

# Beethoven's 'New Song,' The Mass in C Major, Op. 86

by Dennis Speed

*“Man can think a poem and write it. . . He can think a symphony and compose it. . . He can think of a great civilization and produce it. He can be a Handel moving into the highest heavens and transcribing the glad thunders and gentle sighings of the great Messiah. By his ability to reason, his power and memory, and his gift of imagination, man transcends time and space. As marvelous as are the stars, as great as is Handel’s Messiah. . . is the mind of the man that studies them.”*

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

*“Prince, what you are, you are by accident of birth; what I am, I am through my own efforts. There have been thousands of princes, and will be thousands more; there is only one Beethoven!”*

—According to tradition, from a letter which Beethoven wrote to Prince Lichnowsky, when the latter attempted to persuade him to play for some French officers on his estate in Silesia.

The month of December commemorates, among other saints, Saint Ambrose (340-397), Bishop of Milan who, together with the mother of St. Augustine, was central to converting Augustine to Christianity. Augustine (354-430) reported that it was not merely the eloquence of Ambrose’s preaching, but his hymns that were essential in reaching Augustine’s heart. Ambrose, the author of the still-performed “Veni Redemptor Gentium” and many other hymns, and later Augustine, re-

garded music as an essential “divining rod” for the soul, a compass pointing the believer in the direction of the highest good. The theological basis for their outlook was stated two centuries earlier by St. Clement of Alexandria (150-211/215): “The Lord fashioned man a beautiful, breathing instrument, after His own image; and assuredly He Himself is an all-harmonious instrument of God, melodious and holy, the wisdom that is above this world, the heavenly Word . . . Because the Word was from the first. He was and is the divine beginning of all things; but because He lately took a name,—the name consecrated of old and worthy of power, the Christ,—I have called Him a New Song.”

Augustine’s book-length Platonic dialogue, *De Musica*, upshifted the world’s and Western Civilization’s musical practice. In its discussion and distinction of the difference between the “numbers of the flesh” and the “numbers of the mind,” the idea of “divine proportion” was made increasingly intelligible. It would not be until the work of Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), and J.S. Bach (1685-1750) that the system of well-tempered polyphony would provide a language and musical practice capable of illustrating the “New Song” of which the second century’s Clement had spoken. Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven would all choose the liturgy and sequencing of the Mass, in its various settings (Requiem, Solemn High Mass, and Masses for certain feast days) as a special point of intervention into the culture of their times. Their contributions required them to act often as the internal voice of the liturgy, such that the meaning behind and above the oft-repeated words of the Mass

was experienced afresh by the congregants and the clergy as well, demonstrating the unbounded possibility for musical expression offered by the sacred text.

### **‘Man, Help Yourself! For Ye Are Able!’**

The *Mass in C Major* of Ludwig van Beethoven, written in 1807, is rarely performed in its entirety, and deserves to be heard far more frequently. For those unfamiliar with Beethoven’s profoundly religious view of the world, the Mass will help to dispel the idea of Beethoven as an “Enlightenment intellectual” or “indifferent practitioner of the Catholic faith.” His 1803 *Christ On The Mount of Olives*, a composition that concentrates on the story of the agony in the garden at Gethsemane, was his first major religious composition for chorus and orchestra, written just after his successful battle against the temptation to commit suicide in response to his loss of hearing, documented in his 1802 “Heiligenstadt Testament.”

In the small town of Heiligenstadt, just outside of Vienna, in the Summer of 1802 Beethoven had written the most personal of letters to explain his attempts to cope with his increasing deafness, noticed by him in the 1790s, when he was in his mid-to-late 20s. “Oh! ye who think or declare me to be hostile, morose, and misanthropical, how unjust you are, and how little you know the secret cause of what appears thus to you! My heart and mind were ever from childhood prone to the most tender feelings of affection, and I was always disposed to accomplish something great. But you must remember that six years ago I was attacked by an incurable malady, aggravated by unskillful physicians, deluded from year to year, too, by the hope of relief, and at length forced to the conviction of a lasting affliction (the cure of which may go on for years, and perhaps after all prove impracticable). . . .”

Though he indeed briefly contemplated suicide, Beethoven overcame the seduction of his despair. He says, in his Testament: “But what humiliation when any one beside me heard a flute in the far distance, while I heard nothing, or when others heard a shepherd singing, and I still heard nothing! Such things brought me to the verge of desperation, and well-nigh caused me to put an end to my life. Art! art alone deterred me. Ah! how could I possibly quit the world before bringing forth all that I felt it was my vocation to produce? . . . Perhaps I shall get better; perhaps not, I am ready. . . . Forced to become a philosopher already in my twenty-eighth year, oh it is not easy, and for the artist much more difficult than for anyone else. . . . Divine One, Thou seest my inmost soul,

and thou knowest that therein dwells the love of mankind and the desire to do good.”

His “good works,” including his late string quartets, his piano sonatas, his opera *Fidelio*, his Ninth Symphony and *Missa Solemnis*, many of them written when he was completely deaf, comprise a “New Testament” of human thought, composed not out of bitterness toward, but love for the mankind of the future, and the universe as a whole. Doing good, and the desire to do good, is the only efficient recourse available to an individual or a society as a means to correct the willful, deliberate commission of evil. Choosing to do good rather than evil is the only true act of atonement. The act of self-redemption of mankind through giving one’s life for all humanity, is an act of universal love (Agape), the subject of the “Christ Mass,” or Christmas. Beethoven’s *Mass in C Major* allows those not of the Christian faith, or of any faith, as well as believers, to discover the true marvel of the universal message behind and above the words of the text. A dialogue offered by the composer with the heart of the listener, allows the mind of the listener to be freshly engaged, beyond the obstacles of unfamiliarity or pre-judgement. This, the Mass, properly performed and properly tuned, can be as accessible to people today, no matter their background, as it was when it was written 210 years ago.

Such musical/spiritual experiences are increasingly important to facilitate the newly emerging possibility of a dialogue among all the world’s nations. For example, China, in its proposal for world dialogue through creating a “New Silk Road,” now recalls to us the days of the Italian Renaissance. Then, scholars of the Church such as Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, and his scientific collaborators including the architect Filippo Brunelleschi and the astronomer Paolo Toscanelli, pursued a new pathway of understanding and reconciliation of peoples, both through the 1439 Council of Florence, and through individual contact with scholars and thinkers from the whole known (and even unknown) world. This new dialogue is notable for the opportunity it provides for the correction of centuries-old evils, committed by nations, elites, and individuals against the human race.

This principle of dialogue should be very familiar to Catholics from the work, in the late 70s, 80s, 90s and until 2005, of Saint John Paul II. Pope Saint John Paul II’s famous pilgrimages of atonement, in which he publicly apologized for the historical transgressions committed by members of the Church against other nations and faiths, were also accompanied by many encyclicals and pastoral messages, including *Laborem Exercens*



Ilko Dimov

Full Schiller Institute Chorus in Co-Cathedral of St. Joseph in Brooklyn, N.Y.

and *Centissimus Annus*, in which he outlined a philosophical orientation toward a human, non-predatory form of “human good works,” including in physical economy. In Part II, section 6 of *Laborem Exercens*, we are instructed: “Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the ‘image of God’ he is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization. As a person, man is therefore the subject of work. As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity.”

Beethoven recognized that it was through the subduing of his own nature—of his understandable despair at losing the most precious gift that a musician has, which is his hearing—that he became capable of hearing from within, more perfectly than he had physically heard before. The works which were to come, including his *Missa Solemnis*, his Ninth Symphony and his late string quartets, were composed in total deafness, and yet are still unsurpassed in their profundity and their humanity. The inscription written by him at the top of the third movement of his Quartet in A minor Op. 132: “*Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit*

*in der lydischen Tonart*” (“Holy song of thanks to God from a convalescent in the Lydian mode”), removes all doubt of his clarity of view as to the source and purpose of his life in music.

The Foundation for the Revival of Classical Culture and the Schiller Institute NYC Chorus are particularly committed to acquainting, over the course of the next year, the New York area audience with this work of Beethoven, performing it at the “Verdi tuning” of C=256, and doing so in the context of other sacred texts, including, in this instance, the “Christmas” portion of Handel’s *Messiah*, and African-American Spirituals. Conductor John Sigerson is offering a series of lectures on the theme, “Beethoven As A Physical Scientist.” Sigerson is the co-author of a [Manual on](#)

[Registration and Tuning](#), which has sought to restore the primacy of the human voice, and voice-placement, as the origin of all truly Classical compositions, whatever their form. The re-situating of the scientific, as well as artistic breakthroughs surrounding Beethoven’s unique use of Bach’s well-tempered system, by demonstrating the principles of proper tuning through choral music designed to celebrate the infinite creative potential of the human mind, is indeed a “New Song” for these culturally troubled times.

Choral director and Schiller Institute New York Chorus Founder Diane Sare’s selection of African-American Spirituals, and “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” which open tonight’s program, continues a practice that the Schiller Institute began some years ago, thanks to the influence of musicians Sylvia Olden Lee and William Warfield. Both were active as board members of the Institute until their deaths in 2004 and 2002, respectively. Whenever the Schiller chorus performs, the repertoire of our concerts is always selected to invoke the high standards demanded by these great musicians, who were masters of the entirety of the Classical repertoire. But they also demanded truth, and the truth is that the African-American Spiritual belongs here, together with Bach and Beethoven, because of what those songs say to mankind, in the same thoughts, if not the same words, as the liturgy of the Mass.