

Beethoven Mass in C Major, op. 68.

Scoring: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, organ, soprano, alto, tenor, and bass soloists, and chorus.

Duration: approx. 50 minutes

1. Kyrie

Andante con moto assai vivace quasi Allegretto ma non troppo

2. Gloria

Allegro, Andante mosso, Allegro ma non troppo

3. Credo

Allegro con brio, Adagio, Allegro, Vivace

4. Sanctus

Adagio, Allegro

5. Benedictus

Allegretto ma non troppo, Allegro

6. Agnus Dei

Poco Andante, Allegro ma non troppo, Andante con moto, tempo del Kyrie

Beethoven composed his *Mass in C*, opus 86, in 1807, on commission from Prince Nicolaus Esterházy II for the name-day of the prince's wife. It was his first foray into the *oeuvre* of the mass. Josef Haydn, Beethoven's former teacher, had provided six masses for this Esterházy prince, but, on Haydn's retirement from the Esterházys' service, the prince sought out other composers to provide celebratory masses. Beethoven was then in a highly productive and mature compositional phase—his output for 1806 included the three "Razumovsky" string quartets, the piano sonata "Appassionata," the Fourth Symphony, Fourth Piano Concerto, and the Violin Concerto. Nevertheless, he was awed at the prospect of following in his former teacher's footsteps and he approached the composition of his first mass with hesitancy. He wrote to the prince, "I shall deliver the Mass to you with timidity, since you, Serene Highness, are accustomed to having the inimitable masterpieces of the great Haydn performed for you." Having procrastinated, Beethoven completed the mass just in time to begin rehearsals for the slated performance.

Beset by hearing loss, Beethoven is reputed to have been churlish during rehearsals, and the chorus master Johann Hummel, taking advantage of Beethoven's disability, led a rebellion of the singers: some simply stopped attending rehearsals! Esterházy had to intervene and insist that all the singers attend the final rehearsal. Beethoven conducted a private performance of the Mass in the church at Eisenstadt on September 13, 1807, for Prince and Princess Esterházy. It was, by all accounts, a failure. At a reception afterwards and in the presence of the other musicians, the prince is reputed to have said, "But my dear Beethoven, what is this you have done now?" at which Hummel snickered, according to Beethoven's biographer, Anton Schindler. Can we imagine Beethoven's feelings and reaction?

We know that Esterházy subsequently wrote of the mass that the music was “unbearably ridiculous and detestable” and that Beethoven dedicated the work, not to its commissioner, but to Prince Kinsky, one of Beethoven’s patrons. The Mass was heard by a wider public just over a year later when, in December 1808, it was part of a concert of Beethoven works given at the Theater an der Wien, where it was more successfully received. But it took several years of negotiations before Beethoven was able to get the mass published.

Perhaps some of the unfortunate circumstances of the première, having spilled into history, have tainted and dogged the Mass’s acceptance by concert audiences. Certainly, the work has not achieved the same resounding popularity as its big sister, the *Missa Solemnis*, birthed fifteen years later, or the Ninth Symphony choral movement. But this is a loss for concert audiences, because the work is decidedly inspired and magnificently crafted, combining classical formal elements with romantic expressivity. The music’s structure follows the traditional liturgy and is scored for the standard classical orchestra, choir, and four soloists; the solo parts do not stand alone, but are integrated with the choir throughout. The writing combines progressive orchestration, bold harmonic and rhythmic language, and striking textual tone painting. Typically, Beethoven uses the inherited formal classical models and infuses them with a revolutionary, romantic, deeply affective musical content. Perhaps it was just more than this Prince Esterházy could grasp.

The tripartite structure of the Kyrie echoes the ternary text iteration, and the C-E-C major structure lends more urgency to the central cry of “*Christe eleison.*” The apotheosis comes in the last section’s *fortissimo* choral appeal for mercy. Beethoven himself refers to the mood of this movement as “heartfelt resignation, whence comes a deep sincerity of religious feeling.” The absence of the more extrovert flutes, trumpets, and timpani give this music an introspective, dare one say mystical, hue. Usually, a composer will provide for the performers a brief tempo and character indication—a word or two. At the start of this movement, Beethoven writes: *Andante con moto assai vivace quasi Allegretto ma non troppo* (“Walking leisurely, with much motion, lively, as if somewhat fast, but not too much.”) Looking beyond the obfuscation, we can see a nascent romantic commitment to the expressive—tied to tempo, surely, but with a deliberate intent to convey character.

The Gloria opens exuberantly, in C major, with full orchestral force, the brilliant flutes, trumpets, and timpani on board. Each phrase of the text is uniquely captured and colored in the music and tone painting abounds. In “*laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te*” the contrast of loud and high and soft and low suggests the supplicants’ apt bow while reciting the liturgy. “*Gratias agimus*” has a contrasting *dolce, legato* feel. “*Deus omnipotens*” is powerful, its fortitude punctuated by timpani and trumpet fanfare. The sobbing “*miserere nobis*” is set in F minor, in triple meter, with catches of breath captured in the tension between the lower strings on the beat and the upper three strings on the backbeats. “*Quoniam tu solus*” is in sturdy unison several buoyant *fugatos* in “*cum sancto spiritu.*” Beethoven is a master of the extended cadence and he uses it for protracted “*amen*”s both here and in the Credo.

The Credo opens with four quick succession, intensifying iterations of “*credo*.” In this movement, tone painting abounds: “*descendit*,” “*ascendit*,” “*visibilium*” (*forte*) and “*invisibilium*” (*piano*), “*omnia*” (reiterated over and over). The mellifluous E flat major Adagio is interrupted by “*crucifixus*” shouts in B flat minor. The chromatic, descending, submissive “*sub Pontio Pilato*” is followed by a *piano* “*et sepultus est*” and agonizing cries of “*passus*.” *Allegro*, G major, ascending “*et resurrexit*” calls are punctuated by syncopated “*judicare*”s. “*Unam sanctam*” in unison sets up another vivacious fugal “*et vitam*” and protracted “*amen*”s.

The Sanctus opening three-note motif in the woodwinds, supported by lower strings, is perhaps the most tender moment of the entire mass: in the key of A, it descends, falters, stops, and breathes, before it is repeated a step higher, and then elaborated and finally taken up by the choir. Liquid violin lines are punctuated by a *piano* drum roll, and the “*pleni sunt coeli*” breaks forth, *forte*, leaping upward, and triumphant. A first “*Osanna*” *fugato* opens *piano* and grows to a triumphal *forte* “*in excelsis*.”

In the F major Benedictus, smiling, almost content, Beethoven masterfully elaborates on the play between soloists and chorus, creating agreement and reinforcement between the two vocal ensembles, with liquid woodwind lines embroidered over the top of the homophonic texture. The “*Osanna*” is reprised, this time *forte*, as if in affirmation.

The Agnus Dei opens in C minor and is the only movement set in compound meter, the inner triple pulsing heard at the opening like a quiet heartbeat, perhaps symbolic of the holy trinity. Over this, the choir quickly erupts in an anguished *cri de coeur* of “*Agnus Dei*.” The penitential plea for mercy, “*miserere*,” is heard. The most dramatic and terrifying moment occurs when the music shifts abruptly from C major to C minor: an upward arpeggiated *tremolando* in the strings, a timpani roll underneath, and the chorus call out again, “*Agnus Dei*.” This is quickly followed by shuffling, restless rhythms as “*miserere*” is tossed back and forth from men to women. Heraldic upward leaps of “*pacem*” dissolve into a breathtaking reprise of the opening Kyrie theme, in which the text “*dona nobis pacem*” receives its last sublime. The work ends in a spirit of hushed, contemplative repose: Awe and wonder, beauty and acceptance linger like a mantle, magnificently spread.