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William Drabkin

BEETHOVEN, LISZT, AND THE "MISSA SOLEMNIS"

It goes almost without saying that nineteenth-century music was shaped in great part by the way it came to terms with Beethoven: his style, his output, and the force of his musical personality. That Liszt was an ardent admirer of Beethoven's music is so well documented that it need not be dwelt upon here.[1] In his years as a travelling virtuoso, Liszt frequently included Beethoven's concertos and sonatas in his concert programs. At Weimar he regularly conducted the symphonies, especially the Ninth, and the opera *Fidelio*. After Liszt ended his career as a recitalist and turned more toward teaching advanced students the piano, the late Beethoven sonatas occupied an important place in his lessons.

In terms of compositional technique, however, the music of Liszt does not often suggest as direct comparison with Beethoven as with Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, and Brahms. This is probably because Liszt's vast output is concentrated largely in genres either that Beethoven avoided or that did not exist in his time. For most listeners and performers, Liszt the composer is remembered for his books of piano pieces (etudes, fantasies, transcriptions, character pieces), for his symphonic poems, and, to a lesser extent, for his oratorios and shorter sacred works. Naturally, there are some exceptions: the two most familiar Liszt piano concertos, for example, and the two piano sonatas (the "Dante" and the B-minor). Nevertheless, the general picture shows Liszt steering clear of the multi-movement symphony and solo sonata, the string quartet, and other forms of chamber music (including chamber works with piano). Paul Merrick expresses this in the succinct, if overstated, observation: "The Piano Sonata [i.e., Liszt's B-minor Sonata] is unusual in that it makes use of sonata form."[2]

[1][See, however, Axel Schroter, *"Der Name Beethoven in heilig in der Kunst" Studien zu Liszts Beethoven-Rezeption*, 2 vols (Sinzig Studio, 1999) Schroter's two-volume monograph appeared in print after Dr Drabkin had completed the present article – Eds]

[2]MRR, p 283

Despite his deeply held Catholic beliefs and lifelong interest in the Roman rite, Liszt's contact with Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* is difficult to pin down. Liszt's arrival in Vienna in 1822, as an eleven-year-old boy, coincides with Beethoven's most intensive period of work on the autograph score, but it now seems unlikely that there was any contact between the two musicians.[3] Beethoven's mass, moreover, was performed infrequently in the first decade after his death. Apart from the premiere in St. Petersburg in April 1824 under the auspices of Beethoven's patron, Prince Nikolai Galitzin, no complete public performances are documented before the late 1830s. It seems probable, then, that Liszt first heard the work in Bonn in 1845, when it was conducted by Louis Spohr at the Beethoven Memorial Festival Liszt helped organize; the performance took place immediately before the unveiling of the Beethoven monument on 12 August.[4] Liszt may not have heard a second performance for another sixteen years, when Beethoven's mass was presented as the opening work in the second festival of the Tonkünstler-Versammlung in Weimar (6 August 1861). Nearly a decade later Liszt was invited to conduct the mass at a Beethoven festival in Vienna (October 1870) but declined the invitation.[5] There are no records that I know of his having conducted it elsewhere.

What interests me is the extent to which a composer like Liszt who, in writing his first large-scale choral piece, would be influenced by the example of Beethoven, whose *Missa solemnis* was regarded as something of a "Hammerklavier" of sacred music: exceedingly difficult and, as a substantial product of the composer's last creative period, by definition a "great work." If, upon receiving a commission to write a symphonic work for the consecration of a new basilica, the most important place of worship in his native land, would Liszt have turned back to the century's most powerful musical influence for inspiration, or for compositional technique?

[3]Derek Watson, *Liszt* (London: Dent, 1989), pp. 12-13. The anecdote about Beethoven kissing the young boy on the forehead, as an act of artistic christening, is now believed to be apocryphal. See Michael Saffle, "Liszt Research Since 1936: A Bibliographic Survey," *Acta Musicologica* 58 (1986), pp. 279-280, for an account of what really happened at Liszt's Vienna concert of 13 April 1824.

[4]WFL 1·421

[5]Liszt explained his decision not to conduct the work in a letter to Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, dated May 15, 1870. See LSL, p. 716.

TABLE 1

Early Histories of the Masses in D Major by Beethoven and Liszt

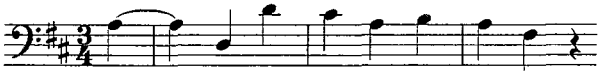
	Beethoven	*Liszt*
composed	1819–1823	1855
first performed	St. Petersburg 24 March 1824	Esztergom (Gran), Hungary, 31 August / 1 September 1856
	Vienna, 5 May 1824 (extracts)	Pest, 4 September 1856
revised	—	1857-1858 (including fugues for Gloria and Credo)
early revivals	Warnsdorf, Austria June 1830	Vienna, March 1856
	Dresden, 1839	Budapest April 1858
	London, 1839	
	Bonn, 12 August 1845	
published	Mainz: Schott, 1827	Vienna: Österreichische Staatsdruckerei, 1859

The early history of the two works is summarized in Table 1. The composition of the *Missa solemnis* occupied Beethoven intermittently for a period of more than four years. He began it in 1819, soon after learning that Archduke Rudolph of Austria had been created a cardinal and was to be installed as Archbishop of Olmütz (today Olomouc, in the Czech Republic) the following year. The work was delivered to Rudolph three years late, in March 1823; neither the composer nor his patron was to attend a complete performance of it. The *Missa solemnis* is the second of Beethoven's two settings of the Ordinary for soloists, chorus and orchestra, and universally reckoned to be the finer of the two.

By contrast, Liszt's *Missa solemnis* (also known as the "Gran" Mass) was composed in 1855, a year *before* it was needed for the consecration of the new basilica at Esztergom ("Gran" in German), although Liszt had been given notice that a large-scale setting would one day be required of him. The work was performed several times under the composer's direction. The first two performances, at Esztergom on 31 August and 1 September 1856, were marred by poor acoustics, among other things. A few days later, at the parish church of Pest (4 September), it was repeated with altogether more success. The Mass was revised in 1857-1858, performed in its new version to great acclaim in 1858, and published at the expense of the Austrian

TABLE 2

Some Musical Relationships Between Beethoven's and Liszt's Masses

	Beethoven, Missa solemnis	*Liszt, "Gran" Mass*
Kyrie	"Assai sostenuto. Mit Andacht" begins with syncopated D-Major chord	"Andante solenne" begins with syncopated d
Gloria	same key; a and f♯ conceptually	in B Major; f♯ conceptually tied over from previous movement
	principal subdivision at "Qui tollis"	principal subdivision at "Qui tollis"
	fugue subject: 	principal motive throughout
	reprise of "Gloria" music at end within "Cum sancto spiritu"	reprise of earlier Mass text within "Laudamus te," "Quoniam"
Credo	major tonal shift after Gloria (D → B♭)	major tonal shift after Gloria (B → C)
	principal motive stated by wind in unison	principal motive stated by unison
	gently pulsating wind chords at at "Et incarnatus est"	gently pulsating wind chords at "Et incarnatus est"
	prominent brass parts at "judicare"	prominent brass parts at "judicare"
Sanctus	"Adagio. Mit Andacht"	"Andante solenne"
Benedictus	main theme in 12/8	Sanctus theme in 6/4 similar to Beethoven's "Benedictus"
	choral "Benedictus" monotone	"Benedictus" monotone
	solo within orch passage; violin solo part throughout	violin solo emerges from cello line
	ends in G Major, in high register	ends in G Major, in high register
Agnus	oboe solo and *a cappella* theme summarize whole	references to earlier movements restores devotional mood

government in 1859. The "Gran" Mass, the first of Liszt's settings for large performing forces, is, significantly, the product of a decade that saw the composition of other ambitious works, including the Sonata in b minor, the *Faust* symphony, and the greater part of his cycle of symphonic poems.

What evidence can be adduced for Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* having exerted some influence on Liszt at the time he came to write the "Gran" Mass? Should we look for structural similarities between the two works? Similarities in scoring and thematic resemblances? Strikingly parallel approaches to the text? Most listeners feel a sense of awe and sacrifice in both pieces. This is confirmed by certain remarks associated with them. When Liszt, for example, confessed to a friend, "My Mass has been more *prayed* than composed,"[6] he may have intentionally echoed the inscription at the start of the Dona nobis pacem from Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*: "Prayer for inner and outer peace" (*Bitte um innern und äussern Frieden*).

Table 2 on the previous page shows, movement by movement, some other correspondences between the two pieces. Space permits me to consider only a few of these points in detail: the overall planning of the five-section work, some similarities of character and scoring, and the matter of thematic relationship.

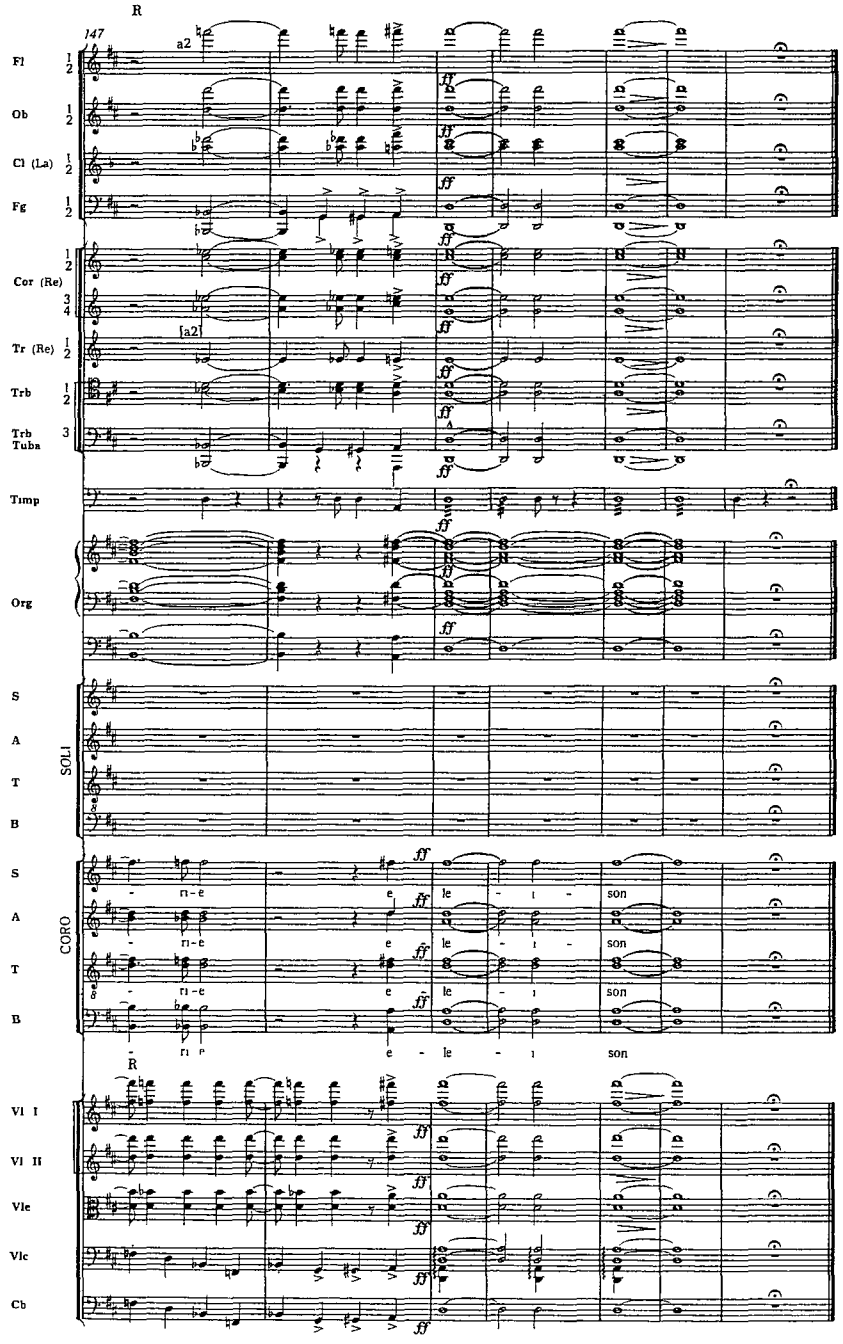
Overall Planning; Arrangement of Sections

It is sometimes argued that sacred music is too often analysed out of context, and that in particular it is a mistake to look for connections between sections of music that are widely separated in time by spoken liturgical text and ritual. From what I am able to gather from biographies of Liszt, however, his "Gran" Mass was more often performed continuously in his lifetime—which is to say, as a composition in its own right, and not as part of a liturgical event. Thus it is appropriate to consider the effect of one section of music followed immediately by another, and to examine the possible connections between them.[7]

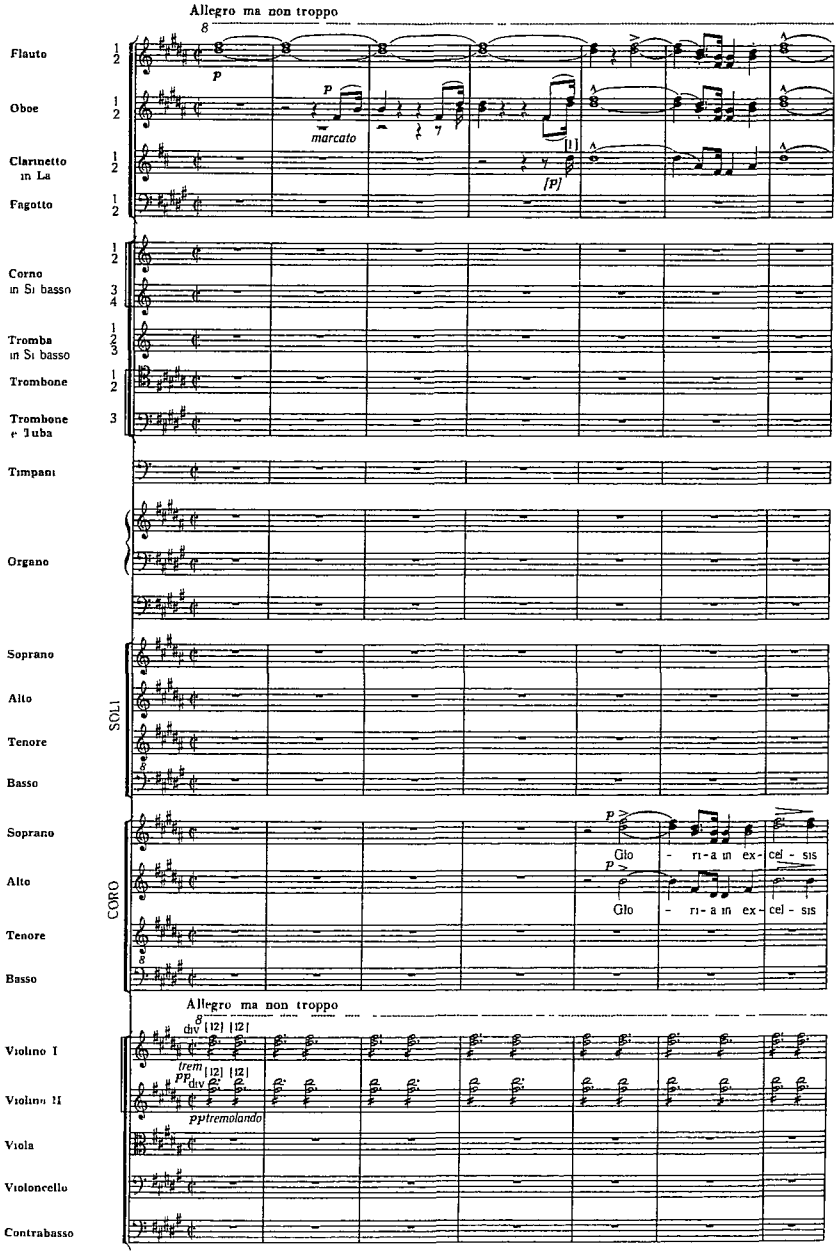
[6]In Liszt's letter of 14 November 1856, to Carl Gille. Quoted in MRR, p. 119.

[7]According to Alan Walker and Dezső Legány, the ceremony for the consecration of the basilica at Gran took place first, on the morning of 31 August 1856, and the performance of the mass followed afterwards, at 1:30 p.m. Moreover, Liszt timed the work with a pocket watch as lasting 45 minutes. See WFL II:406; and Legány, "Liszt in Hungary, 1849–1867," NLL, pp. 3-15. In letters to Goethe, Friedrich Duncker, and the Grand Duke Ludwig I of Hesse, Beethoven himself repeatedly made the point that his *Missa solemnis* could be performed as an oratorio. See Ludwig van Beethoven, *Briefe: Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 5 (Munich: G. Henle, 1996), letters 1550, 1562, and 1571.

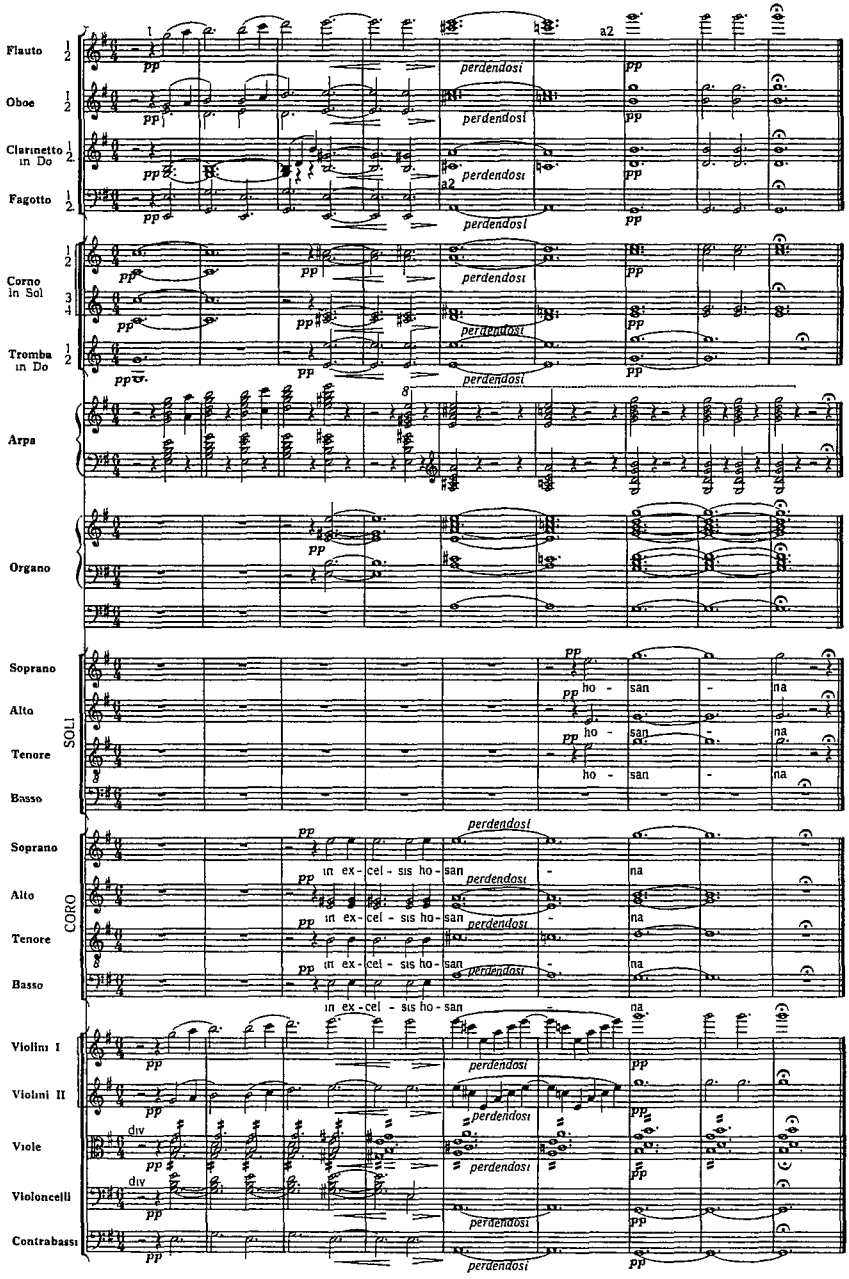
Example 1a: Liszt, "Gran" Mass, Kyrie, mm. 147-153:



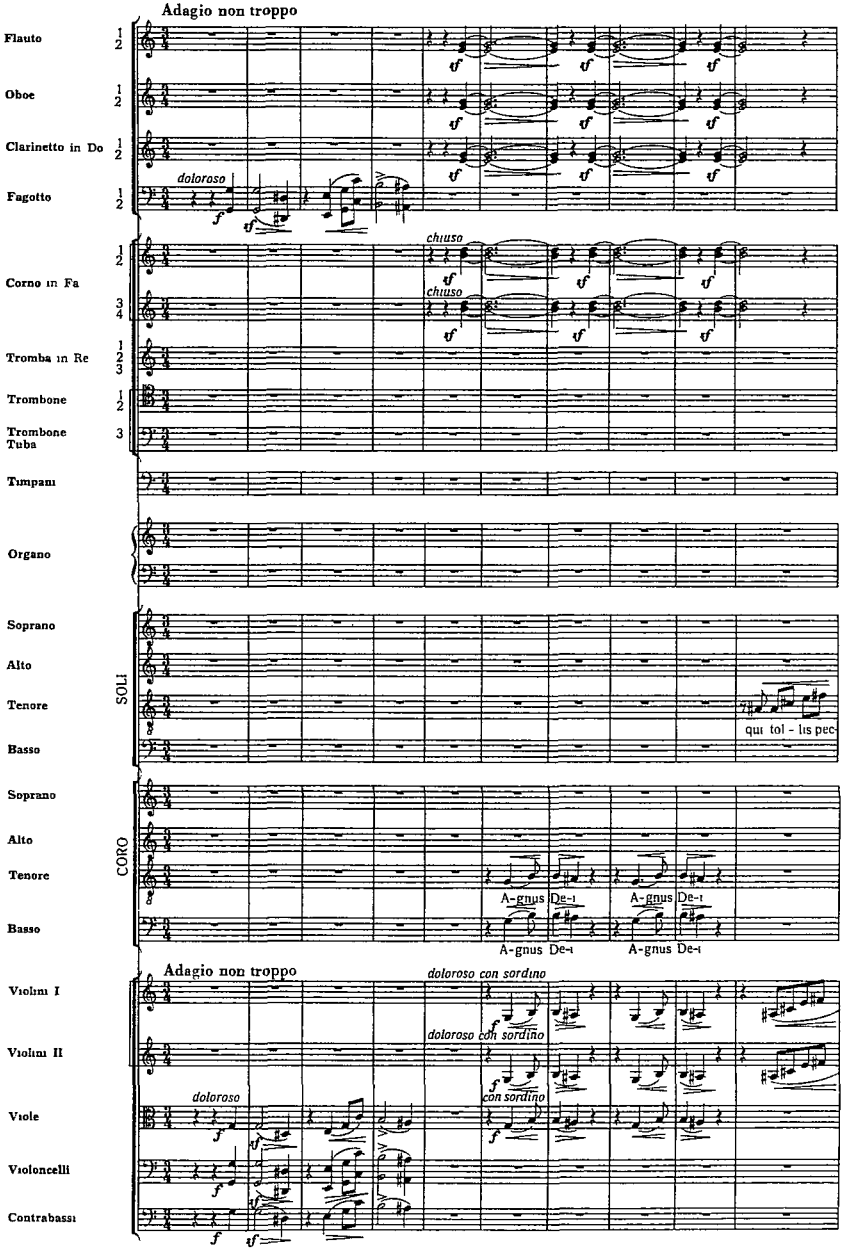
Example 1b: Liszt, "Gran" Mass, Gloria, mm. 1-7:



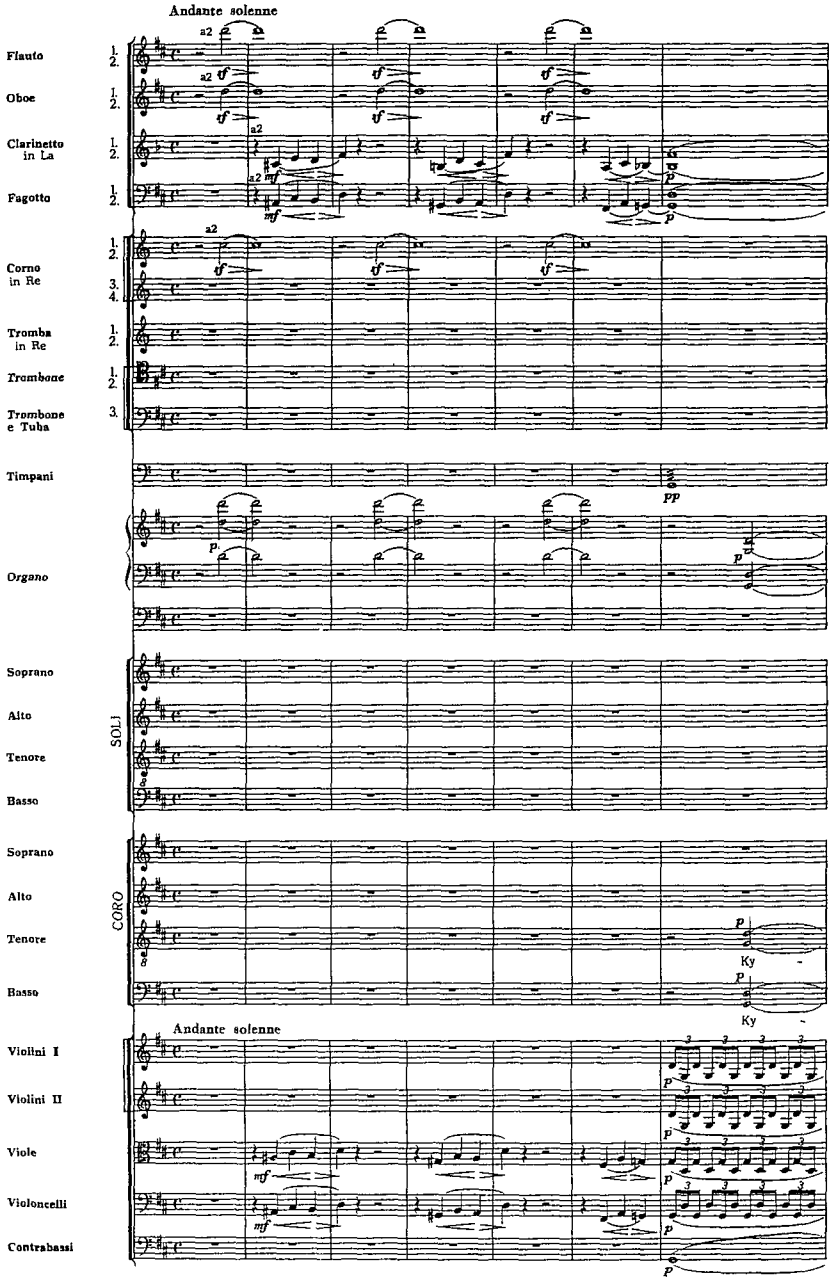
Example 2a: Liszt, "Gran" Mass, Benedictus, mm. 84-92:



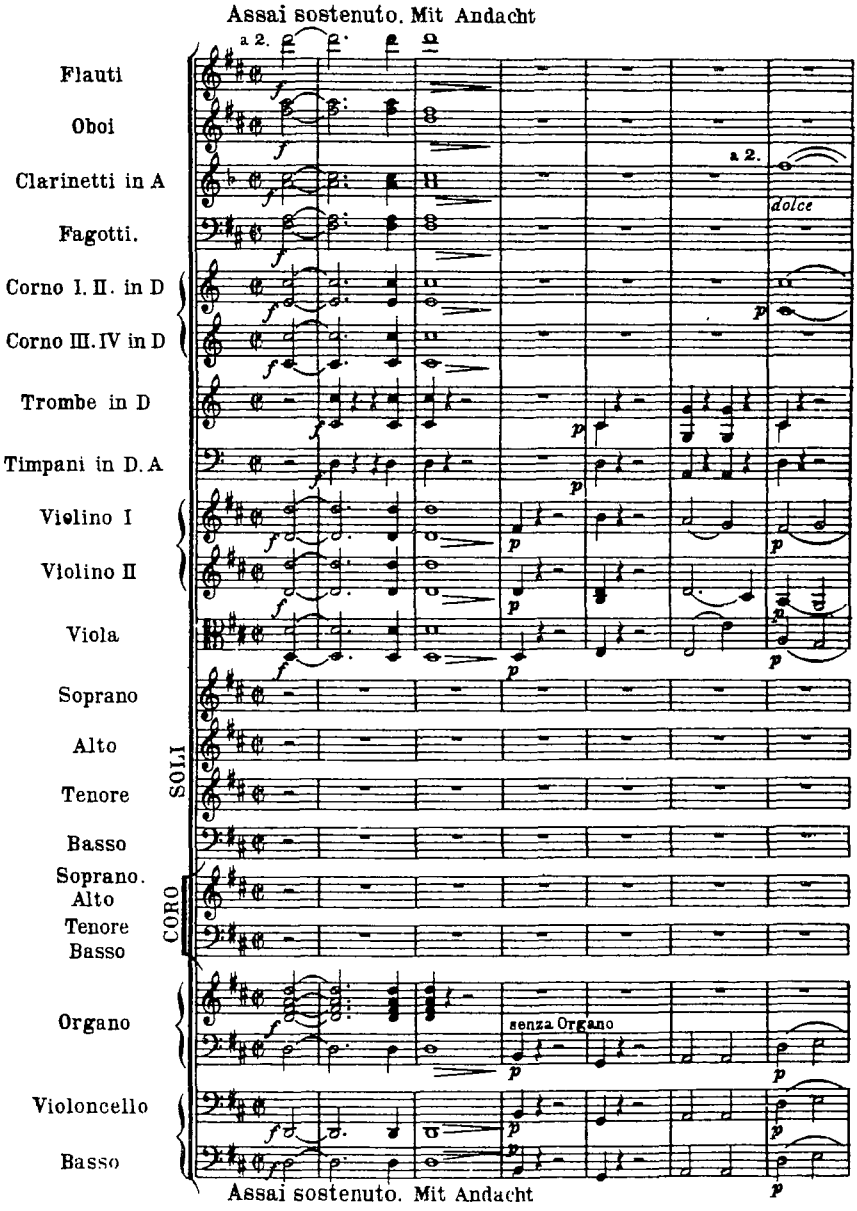
Example 2b: Liszt, "Gran" Mass, Agnus Dei, mm. 1-10:



Example 3a: Liszt, "Gran" Mass, Kyrie, mm. 1-7:



Example 3b: Beethoven, *Missa solemnis*, Kyrie, mm. 1-6:



In Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, four of the five principal sections begin in D Major, and all but one of these also ends in that key. The Gloria and Credo are the longest sections and are of about equal length; but Beethoven clearly separates the Credo from the other movements, both by isolating it tonally—it is the only movement in a "flat" key—and by avoiding in it all reference to themes or motives from earlier movements. Liszt also sets his Credo apart tonally—it is the only section *not* in a "sharp" key—and accentuates this distinction, as does Beethoven, by assigning the main theme to the wind band, in advance of the first choral entry.

Liszt's setting also follows Beethoven's by showing connections between the other four movements, considered as adjacent pairs. Beethoven's Kyrie ends with the interval of a third [a–f♯] left unresolved; the thunderous beginning of the Gloria completes the descent of the D-Major chord [a–f♯–d]. In Liszt's mass, the start of the Gloria reinterprets the f♯ from the end of the Kyrie as the fifth of the remote key of B Major. The focus on f♯ as common tone is, if anything, clearer, as Liszt calls attention to this note by ending his Kyrie with a juxtaposition of the harmonies of B-flat Major (supporting f♮) and D Major (supporting f♯); the scoring and register of the f♯ at the start of the Gloria puts the connection between the two movements beyond doubt. See Examples 1a-b on previous pages.

At the conclusions of the two works, the connection between Liszt's Benedictus and Agnus is achieved by similar techniques. Beethoven's Benedictus is a broadly planned *romanze* in G Major featuring the solo violin, its final chord rendered somewhat inconclusive by a plagal cadence. G Major then resolves inwards to b minor for the start of the Agnus, the bass solo entry reiterating the progression of the upper voice from g to f♯.

Liszt's connection is more direct, a G-Major chord leads to a unison G in the lower strings at the start of the new section. The effect is similar: the placid ending of his Benedictus leads to the anguished cries for mercy in the Agnus. The connection is coupled with thematic transformation: the ubiquitous "Christe" motive, transposed to E-flat Major for the Benedictus, is recast in e minor and thus retains the common pitch of g while dramatically reinterpreting e♭ as d♯.

Character, Mood, Scoring

The second matter I would like to touch on is that of character and mood. A little over thirty years separates the completion dates of

Beethoven's and Liszt's masses: is it reasonable to expect them to sound alike and, if so, to what degree and in what ways?

Some commentators have remarked on a very general kinship between the two pieces, but no one has actually pointed to specific passages.[8] If the brassy writing at "judicare vivos et mortuous" is almost too obvious to be worth mentioning,[9] there are others which, though subtle, are far from obscure. I shall restrict myself here to comparing the opening of the two works, that is, the first "Kyrie" sections. See Examples 2a-b on previous pages.

Let us start at the very beginning. That both Masses open with unprepared syncopations is so striking that I feel it must be more than coincidental. Compare Examples 4a and 4b. The subsequent course of Liszt's first "Kyrie" suggests additional engagement with Beethoven's musical argument. In the Beethoven excerpt, the opening orchestral tutti hints at the key of b minor via its dominant (the *sforzando* at measure 17), and this chord duly marks the first climax in the chorus, at measure 55. Liszt's harmony takes the same route, but he gets to a choral F-sharp-Major chord much more quickly (in just 15 mm.) and so cannot stretch out the remainder of the Kyrie as a continuous deferral of b minor; instead he has to reinterpret the chord in characteristically chromatic terms, making the f♯ ultimately act as g♭ en route to the key of B-flat Major. In other words, Liszt follows Beethoven to the boundaries of the home key, then plunges into a distant key—one that Beethoven doesn't reach until he is well into the Gloria. The difference between the harmonic routes in the two works represents the difference in harmonic procedures that characterize the periods in which they were composed.[10]

Thematic Interrelationships

If large-scale planning is, by common consent, an aspect of music readily associated with Beethoven, thematic development is

[8]Humphrey Searle characterized the "Gran" Mass as "bearing some resemblances to Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, though containing many original ideas" [in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London and New York: Macmillan, 1980), Vol. 11, p. 46].

[9]Watson claims that this is one of the more striking passages in Liszt's setting, but doesn't connect it with Beethoven's comparably stentorian "judicare", and its prominent trombone doublings of the choral parts. See Watson, *Liszt*, p. 295.

[10]Liszt may have been uncertain of the effect of an early move to F-sharp Major, only one third of the way through the Kyrie His score suggests a cut of 32 measures, which makes the reinterpretation of f♯ = g♭ much more direct. It also results in a substantial change in the proportions of the movement, with the Kyrie cut by more than half its length and thus dwarfed by the "Christe "

very much Liszt's home ground, and the deployment of themes in their mature works would seem a major source of difference between the two composers.

Liszt structures his mass around thematic recall and transformation. As can be seen from Table 3 on the following page, the theme we first associate with the words "Christe eleison" appears in every movement but the Credo, and it is used especially in passages where traditions of liturgical music call for the tempo to be slowed down: in the minor mode at "Qui sedes," as a reminiscence theme in the Benedictus, and—in a more anguished form—at the start of the Agnus Dei. The fanfares that begin the Gloria also recur, for instance at "Et resurrexit" in the Credo. Late in the work, in the Dona nobis pacem, the main Credo theme is encored, and here all the principal thematic players make their final appearance.

In contrast, Beethoven uses different thematic material for each section: recall is limited to repeats of the text, e.g. the extra-liturgical reprise of at the end of the Gloria, and the four-note "Credo, Credo" motive. However, many of Beethoven's themes have what Carl Dahlhaus called "subthematic" connections, and these contribute to the spiritual integrity of his setting. We can trace the subthematic process through the various permutations of the figure b–a–g–f♯, as shown in Table 4. Although these notes do not constitute a "motive" in the conventional sense, their appearance helps convey the "devotion" (*Andacht*) specified by Beethoven's initial tempo marking. Note, in particular, the open-ended melodic line and the gentle emphasis on the subdominant by its separation from the cadential progression. The circularity of this figure is exploited by the singers, who repeat its permutation as g–f♯–b–a in mm. 33-35, and by the oboe which develops it in measure 49; in both places, the original, strictly linear succession provides counterpoint in the bass. A full account of Beethoven's use of figures based on these notes would be beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth calling attention here to just two further passages: the solemn brass music in the opening section of the Sanctus, and the *a cappella* "Dona nobis pacem" theme.

So far as I am aware, Liszt left no record of his impressions of Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*. An early statement on church music, which was incorporated into his essay *De la Situation des artistes, et de leur condition dans la société*, is concerned mainly with the use of

TABLE 3

Thematic Presentation, Recall and Transformation in Liszt's "Gran Mass"

Ky = start of Kyrie
Gl = fanfares at beginning of Gloria
Cr = principal "Credo" motive
Ch = "Christe" theme
Et = "Et in terra pax"

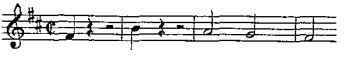
keys are given in parenthesis, followed by measure number(s); thematic transformations are given in **bold** *type*

section	recurring themes: first occurrence, recurrences
Kyrie	Ky (D) 1, Ch (B♭) 59
Gloria	Gl (B) 1, Et (B), **Ch (g) 228 "Qui tollis,"** Et (B) "Quoniam"
Credo	Cr (C) 1, **Cr (F♯) 71 "Qui propter nos homines,"** Gl (B) 171 "Et resurrexit," Cr (C) 279 "et unam sanctam" (fugue subject)
Sanctus	
Benedictus	Ch (E♭) I "Benedictus qui venit"
Agnus Dei	**Ch (from e, modulating) 1 "Agnus Dei,"** Ch (D) 58 "dona nobis pacemm" Gl (D) 88 "dona," Et (D) 66 "dona," Ky (D) 149 "dona," Cr (D) 166 "Amen."

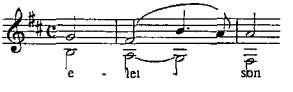
TABLE 4

Some Thematic Relationships in Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*:

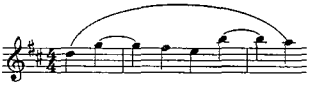
(a) Kyrie
(orchestra, mm 1–6)



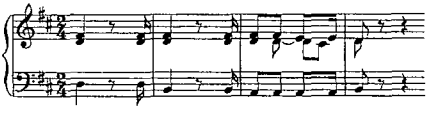
(b) Kyrie
(alto solo, chorus, mm 33-37)



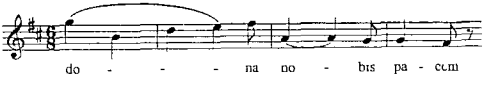
(c) Kyrie
(oboe, mm 49–53)



(d) Sanctus
(trombones, mm 9–12)



(e) Agnus
(sopranos, mm 123–126)



music to raise the religious consciousness of the people.[11] The closest we get to a pronouncement about symphonic settings of the mass comes in a letter to Agnes Street-Klindworth, dated 16 September 1856, in which Liszt confesses that "Bach and Beethoven, who are the peaks of Catholic music, are a great resource to me."[12] This seems an odd way of characterizing two composers who, between them, produced only a handful of works for a specifically Catholic-liturgical context. Thus I cannot say whether Liszt may have been attracted to the *Missa solemnis* on account of its communality of thematic material. Even if such techniques appear to be common features of Beethoven's late style, much of which Liszt would have known well, thematic reminiscence and transformation were such well-established features of Liszt's own compositional technique that he would not have needed a specific model from Beethoven. If the two composers worked along different lines in their full maturity—Beethoven devising themes from archetypal interval patterns, Liszt transforming one fully formed theme into another—their aim was nevertheless similar: to link sections of music in such a way that the listener has the sense that all of it belongs together.

I do *not* wish to suggest that Liszt appropriated Beethoven's compositional techniques. About the only things we can accuse him of "stealing" from Beethoven are the key signature and half a measure's rest at the start of the Kyrie. Rather, one thinks of points of correspondence as natural outcomes of Liszt working on a cyclic mass a long generation after Beethoven's death, when no contemporary nineteenth-century settings were available as obvious models. If Liszt was looking to Beethoven for guidance, he would still have had to translate what he found there into a musical idiom that had developed considerably in the space of some thirty-five years, and to which he himself had substantially contributed. What the two composers were doing in these two devotional works may amount to the same thing, but they were certainly doing it in different—and Liszt, perhaps, in more "modern"—ways.

University of Southampton (United Kingdom)

[11]For example, the passage beginning "Aujourd'hui, personne que nous sachions ne songe sérieusement" in *Franz Liszt· Samtliche Schriften*, Vol. 3 = *Fruhe Schrıften*, ed. Rainer Kleinertz (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2000), *De la Situation*, Article 5, p. 28. I am grateful to Dr. Kleinertz for allowing me to see this work in 1998, prior to publication.

[12]FLBr II·80–81.