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# Solti, symphony and chorus excel in an eloquent and moving 'Missa'

By John von Rhein

Music critic

BEETHOVEN'S "Missa Solemnis" has long been regarded as one of the holiest of music's holy grails, an awesome shrine into which only the purest and most fearless believers may enter.

To an extent this attitude—combined with the almost superhuman technical difficulties of parts of the Mass—has kept listeners at a gravely reverent distance from the work. True, the "Missa Solemnis" can and should be given only under optimum conditions, with performers of high caliber rehearsed under festival-like conditions. But the "Missa" legend remains as the musical embodiment of unknowable spiritual mysteries, earnest, ineffable, monumental and [dare one say it?] just a little bit dull.

One of the most impressive aspects of the performance of "Missa Solemnis" that Georg Solti delivered with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus Thursday night was his masterly way of bringing the choral masterpiece down from Parnassus and drawing the audience directly into its musical abundance. Everything about the reading carried a sense of occasion. Solti treated the Mass not so much as sacred music drama, as he did in his most recent CSO version six years ago, but as a living testament of faith and praise. This was the finest, most inward realization of the "Missa Solemnis" that the maestro has given us—an eloquent and ultimately very moving achievement.

Beethoven conceived his grand Mass for church performance at the installation of an Austrian archbishop. Yet, it almost never is heard in its intended liturgical setting, which is rather a shame, given the grandeur of the composer's choral writing, tailored as it was for the rich, rolling acoustics of a great cathedral.

Orchestra Hall cannot boast that kind of reverence, which meant that the majestic "swim" of Beethoven's most fervent, fully scored passages—the climax of the *Credo*, for example—had to be taken on faith. One can hope that the "Missa" will find a more suitable sonic ambience next Monday at Washington's Kennedy Center, where Solti and company will perform it and where

WFMT will present a live broadcast, to launch the CSO's two-week tour of the southeastern United States.

BEETHOVEN WROTE that his chief intention with his Mass was to "arouse and establish permanent religious feeling in both the singers and the audience."

With Solti, the "Missa" is a musical and spiritual totality. Rhetorical points were not pulled out of context. Lyrical lines soared with unforced purity of phrasing. Contrasts between public ceremony and private supplication were vividly drawn, but never exaggerated. When the exultant majesty of the *Gloria* burst over the audience's unprepared senses, sweeping back and forth between the soloists and chorus, the effect was overwhelming.

The virtues of this inspiring performance were sufficient in number to be shared by all, and for these praise first must be awarded to the full-throated and finely disciplined singing of the 164-voice chorus, trained by Margaret Hillis. Whether in the treacherous passage-work of the *Credo* fugue, where Beethoven asks voices to behave as instruments, or in the expansive serenity of the *Benedictus*, the chorus was a marvel of strength, accuracy, agility and beauty. They sang in the middle-European Latin that Beethoven knew, and really projected the sense of the words.

Solti's orchestra was hardly less splendid, though one would have preferred a *Benedictus* violin soloist with a less cloying vibrato than Samuel Magad's. There was one important change from 1977: It was wonderful to hear the deep pedal tones of a real pipe organ in the prelude. There was only one noticeable mishap: At the first "Osanna" fugue, Solti's beat wasn't clear, and the violin entrance was a hash.

The solo vocal quartet was exceptionally well-matched. They were never more moving than in the prayerful pleas of the *Agnus dei*, which had the timidity of expression Beethoven asked for. The women, Felicity Lott and Diana Montague, were particularly good, Lott having no trouble floating her radiant top notes. Simon Estes was the intense, dignified bass-baritone. Siegfried Jerusalem, the tenor, sounded a bit grainy and probably was not in his finest vocal estate.