

# Mozart's Wedding Gift

**Performed October 30, 2004**

**W. A. Mozart *Great Mass in C minor, K. 427***

**Donald St. Pierre *Agnus Dei and Ite Missa Est***

**Meredith Monk *Earth Seen from Above***

Although Mozart spent his first twenty-five years at the court of the Prince Archbishop of Salzburg, the last nine of which as a salaried musician, his output of sacred music is surprisingly modest. His two greatest sacred works, the Requiem and the C minor Mass, both were unfinished. While the circumstances surrounding the Requiem are well known, the C minor Mass remains more mysterious. It is mentioned only once in a letter of Mozart to his father, composed to fulfill a prenuptial vow to his wife Constanze, received but a single performance (of which no description survives) and then was set aside, not to surface again until a 1901 performance from a reconstructed score.

Because the C minor Mass was left unfinished, lacking the end of the Credo, the Agnus Dei and the Ite missa est which would complete the Ordinary of the Mass, Mendelssohn Club has taken the opportunity to commission an Agnus Dei from composer-in-residence Donald St. Pierre, which is paired with his 1999 Ite missa est. The concert opens with Meredith Monk's haunting and ethereal *Earth Seen From Above*.

Meredith Monk is a composer, vocalist, choreographer, and filmmaker who has developed a uniquely personal art form blending sounds, music, and motion. Her extended vocal technique uses syllables chosen for their sound and color rather than text. It is harmonically simple but rhythmically complex, and develops through repetition with subtle variations. *Earth Seen From Above* is taken from her 1991 opera *Atlas*, a voyage of discovery based loosely on the life of explorer Alexandra Davidson-Neel. It contrasts the sounds of open and closed syllables using simple chords, varying the combinations of voices and rhythms. Individual pitches appear and disappear in a fabric of tonality, producing an effect not unlike Bach's *Prelude in C*. The music segues into the opening chords of the *Mass in C minor* without pause. In the words of Music Director Alan Harler, it is "meant to guide the listener emotionally into the program, with a timelessness and sense of being on an endless artistic continuum that introduces the dark majesty of the opening movement of the Mozart."

Mozart composed his great C minor Mass in 1782, a year which marked a turning point in his life. He had left the service of the Archbishop of Salzburg for good and embarked on a career as an independent musician in Vienna, much against his father's wishes. He also married Constanze Weber without his father's consent and immediately began a family. These events caused a break with his father that was never fully healed.

Mozart's life in Salzburg had become increasingly uncongenial for him since the accession of Hieronymous Colloredo as Archbishop in 1772. His predecessor was a disorganized and ineffectual ruler, but had given a great deal of latitude to the Mozart family. Although Leopold Mozart held the post of Assistant Kapellmeister, he was allowed extended leaves, on salary, to tour Europe with young Wolfgang and his equally talented sister, Maria Anna. They spent three and a half years in England alone, and were absent from Salzburg nearly seven years in total between 1762 and 1772.

Colloredo was cut from altogether different cloth than his predecessor. He was intellectual, energetic, and a vigorous reformer in the mold of the Emperor Joseph II, whom he emulated. He instituted reforms in agriculture, education, hygiene and medicine, reduced the power of the monastic orders with respect to his central authority, and arbitrarily abolished customs he felt were superstitious, including religious processions, passion plays, and the firing of cannons during thunderstorms. He was the embodiment of the Enlightened despot, and like other reformers who had absolute faith in their own ideas, he required only compliance, not consensus.

Colloredo also campaigned against what he considered extravagance, both in court life and in the Church, maintaining that that money was much better spent improving the lot of the poor. He closed the University Theatre, Salzburg's main venue for drama and opera. He decreed that sacred cantatas last no more than three minutes and music for the ordinary of the Mass be no longer than forty-three minutes. While there was sound liturgical reason for these reforms, with the mass having become completely disconnected from the underlying liturgy, Mozart chafed under these restrictions. He performed his duties as concertmaster perfunctorily and composed little for the court, preferring to perform within the small circle of Salzburg nobility. Colloredo took frequent opportunity to chide Mozart for his inattention to duties, none too gently. In 1777, the twenty-one year old Mozart resigned his post to seek employment elsewhere. Leopold was unable to accompany him, so Mozart's mother went as chaperone. The tour was a disaster on many levels. Mozart offered his services at a number of courts, but was not engaged. He made no important contacts and composed very little of significance. He amassed a sizable debt. His mother took ill and died suddenly while they were in Paris. Mozart was obliged to return to Salzburg and ask to be reinstated.

In 1780, Mozart had received a commission to write an opera for the Hoftheater in Munich. With Colloredo's permission, he traveled to Munich to mount a production of *Idomeneo*, which was a great success. Mozart became convinced that his true calling was opera, for which there was no opportunity in Salzburg, and began to look for any excuse to break with the Archbishop. He overstayed his leave in Munich until he was peremptorily ordered to join Colloredo in Vienna, where he was to perform in concerts showcasing the Archbishop's musical establishment. Mozart complied reluctantly, but took every opportunity to cultivate the Viennese nobility on his own. He tried to arrange for his own concerts but was prevented by the Archbishop, much to his annoyance. He contrived to arrive alone at the concerts arranged by Colloredo, entering through the front door and walking up and greeting the nobility rather than entering through the back door with the rest of the musicians, much to the Archbishop's annoyance.

Leopold watched these events from Salzburg with growing concern, keeping in touch through a steady stream of letters. He was now 61 and desired stability and security for the family more than anything else, and he saw no prospects for that other than Mozart remaining in Salzburg. He instructed the Archbishop's chamberlain, Count Arco, to do everything he could to keep Mozart in the Archbishop's employ. Arco discharged these duties with more enthusiasm than required. He repeatedly refused to accept Mozart's letters of resignation and, in a celebrated incident, literally booted the importunate composer out of the Archbishop's drawing room. This was all the pretext that Mozart needed. Claiming an injured pride as well as a sore rump, he left the Archbishop's palace and service for good.

If Leopold was alarmed at this turn of events, he was even more alarmed when Mozart let slip that he was now lodging with the Weber family. Mozart had met the Webers in 1778 in Munich, during his ill-fated tour. Daughter Aloysia was a talented soprano with a promising career, and the two concertized together frequently. Mozart fell in love with Aloysia and concocted a scheme where they would go to Italy together, performing music that he wrote for her, and would find fame, fortune and happiness. Leopold, suspicious about the motives of the Weber family, scotched those plans and Mozart left for Paris soon thereafter. But on his return journey to Salzburg, he again stopped in Munich and proposed marriage to Aloysia. She treated him coolly, rejecting his proposal. She now had a professional engagement in Munich and soon married actor Joseph Lange.

In 1781, the Webers had followed Aloysia to Vienna, where she was engaged to sing at the imperial theater. Mozart renewed his acquaintance with the family and now fixed his attentions on the second daughter, Constanze. In an attempt to placate Leopold, who was quite vocal in his distrust of the Webers, Mozart's letters to his father paint Constanze as sweet, industrious, quiet, thrifty, and modest, in short the perfect wife and helpmate, and to reinforce the contrast, paint Aloysia in the blackest of terms. In order to impress his father with the sober, industrious life he himself was leading in Vienna, he mentioned a half-finished Mass he had written for Constanze, in fulfillment of a vow he had made if she recovered from an undisclosed illness and allowed him to marry her. Leopold remained skeptical and refused to give his consent to the marriage, which took place in August of 1782. Mozart waited nearly a year to introduce Constanze to his family in Salzburg, and he took the score of the unfinished Mass with him. It was performed as part of a liturgical service in St. Peter's Church outside Salzburg on October 26, 1783, with Constanze taking one of the soprano solo parts. (This was also a bit of a backhanded slap at the Archbishop. The Mass clearly violated Colloredo's edict on length, but St. Peter's was not under the Archbishop's jurisdiction despite its location.) There is no account of the performance or even of how Mozart supplied the missing sections (the last half of the Credo and the Agnus Dei.) When he returned to Vienna, he set the Mass aside for good, although he ultimately recycled the music from the first two sections into a secular cantata, the *Davidde penitente*.

The Mass in C minor is set somewhat unusually, calling for two sopranos, tenor, bass, chorus and orchestra. As befits a work written to showcase Constanze's voice, there are no less than three soprano solos, a duet for both sopranos, a trio for the two sopranos and

tenor, and a solo quartet. It is not clear how Mozart intended the soprano parts to be divided. In the ensemble movements, one part is usually lower than the other, but their ranges overlap to a considerable extent and they even trade pitches in the Domine. Taken together, the soprano solo movements require a considerable range, from A below middle C to high C. Interestingly, that is the same range given to Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*, and the most celebrated Susanna of Mozart's time was his sister-in-law, Aloysia. It is tempting to speculate on whose voice Mozart heard when he was composing the C minor Mass. (For the record, Mozart appears to have been completely devoted to Constanze, although Aloysia later maintained that Mozart had always remained in love with her. The family was close and the Mozarts saw Aloysia frequently, especially after her marriage to Lange failed. And she frequently appeared in leading roles in his operas.)

In Vienna, Mozart had become acquainted with Baron van Swieten, an amateur musician who had a vast collection of the music of Handel and Bach, including the complete score of the B minor Mass. Mozart took part in musicales at the Baron's house featuring the music of those Baroque masters and had ample opportunity to study their scores. His C minor Mass clearly shows the influence of both, especially Bach. If completed, it would have rivaled the B minor Mass in scale. Such touches as the double chorus setting of the Sanctus, the two magnificent fugues of the Cum Sancto Spiritu and Osanna, the dramatic, almost anguished setting of the Gratias agimus tibi, and the highly chromatic flavor of many of the movements recall Bach's masterpiece. The long, rhythmic, dotted subjects and running sixteenth note countermelodies have a very Handelian sound, and the brilliant fanfare opening of the Gloria could have come straight from *Messiah*. While he may have been influenced by Bach and Handel, the results are pure Mozart. He tosses off complex fugues and counterpoint with almost nonchalant ease. There is an operatic quality to the music, with its dramatic settings and soaring, aria-like soprano solos. Above all, the Mass is suffused with Mozart's exquisite melodies and intricate harmonic structures. Even unfinished, the Mass in C minor stands as a masterpiece in the world of sacred composition.

Mendelssohn Club composer-in-residence Donald St. Pierre has been on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music since 1990. He has served as principal keyboard player for the Milwaukee Symphony and was music director of the Skylight Music Theater in Milwaukee from 1978-1990, where he directed more than 50 productions and composed three chamber operas. He is one of the contributing composers to the AIDS Quilt Songbook, published by Boosey & Hawkes and recorded on the Harmonia Mundi label. From 1987-1994 he was head coach of the voice department at the Chautauqua Institution. Since 1995 he has held the same position at the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival in Brunswick, Maine. As a recital accompanist, Mr. St. Pierre has appeared at such venues as New York's Lincoln Center, London's Wigmore Hall and the Almeida Theatre, Paris' Théâtre du Chatelet as well as at the Tanglewood, Santa Fe Chamber Music, Bowdoin, Bard and Grand Teton Music Festivals. The Agnus Dei which receives its world premiere at this concert is Mr. St. Pierre's sixth commission for Mendelssohn Club.

The Agnus Dei is based on a traditional plainsong chant. The music is in constant motion, with a restlessness which suggests man's eternal longing for peace. The *Ite missa est* was composed in 1999 and originally paired with Beethoven's *Mass in C*. Like the *Agnus Dei*, it is based on plainsong chants, the first of which is heard in the handbells which open the piece. The two chant melodies are developed through a series of variations. The exuberant, highly rhythmic music is accompanied by a variety of percussion instruments and is propelled forward by constantly changing meters. It is wonderfully joyous music which, in the words of the composer, "should sound like church doors opening on a sunny, birdsong-filled day."

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