuman speed and sung with incredible strength and focus by the consistently stunning Gulbenkian Choir. At the dress rehearsal, John Nelson stopped for several minutes after the concluding cadence (seen by many commentators as a direct reference by Beethoven to the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*), overwhelmed and apparently unable to continue, as if blinded by a dazzling bolt of lightning hurled from a whirlwind. This would seem to be precisely the encounter with 'th'impenetrable gloom of light intense' noted in Beethoven's *Tagebuch*, and which I had the personal privilege of witnessing on a camera placed next to the bench on which I was seated as the Chamber Orchestra of Europe's 'invisible organist', tucked away behind the chorus. Dissection of such a 'numinous' moment is of course a risky exercise, but our maestro's reaction was clearly induced not merely by the genius of Beethoven's score, but above all by the elemental physical power and intensity of the sound unleashed by the performers (which incidentally does not translate well onto broadcast media, partly due to the loss of the harmonic richness of the aural source when captured by microphones). This is perhaps the dimension of music in which we can speak of a glimpse of the transcendent *in* the realm of sensory perception, through the miracle of the God-given vibrating properties of sounding objects – or to use Thomas Aquinas's framework, the 'sacramental' aspect of reality that points beyond itself. 150 years after the composition of the *Missa Solemnis*, another great composer, Olivier Messiaen, would quote Aquinas through the mouth of the dying St Francis of Assissi in his opera *Saint François d'Assise*, making this precise point :

> 'Lord, illuminate me by thy presence!
> Deliver me, intoxicate me, **dazzle me forever by thy**
> **Excess of Truth!'**

Beethoven and Messiaen are both specialists in aural 'saturation' (to put it bluntly, the music of both of them is frequently skull-crushingly loud): experiencing a work such as Messiaen's *Et exspecto*, or a passage such as the conclusion of the *Gloria* of Beethoven's *Missa* provides an instant of 'dazzlement' in which the listener is taken out of herself in a moment of ecstasy (*ek* [= out of] –*stasis*). Because it is 'excessive', this moment is awe-inspiring, but cannot properly be understood on a rational level; its very resistance to explanation exposes the limits of human perception and understanding, therefore pointing beyond itself.

The diversity of the origins of the material in Beethoven's *Tagebuch* from various world faiths seems to indicate that he was attracted to the idea of a synthesis of the Judeo-Christian heritage with other traditions, not only oriental but also those of Classical antiquity (in 1820 he would state that Socrates and Jesus represented his models, having sketched out a plan in 1818 for a symphony to be based on a fusion of Greek and Christian elements, of which the Ninth Symphony can arguably be seen as the realization). It must be admitted that there is no evidence of a place for orthodox Christology in Beethoven's thinking in the sense of the creedal affirmation of Christ as fully God as well as fully human: indeed, legend has it that the composer only narrowly escaped excommunication for saying that Jesus was 'only a human being and a poor Jew'.[2] Beethoven's deity is strictly monotheistic, not Trinitarian; whereas in the case of Bach scholars are at least partially justified in reading musical

[2] Friedrich Kerst, Henry Edward Krehbiel (eds) *Beethoven, The Man and The Artist : as Revealed in His Own Words* (1921), p. 97.

manifestations of the number 3 as symbols of the Trinity, in the *Missa Solemnis* the appearances of threefold structures merely reflect the inherited text of the Mass (the tripartite *Kyrie* and the threefold repetition of the words *Agnus Dei*). Aquinas might well have generally approved of a passage from Beethoven's diary of 1816 copied 'from Indian literature':

"God is immaterial, and for this reason transcends every
conception. [...] But from
what we observe in His work we may conclude that He is eternal,
omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent."

However, given the centrality of his belief in the Incarnation, St Thomas would doubtless have shaken his head at the accompanying words 'Since He is invisible He can have no form.' Although the *Missa Solemnis* is indubitably characterized both by an unusually powerful sense of the transcendence of God and a profound admiration for Jesus as a model of humanity, neither in Beethoven's written statements nor in the music is there a sense of the organic connection between these two aspects. Precisely because Beethoven's God is so wholly Other, and 'can have no form', transcendence cannot be anything other than disconnected from the immanent reality of our earthly existence (although Beethoven certainly does his best to *depict* the Incarnational theology intrinsic to the statements of the creed as successfully as he can).

This is by no means to say that Beethoven was necessarily averse to citing Christian theological sources. One of his favourite books was "Observations Concerning God's Works in Nature" (Betrachtungen uber die Werke Gottes in der Natur) by Christoph Christian Sturm (1811), which according to Anton Schindler he recommended to priests for reading from the pulpit (*Beethoven as I knew him*, tr. Donald W. MacArdle, 1996, p. 248). Sturm was a Lutheran clergyman who attempted to reconcile Enlightenment, science and religion; it is from his book that the concluding quotation of Beethoven's *Tagebuch* is drawn :

> 'Therefore, calmly will I submit myself to all inconstancy and will place all my trust in Thy unchangeable goodness, O God! My soul shall rejoice in Thee, immutable Being. Be my rock, God, be my light, my trust for ever!' (n. 171)

This citation suggests that it would be wrong to see Beethoven as simply a deist considering abstract philosophical questions. The composer's religion is nothing if not deeply felt, as the inscription on the opening page of the *Missa Solemnis* – 'From the heart –may it return – to the heart' – makes plain. His 'rock' is clearly a personal God, not some oriental statue, as is demonstrated by a prayer expressing remorse at his harsh treatment of Johanna during the struggle over the custody of his nephew Karl:

> 'God, God, my refuge, my rock, O my all, Thou seest my innermost heart and knowest how it pains me to have to make somebody suffer through my good works for my dear Karl!!! O hear, ever ineffable One, hear me, your unhappy, most unhappy of all mortals' (*Tagebuch*, n. 160)

It would therefore seem that Beethoven, for all his fascination with the inscrutable, unknowable Divinity of Eastern religion, ultimately still functions within the personal theistic framework offered by Judeo-Christian tradition.

An 'alienated masterpiece' ?

A few weeks prior to the Lisbon performances of the *Missa Solemnis*, I received the following comment John Nelson by e-mail regarding the *Missa* :

> 'I'm still struggling with the ending, which to my knowledge, is the only final gesture of his that doesn't end convincingly. What does that say?'

If it is easy to wax lyrical over the awed solemnity of the Kyrie, the grandeur of the Gloria and Credo, or the tender expression of the Benedictus, there is no doubt that the final section of the Mass has proved a persistent headache for conductors and an enigma to music critics. If commentators such as William Drabkin (1991) have pointed out the continuity between Beethoven's work and the

Austrian Mass tradition, here is where that continuity clearly breaks down. With the *Agnus Dei* we are in uncharted waters.

The layout of this final movement is a surprising one. Following the impassioned, heartfelt slow opening, imploring the Lamb of God with the words 'Miserere nobis', the ensuing *Dona nobis pacem* (bearing the caption 'Bitte um innern und äussern Frieden' – 'a plea for inner and outer peace') seems initially to bring a relaxation of tension. However, its optimistic D major unexpectedly and shockingly veers, via an extended F pedal, into B flat major as the sounds of war – distant timpani and trumpets – disturb the liturgy. The soloists anxiously (*ängstlich*) re-intone the prayer for mercy; the *Dona nobis pacem* returns, bringing a re-transition to D major, but this is not the end of the matter. Although Beethoven could easily have concluded the work at this point, the music instead disintegrates in a battle-scarred, chaotic Presto (whose menace was accentuated in the Lisbon performances, with John Nelson asking the orchestra to 'go to Afghanistan' at this point during rehearsals). Again, this leads to a strident cry for mercy from both the chorus and soloists; this seems to bring a partial reconciliation in that the words 'dona pacem' do indeed end the piece, but the work's final pages remaining unsettling. There is no *fortissimo* choral peroration, but only an abrupt four-bar orchestral coda; the military trumpets may have disappeared, but the beating of the timpani remains as a fly in the ointment, an ever-present threat, resounding from afar a mere twenty bars before the conclusion of the *Missa*.

Commentary has tended to squirm uncomfortably in the face of this question mark with which Beethoven ends the *Missa Solemnis*. The conviction of the numerous attempts to demonstrate that the work is a satisfying, unified whole diminishes in proportion to the force with which the case for such a reading is argued. Lewis Lockwood's description of a 'massive recapitulation and to a lengthy coda that restores the tonic D' that 'rounds out the movement and the whole vast structure in peace' sounds suspiciously like special pleading, whereas both Barry Cooper's otherwise sensitive account of the *Dona nobis pacem* offers nothing in explanation of the ending to justify the blanket affirmation that each movement of the *Missa* is unified in its form. A similar evasion of the question can be found in Drabkin's insightful analytical study, in which he merely comments that the coda of the *Dona* 'provides a final reminder that great effects in music need not always sound hard-won'. William Kinderman seems far closer to the mark when he writes that 'the end of the Mass is left ambiguous, since a prayer for peace is far from being its fulfilment'.

This interpretation seems to be supported by Beethoven's sketches, which reveal that he experimented with a triumphal symphonic conclusion, only to reject it. It can be argued that this conscious decision on Beethoven's part to opt for an open ending to the work that he regarded as his greatest achievement (in a letter of 1824 to Schott) is the most disconcerting aspect of the *Missa Solemnis*, as it challenges our conventional association of aesthetic success with formal completeness. This point is made most powerfully in Adorno's reading of the work as an 'alienated masterpiece': in Beethoven's late period, there is a sense in which the 'heroic' style – the creation of an artistic totality in which all loose ends are resolved by the power of compositional technique – is abandoned; at the very least, its claim to truth is relativized. This mirrors the composer's perception of the failure of the ideals of the Enlightenment to deliver the utopian society it promised. Thus Beethoven's last quartets are marked not by heroism, but rather by 'open fractures' which are not forcibly resolved but allowed to stand, as if as a reminder of the falsehood of aesthetic harmony proclaimed prematurely in an unreconciled world. In Adorno's interpretation, artistic 'failure' (i.e. the lack of the resolution that would produce a rounded, finished art-work) becomes 'in a highest sense a measure of success', because it derives from Beethoven's honesty and willingness to see the world as it really is, not as wishful thinking might make it out to be.

Intriguingly, Adorno does not comment on the ending of the *Missa*; however, his reading of the Mass as critical of Beethoven's society has been taken up recently by the brilliant Anglo-Chinese musicologist Daniel Chua in his provocative book *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* and an equally thought-provoking major essay entitled 'Beethoven's other humanism' (*Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Fall 2009). Chua's basic contention is that we need to re-evaluate the conventional view of Beethoven's 'heroism' as constituting his humanistic greatness (with the *Eroica* as **the** emblematic Beethovenian work). He for example points out that there is something very ambiguous in the way that the finale of the Ninth Symphony is repeatedly dragged out to celebrate the achievements of the human spirit, whether at the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or the Twin Towers in 2001 (immediately after which it was hastily inserted into the programme of the Last Night

of the BBC Promenade Concerts in London). We clearly feel that the Ninth epitomizes the nobility of Western culture because we and Beethoven not only share its ideals but also its 'Promethean' pathologies of self-sufficiency and the will to power. When we are celebrating Beethoven, we are celebrating ourselves in a way that ought to make us think twice:

> 'If Beethoven's Promethean defiance can tear down the walls of tyranny in Berlin, if its twin tenets can rebuild the twin towers of New York, then it is likely that its ethics will continue to speak for the epochal events of the future. The hero will survive as he is programmed to do so. The question is whether this demythologizing hero is an adequate definition of humanity and its ethical task in the twenty-first century.' ('Beethoven's Other Humanism', p. 575.)

Chua argues that it is the moments where Beethoven refuses triumphalism, where question marks are allowed to remain in his music, which point to an alternative conception of humanity, based not on the logic of power and domination, but on allowing oneself to become vulnerable, in opening oneself to those whom suffering has excluded from the victorious firework display of the *Ode to Joy*. Ours is a age in which it is becomingly increasingly apparent that the Promethean spirit of the Enlightenment, for all its glories, has not brought universal happiness but the 'heroic' triumph of the 'Age of Self', marked by rampant individualism and ruthless exploitation. What we need more than ever, says Chua, drawing both on modern Christian theology and the thought of seminal Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, is an 'ethics without heroes'.

The inconclusive ending of the *Missa Solemnis* perhaps points in just such a direction. It is a moment of 'anti-performance' in that, as John Nelson remarked, the audience scarcely knows whether to start applauding at the end of the work . By refusing to play to the gallery Beethoven provokes a moment of silence in which there is a chance that the open question of the *Dona nobis pacem* will actually be heard and not merely disappear in a storm of congratulation. There is no sense in crying 'victory' when the world is so visibly unredeemed.

This is where, ironically, the non-churchgoing Beethoven is perhaps closer to authentic Biblical tradition than he himself realized. He stands on the side of God's condemnation in Jeremiah 6 :14 of the false priests and prophets :

> 'They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace.' (New International Version)

Moreover, Beethoven's insistence that the reconciliation celebrated in the Eucharist is only partial given the unreconciled world can be interpreted as a stimulating challenge to Christianity on two counts. Firstly, it is a reminder that religion becomes false whenever it deserts the world, retreating into a realm of cosy private spirituality and internal harmony, because 'inner and outer peace' are indissociably linked. Secondly, it points the Church back to the 'surplus of the still unfulfilled promises of the Old Testament' (to quote Jürgen Moltmann, one of the contemporary theologians on whom Chua draws). The lion does not yet lie down with the lamb, and swords have not yet been beaten into ploughshares. It is not by chance that it is Jewish commentators who should have stressed this implication in Beethoven's spirituality as articulated by his musical modernism; Maynard Solomon's words are worth pondering:

> 'Beethoven simultaneously encompasses conceptions of a timeless, immutable deity and of a protean deity whose nature is in a process of emergence – that which is, was, and shall be. He was able to reach out toward the horizon of possibility as well as backward to a petrified and changeless conception of a perfected God, to unite the God of origins with the Messianic concern for what Isaiah called "the things that are not yet done" [*Isa.* 46: 9-10]. This spiritual cleavage perhaps mirrors the unceasing interplay in Beethoven (and in his art) between tradition and modernism, between his restless dissatisfaction with the present order of things and his reverence for the cultural and historical heritage.' (*Beethoven Essays*, p. 226)

Beethoven's refusal to conclude the *Missa Solemnis* triumphantly is precisely this recollection of 'the things that are not yet done' which Christian theology would do well to remember in the light of the temptation of the Church throughout history to regard itself as the absolutization of God's purposes in the world.

And what would the ‘dumb ox’ Thomas Aquinas have made of the Mass by the deaf composer and his search for peace? Well, I like to think that he would have seen the spiritual significance in Beethoven’s ‘restless dissatisfaction’ and quoted the famous words of his great predecessor Saint Augustine:

> ‘Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee’ (*Confessions* I, 1)

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