

Ludwig van Beethoven: Missa Solemnis Review by Blair Sanderson
AllMusic Review Rating: 4 1/2*/5*

Philippe Herreweghe's 2011 recording of **Ludwig van Beethoven's** Missa Solemnis in D major receives high marks, not only for the elegant period treatment, but also for the profound conviction of the performance. The Collegium Vocale Ghent and the **Orchestre des Champs-Élysées** deliver the music with a somewhat smaller sound than one usually hears in modern performances; the Classical proportions of the ensembles allow details to stand out with utter clarity and the choral parts to move with greater fluidity and transparency than permitted with much larger choruses. Herreweghe's attention to the authentic instrumentation and distinctive tone colors reveals **Beethoven's** subtle orchestration, and the modest scale of forces permits the balancing of voices and orchestra into a lucid blend. Soprano **Marlis Petersen**, mezzo-soprano **Gerhild Romberger**, tenor **Benjamin Hulett**, and bass **David Wilson-Johnson** sing with great control and clear diction, and their quartet passages are remarkably coherent, despite the occasional awkwardness of **Beethoven's** vocal writing. Yet for all the separate features that contribute to the excellence of this rendition, their combination under Herreweghe's leadership makes this an organic and unified interpretation that is compelling for its vitality and emotional depth. Far from an exercise in historical re-creation, Herreweghe's Missa Solemnis has the ring of expressive truth, and the musicians' commitment makes this a worthy CD for any **Beethoven** collection.

BEETHOVEN *Missa solennis* • **Philippe Herreweghe, cond; Marlis Petersen (sop); Gerhild Romberger (bar); Benjamin Hulett (ten); David Wilson-Johnson (bs); Collegium Vocale Ghent; O de Champs-Élysées • PHI 007 (75:22)**
FANFARE REVIEW

This is Philippe Herreweghe's second version on disc of Beethoven's *Missa solennis*; the first, from a live performance in 1995, was reviewed in considerable detail by both Marc Mandel in 19:5 and David Johnson in 19: 4. The former endorsed it with enthusiasm, the latter expressed a somewhat divided opinion. I, by contrast, continue to view it very poorly. In it, Herreweghe adopts the radical end of period performance with a vengeance, with thin, scratchy strings and buzzing, bleating woodwinds and brass in the orchestra, and an underpowered chorus. The tempos are generally rushed and make sudden lurches rather than seamless transitions into one another; all four members of the solo quartet sing poorly, with pronounced wobbles, pinched tone and inadequate breath support,

and other ills.

While this performance is also performed according to period practice, it is very different and much improved. First, although the performing forces are virtually identical in numbers and proportions in the two recordings, there is now a solidity and projection of sound that was previously lacking. While preserving the distinctive sound of period instruments, the orchestra now sounds like a real ensemble rather than a renegade insectarium; the chorus now has heft and tonal color. (It is also rewarded with the *Pleni sunt coeli* passage in the Sanctus, remanded in the previous recording to the solo quartet.) Second, Herreweghe now has a far surer grasp of the score; even though the overall timing of this performance is slightly over one minute faster than in the 1995 version, it has a sense of greater spaciousness, in which much is allowed to breathe more freely instead of being hustled out the door, and the tempo changes are much better gauged and proportioned. (The Kyrie still remains one of the slowest versions of that ever recorded, and the Credo one of the fastest.) Third, the solo quartet is also much stronger, both as individuals and a blended ensemble, though still not ideal. Its best member is the stellar young tenor Benjamin Hulett, who I hailed in a review of Théodore Gouvy's oratorio *Iphigénie en Tauride* back in 34:3. I also recently reviewed a recital disc by soprano Marlis Petersen in 36:2, in which I was generally complimentary but also wrote: "Petersen's vocalism is not absolutely faultless; sometimes when pushed, her somewhat slender voice can assume a slightly edgy and squally quality in the upper register, and some of her softer passages can be a bit breathy." Exactly the same observations apply here, where the defects are more problematic because so much of the soprano part lies in the upper register, but overall she sings affectingly. Gerhild Romberger is a good though not exceptional alto, while bass David Wilson-Johnson is the weakest link; like Cornelius Hauptmann, his off-form predecessor for Herreweghe, his voice lacks body and depth, and is sometimes a bit diffuse and unsteady, though not to an intolerable degree. Finally, the recorded sound is superior, having more presence and impact. The digipak provides a pull-out booklet with texts, an essay, and thumbnail portraits of the performers in English, French, and German, plus complete rosters of the orchestra and chorus members.

This is now by a wide margin the best period-performance recording of Beethoven's *magnum opus* available, and if your tastes incline that way you should acquire it forthwith. Yet, despite all the advances on its predecessor, it is a rendition I regard with respect but for which I do not feel passion. Why? *Je ne sais quoi*. I really can't put my finger on the problem, but somehow for me it lacks that spark of Promethean heat, of mystical fervor, of building to tremendous climaxes followed by releases of tension, that marks a truly great performance rather than just a highly polished one. Perhaps it is a combination of a number of small factors: a less than ideal solo quartet, a bass line that sometimes lacks punch (the orchestra needs at least another pair of cellos and double basses), the occasional passages (e.g., the *Et resurrexit* in the Credo, the opening of the Sanctus, the surprisingly lame close to the Agnus Dei) that feel too smooth or are still gone

through too quickly. Perhaps it will grow on me with time, but for right now my previous recommendations remain the same: Arturo Toscanini (the 1935 BBC performance), Bruno Walter, and Carl Schuricht for historical broadcast performances, Leonard Bernstein (the New York Philharmonic version), Colin Davis, and Christoph Eschenbach for studio accounts, and Herbert von Karajan for a DVD version. This release gets a qualified recommendation instead. James A. Altena

Beethoven, Missa Solemnis, Collegium Vocale Gent, Philippe Herreweghe

GappleGate Musical Reviews Blog

Many years ago for one reason or other I nabbed tickets to hear Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* sung by a very reputable choral organization. I asked somebody I knew slightly to join me. It was a last-minute thing but she accepted. So we went. Afterwards I was eager to know what she thought, since I was single and determined to end up with somebody that appreciated good music.

"So, did you like it?" I asked. "No," she replied disarmingly, "I didn't." *She didn't*. I thought to myself. Then I thought a bit more. *Come to think of it, I didn't like it much, either.*

We went our separate ways. That was that. But for many years I listened to various versions of the work and never could quite get with it. Of all of Beethoven's mature masterworks, it has proved most difficult for me to get into. Why?

The answer came to me as I first started listening to a new recording of the work by Philippe Herreweghe, conducting the Collegium Vocale Gent and the Orchestra des Champs Elysees (Outhere 007). *It takes a visionary performance to allow the work to breathe. Transparent. Passionate.* Herreweghe and company give us that, an "Ode to Joy" sort of version, ecstatic, enthusiastic, articulate.

I've heard and still have some rather famous older recordings and they never convinced me. Perhaps it was that they were a little too solemn. There is such a thing. Even the funeral movement of the *Eroica* Symphony soars in the best hands. So should the *Solemnis* Mass.

The Collegium Vocale/Herreweghe version does that. It soars aloft, with beautiful synchronicity of soloists, choir and orchestra. If you have loved Beethoven but never seemed to get with the *Solemnis*, this version may do for you what it did for me. It is quite stirring!

Posted by [Grego Applegate Edwards](#)

MusicWeb Survey: http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2020/Apr/Beethoven_missa_survey.pdf - includes the older Herreweghe version and many

others - not sure of the date?