

Beethoven - Merryman - St. Pierre

Performed October 23, 1999

This evening's concert opens with two works which evoke different images of the sea and man's relationship to it: Beethoven's *Meerestille und Glückliche Fahrt* and Marjorie Merryman's *Jonah*.

Beethoven: *Meerestille und Glückliche Fahrt*

Meerestille and *Glückliche Fahrt* are two separate poems by Goethe but have always been published back to back and appear to provide a continuous narrative. Their juxtaposition of contrasting elements has inspired their share of musical versions, including Beethoven's 1815 choral setting and Mendelssohn's famous concert overture. The title is often translated as "Calm Seas and Prosperous Voyage", but that fails to convey the sense of the text. *Meerestille* is better translated as "Becalmed" and the *glückliche Fahrt* is a happy or successful voyage only in the sense that the travelers finally reach port safely. In the days before steam power, being becalmed at sea was perhaps the worst fate which could befall a ship, and Beethoven does a masterful job not only of conveying the ominous, deadly calm of the ocean but also of suggesting an edge of barely suppressed hysteria. The music brightens as the wind freshens and the prospects of a safe return home suddenly become real, but there is still something a bit frantic about the repeated phrase "schon seh' ich das Land!" (I can already see land!)

At the time he was composing *Meerestille*, Beethoven was also heavily involved in concerts given in conjunction with the Congress of Vienna, which marked the end of the Napoleonic Wars. One of the main attractions was an otherwise eminently forgettable novelty piece of his which enjoyed a brief popularity, *Wellington's Victory*. This was a musical picture of the Battle of Vittoria, complete with rifle fire, and was originally composed for the Panharmonicon, a mechanical band created by Beethoven's friend Johann Mälzel, an inventor and entrepreneur who would later design Beethoven's ear trumpets. Beethoven could not resist inserting a small quotation from *Wellington's Victory* into *Meerestille* ("es säuseln die Winde.") And as in a number of other late choral works (including the *Choral Fantasy*, which Mendelssohn Club will perform later this season), Beethoven was also clearly trying out ideas for the Ninth Symphony.

Merryman: *Jonah*

Jonah was composed by Marjorie Merryman on a commission from the Newburyport Choral Society, which premiered the work in 1995 under the direction of conductor Gerald Weale. Dr. Merryman provided the following program notes:

"In composing *Jonah*, I was drawn to the dramatic imagery of the story, and to the idea of writing music that might evoke the sea. The six movements surround the actual story of Jonah (told in the second, third and fifth movements) with other biblical text that

comment on the topics important in the narrative: the force and mystery of God; the physical, emotional, and spiritual power of nature (represented by the sea and by creation as a whole); the issues of faith and faithfulness.

"Jonah begins with a chorus whose text is drawn from Psalm 107. This first movement sets the scene: the majesty and terror of the sea, the power and mercy of God.

"The second movement, for tenor and baritone solos and chorus, tells the story of Jonah. God commands that Jonah preach a message of imminent destruction to the unholy city of Nineveh, and Jonah responds by fleeing, embarking on a voyage to Tarshish (more or less the end of the known world of ancient times.) God unleashes a huge storm that threatens to drown Jonah and his fellow voyagers, until Jonah begs to be thrown overboard. As the sea calms, a 'great fish' surfaces and swallows Jonah. In the music, the tenor solo narrates this story, while the chorus sings the distressed words of the sailors. The baritone solo is the voice of Jonah himself. After Jonah has been thrown into the sea, the chorus reacts in polyphonic awe to the demonstration of God's power over the storm, the water and the whale.

"The third movement, for baritone solo, is Jonah's soul-wrenching cry of faith in the face of enormous agony. The solo timpani and string harmonics provide a background of sea and whale sounds that are woven into the musical texture.

"The fourth movement opens Part II with a chorus praising the spirit of God in creation, and acknowledging God's absolute power over life and death. The musical accompaniment is rather agitated throughout this movement, still reflecting Jonah's crisis of faith versus human will.

"Tenor and baritone solos begin movement 5, the tenor once again playing the role of narrator, the baritone again as Jonah. Rewarded for his faith and his promise of obedience, Jonah is released from the whale by God's command.

"In the final movement, the chorus sings lines from the book of Genesis relating to the beginning of creation, and specifically to the fifth day, when God commanded the seas to bring forth 'the great whales and every living creature that moveth.' The actual book of Jonah continues the story through another test of faith and reconciliation, but the oratorio ends here. In the Bible, the story ends rather uneasily with Jonah's acceptance of God's will. In the same way, the music ends with an uneasy celebration of God's power. While the text revels in the wonder of creation, the music, remembering the storms and tests of faith, conveys a slightly darker or more ambiguous sense of acceptance of God's power over all His works."

Beethoven: *Mass in C Major*

When Beethoven was commissioned to compose a mass in 1807 for the name day of the wife of Prince Nicholas II Esterhazy, he accepted with a certain amount of misgiving. Beethoven was one of Vienna's most prominent composers and had already completed

five symphonies (and was working on the sixth), all five piano concertos and his opera *Fidelio*. He had not, however, written much sacred music, the only major work being his oratorio *Christus am Ölberge* (Christ on the Mount of Olives.) Perhaps more to the point, Beethoven wrote to Prince Nicholas,

"I shall deliver the Mass to you with timidity, since you are accustomed to having the inimitable masterpieces of the great Haydn performed for you."

Not only had Joseph Haydn spent most of his professional life in the service of the Princes of Esterhazy, but he was also one of the great masters of the mass as a musical form. Haydn himself had written his last six (and possibly his greatest) masses for the name day of the Princess Esterhazy.

Beethoven did not welcome the inevitable comparisons with Haydn not only because of the success and popularity of Haydn's masses but also because he himself had been a student of Haydn's for a short time. The young Beethoven had been court organist for the Elector of Cologne as well as a virtuoso pianist of some note. The Elector had arranged for Beethoven to study with Haydn in Vienna. (The Elector would later recount that he had actually intended for Beethoven to study with Mozart, but his untimely death intervened. If true, the Elector showed unexpectedly acute musical sense.) Haydn's career had been revitalized following his London triumphs and he was busily engaged in new compositions for his planned return. He gave Beethoven's lessons only cursory attention. Beethoven was an indifferent pupil as well, misrepresenting old compositions as new ones written under Haydn's tutelage and even paying another musician to correct his counterpoint exercises for Haydn. Throughout his life Beethoven maintained with no little heat that he had learned nothing from Haydn. As far as his formal lessons went, that was probably an accurate statement, but Beethoven clearly learned a great deal from Haydn's music.

While Beethoven followed Haydn's general plan for a mass, down to the obligatory fugues for the "cum Sancto Spiritu" in the *Gloria*, "et vitam venturi sæculi" from the *Credo* and "osanna in excelsis" from the *Sanctus*, he departed substantially from the spirit of Haydn's masses. By this time the mass had become increasingly disconnected from the underlying liturgy, something to which Haydn himself had been a major contributor. The mass had expanded greatly and taken on more of an operatic character, with the major sections like the *Gloria* and *Credo* broken up into various arias, duet, trios, quartets and choruses. With the *Mass in C*, Beethoven restored a measure of unity to the mass form. He eliminated the artificial separation between the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*. There are no solo arias, and the solo quartet and choral parts provide variations of color and emphasis rather than standing apart as separate sections. In a wonderful touch, Beethoven reprises the opening *Kyrie* music at the end of the *Agnus Dei*, reinforcing the essential unity of the mass. Throughout it all, Beethoven places a highly individual interpretation on the mass, from the blossoming forth of the *Credo* from an almost hesitant beginning, to the quiet, seemingly awestruck *Sanctus*, to the expansive, lyrical "dona nobis pacem" of the *Agnus Dei*.

The mass was not an immediate success. At the public reception following its performance, Prince Esterhazy offended Beethoven with the rather inscrutable remark,

"My dear Beethoven, what is it you have done here?" Beethoven refused to dedicate the mass to the prince and never provided him with the manuscript. This probably suited Prince Nicholas just as well, for he later complained that he found the mass "unbearably ridiculous and detestable." Beethoven immediately began negotiating with his publishers for the printing of the mass, offering it as a part of various package deals with his more popular fifth and sixth symphonies, but it was not published until several years later. While the *Mass in C* is often overshadowed by the immense *Missa Solemnis*, written some fifteen years later, it has a directness and an emotional content that the latter work sometimes lacks.

St. Pierre: *Ite Missa Est*

It had been the original custom to also set the dismissal, or *Ite missa est*, which concludes the mass, but by Beethoven's time it was no longer fashionable to do so. In commissioning Don St. Pierre to compose an *Ite missa est*, Mendelssohn Club is also following something which has become a tradition in itself, namely commissioning works specifically to be paired in performance with masterworks. In previous seasons Mendelssohn Club commissioned Robert Moran's *Agnus Dei* and *Ite missa est* to be performed with Mozart's unfinished *Mass in C minor*, and Roberto Sierra's *Lux Æterna*, which was performed with the Brahms *Requiem*.

For this performance St. Pierre has written an energetic, highly rhythmic *Ite missa est* based on two plainsong chants. The first is heard explicitly at the opening of the piece, introduced by hand bells, and then is developed through a series of seven variations using different combinations of voices. In the next section the second chant melody is introduced, again developed through four variations, and then is superimposed on the first chant melody. The third section returns to the original chant melody and set of variations, but subtly altered, before ending with a brief coda. In the composer's words, the piece is a musical triptych in which

"each section is a vibrant and self-contained panel. The first should sound like the church doors opening on a sunny, birdsong-filled day."

Program notes copyright © 1999 Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia. All rights reserved

[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)