

DAVIDDE PENITENTE

MOZART

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791): *Davidde Penitente* K469 (1785)

Mozart's 1785 Lent oratorio, *Davidde Penitente* (*The Repentant David*) recycles almost note for note the Kyrie and Gloria of his earlier *Mass in C minor* together with two newly composed arias. The Italian text (thought to be by da Ponte, the librettist of three of Mozart's most celebrated operas) is a loose paraphrase of a selection of penitential psalms of David. Those familiar with the *Mass* may be surprised by the dramatic possibilities offered by the change of text; those hearing the music for the first time will be overwhelmed by the majesty of the choral writing, the virtuosity of the solo movements (for two sopranos and tenor) and the audacity of the final great fugue.

In January, 1785, Mozart accepted a commission from the Viennese Society of Musicians for a choral work to be performed at two Lenten concerts in March of the same year, promising a new setting for a complete psalm. *Davidde Penitente* was the resulting work, but it was quite different from that intended in the initial promise, and marks a reappearance of music that had been developed three years earlier, at a time of intense creative and personal change.

Since the autumn of 1781, Mozart had been engaged in a second attempt to establish himself as a freelance composer and musician, outside the dependency on a sole patron required of a musician appointed, like his father, Leopold, to a court. His first attempt had been made, against his father's wishes, when, in 1777, he resigned from the service of Hieronymus Colloredo, Archbishop of Salzburg, to seek employment in Mannheim and Paris. However, the infrastructure for musical commission that he sought had not yet developed sufficiently and his attempts to find work were effectively ended when his mother, who had travelled with him, died in Paris in the summer of 1778. Having failed to find work in Mannheim and Munich, as he made his way back reluctantly to Salzburg, Leopold formally petitioned the Archbishop on his behalf for the post of court organist – similar to one at Versailles that he had turned down as uninteresting whilst in Paris a year

earlier. Mozart was appointed in January, 1779, but with the stipulation that any new works he composed, in addition to his court and chapel duties, should neither last too long, nor deploy operatic conventions! Despite these constraints, or perhaps to compensate, in the next two years he created some of his most outstanding church music, of which the *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore* and the *Coronation Mass* can be considered as the finest examples, displaying within the structural order of traditional compositional forms the imaginative originality of his mature style.

Mozart's frustrations mounted, however, and he resigned from the Archbishop's court in June, 1781, whilst it was in Vienna, writing to his father: "No more Salzburg for me! I hate the Archbishop almost to fury!". He remained in Vienna and married Constanze Weber in August, 1782, promising her the composition of a large-scale Mass as a wedding present, to be performed in Salzburg on their first visit as man and wife. This was to be the *Mass in C minor*, of which Mozart was able to write to his father on 4 January, 1783, that he had "the score of half a Mass...lying here waiting to be finished". He had earlier written to him that although "for quite a time we have gone to Mass and confession and communion together,...I found that I have never prayed so fervently or confessed or communicated so devoutly

as at her side, and it was the same for her". Whilst this may explain Mozart's pious initiative, Constanze was already expecting their first child and Mozart was therefore reliant wholly on his own enterprise to provide an income for his prospective family: the *Mass*, consisting thus far of the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Benedictus, may have been "waiting to be finished" because he was also more or less simultaneously engaged in the composition of three *Piano Concertos* (K413-415), the *C minor Serenade for Wind Instruments*, the first of a set of six string quartets that would be dedicated to Haydn and the '*Haffner*' *Symphony*. The visit to Salzburg duly took place in the autumn of 1783, and the *Mass* was performed in St Peter's church on October 23. Since it is inconceivable that an incomplete *Mass* could have been performed in a liturgical setting at that time, presumably Mozart drew from his own earlier works for the missing movements. He would have had no compunction in doing so, following the parodic convention, employed by most baroque composers, of *contrafactum* – setting new words to music composed for earlier work. Bach and Handel both resorted frequently to this practice, and Mozart had become closely acquainted with their music in 1782 through playing it at the Sunday musicales in Baron van Swieten's apartments, adding their contrapuntal techniques to his own Galant style, and thus extending his musical language into the brilliance

characteristic of his late work. The practice also served him well under comparable pressure three years later, at the beginning of 1785, after he had accepted the commission for *Davidde Penitente* from the Society of Musicians. His father and Joseph Haydn, to whom he had dedicated a set of six recently completed quartets, were both visiting Vienna and Mozart had organised six concerts during which he planned to premiere two new *Concertos* (K466 and 467). From February to mid-March he is known to have performed in these and four other concerts, as well as giving three further performances and, with his father, playing the violin parts in three of the recently completed set of 'Haydn' *Quartets* at a performance for their dedicatee. During this period he had to prepare *Davidde Penitente* for two performances that he would be required to conduct on March 13 and 15. He had already told the Society that he would be unable to fulfil his promise of a new Psalm setting, but honoured the contract nevertheless by recycling music from the *C-minor Mass* to a text comprised of ten brief selections from an Italian translation of the Lenten Penitential Psalms of David – hence the work's title. The *Mass* had not yet been heard in Vienna and Mozart would surely have hoped that its display of his compositional skills would lead to further commissions. The source of the Italian text is unknown, but is possibly the work of Lorenzo da Ponte, who had arrived in Vienna in 1783 and was introduced to Mozart shortly afterwards. Having produced librettos for Salieri and other composers, Mozart had suggested he adapt Beaumarchais's *Les Noces de Figaro* for him – the first of their successful operatic collaborations. Already working closely with Mozart by 1785, the resourceful da Ponte would have

been an obvious person to ask for a text to set for a commission that had to be fulfilled in haste.

Following Bach's structure for his *Mass in B minor*, Mozart had organised the completed parts of his own *C minor Mass* into separate, cantata-style numbers, to which the Italian text could easily be adapted. He took the Kyrie and Gloria as the basis for *Davidde Penitente*, adding two arias and a passage for the three soloists before the finale. The work is divided into ten numbers, shared equally between chorus and soloists and opens with the music of the Kyrie from the *Mass* – here also a chorus 'Alzai le flebili voci al Signor', calling penitentially for relief from oppression by pain, the poignancy of the plea emphasised by the soprano soloist's lovely arpeggios. The second chorus 'Cantiam le glorie' follows the opening number of the Gloria of the *Mass* in both music and initially exuberant mood to its quiet conclusion. The florid aria for mezzo-soprano which succeeds it 'Lungi le cure in grate' offers a more ruminative interpretation to the music of *Laudamus te*, which requires a particularly subtle virtuosity from the soloist. For the following chorus 'Sii pur sempre benigno, oh Dio', the sopranos are split, giving an almost keening edge to the plea for compassion, again shifting the mood of the *Gratias* of the *Mass*, from which the music is drawn. The fifth number 'Sorgio, o signore', as in the *Domine Deus* of the *Mass*, is a duet similar in mood for both soprano soloists.

This is followed by the first of Mozart's new additions, an impressive aria, for tenor soloist 'A te, fra tante affanni', which begins, *andante*, in pastoral style, to gentle woodwind and accompanying

strings. An anxious plea for divine pity is gradually developed into a more elaborate celebration, *allegro*, 'Udisti i voti mei' that the plea has been understood, before concluding with a return to the opening calm. The seventh of the Penitential poems 'Se vuoi puniscimi' opens trenchantly to the music for the *Qui tollis* of the *Mass*, dividing the chorus into two choirs in contrapuntal acceptance of the justification for Divine punishment, moving to a softer closing prayer for help and forgiveness. A sombre introduction follows to the second of Mozart's innovations, the soprano aria 'Fra l'oscure ombre funeste', which is structured similarly to that for the tenor soloist – an opening *andante*, here a sombre plea on behalf of the righteous for lightening the darkness of suffering and sorrow, moves to a cheerful *allegro* celebrating the dawn of salvation. Representation of the different moods through long runs and *coloratura* expression demand a virtuosity of the soloist to match that of Mozart's composition. Fittingly, the three soloists join for the ninth movement Terzetto 'Tutte le mie speranze', taking the music of the 'Quoniam' from the *Mass* and cheerfully interweaving the Trio's complex harmonies over the orchestra's brisk *allegro* flourishes, united in celebration of the Divine trust which is the reward for their penitence. The work concludes with 'Chi in Dio sol spera', a huge chorus, supported, *adagio*, by brass and timpani, asserting faith as the antidote to fear through increasingly elaborate fugal interchanges to shifting dynamics until interrupted by Mozart's final innovation, a gloriously showy, echoing intervention from the three soloists. Finally the choir returns for a last restatement in resounding conclusion.

CHRISTUS AM ÖLBERGE

BEETHOVEN

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827): *Christus am Ölberge (Christ on the Mount of Olives)* Op 85 (1803 rev 1811)

Beethoven's *Christus am Ölberge (Christ on the Mount of Olives)* was composed and first performed in 1803. Exceptionally well-received by the public, Beethoven himself claimed to be dissatisfied, considering the original text substandard and the music too dramatic. The drama surrounds Christ's emotional turmoil in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his crucifixion and, unlike other Passion settings, focuses on the humanity of Christ, ending not with the Crucifixion, but with his personal decision to accept his fate. The final chorus, *Welten singen*, is often performed out of context and is widely known as Beethoven's 'Hallelujah Chorus'.

When he came to revise his dramatic oratorio, *Christus am Ölberge*, eight years after its composition, Beethoven described it to his publishers, Breitkopf & Härtel, as “my first work of that kind and, moreover, an early work... written in a fortnight during all kinds of disturbances and other unpleasant and distressing events in my life...”, adding “what is quite certain is that now I should compose an absolutely different oratorio”. At the time of its composition, however, Beethoven had written to a friend that it was “especially dear to my heart”, a view he seemed simultaneously to contradict in declaring it “too sentimental” and later as “overly dramatic”. He is said to have written parts for two trombones on the morning of the first performance, at the Theater an der Wien on April 5 1803, on realising that the orchestra contained two trombonists, who would otherwise have been wholly unemployed, and insisted that both orchestra and chorus were insufficiently rehearsed. It was, nevertheless, immediately successful as part of a programme of his own works, including the *Second Symphony* and *Third Piano Concerto*. The concert, which he also conducted, was for his own benefit and he received the considerable sum of 1300 florins from the takings. *Christus* continued to be popular throughout the nineteenth century, especially in England, where it was performed under the title *Engedi*, with a libretto altered to tell the story of David. Subsequent critics have, like Beethoven himself,

treated it as one of his lesser works, often comparing it unfavourably with *Leonore/Fidelio*, which was first composed in the years immediately following, and with which it has in common a single, suffering male figure. It marks, however, an important moment in Beethoven's personal life and is important to an understanding of the development of his mature thinking about the role of the artist and the significance of religion.

By 1802 Beethoven had reached the end of what has come to be termed the first maturity of his middle period (1798-1812). Amongst his considerable initial output during this time, he had composed his first two symphonies, the *Kreuzer* and *Pathétique* sonatas, the score for the ballet *Prometheus* and had held the first concert of his own music in the Hoftheater, Vienna. But the following spring he retreated to the secluded nearby village of Heiligenstadt for six months, at the end of which he wrote a Testament, part will, addressed to his brothers, and part public proclamation to the world at large. Dated October 6 and 10, 1802, it remained hidden among his private papers until after his death in March, 1827 and was published in October of that year. What had occasioned both the retreat and the Testament was the devastating realisation that his loss of hearing was not a passing distress but a permanent and increasingly chronic affliction. He had written, the previous year, to his old friend Franz Wegeler

that he was leading “a miserable life... because I find it impossible to say to people, I am deaf”. Deafness had not only made him apparently irascible in social company, but, more importantly, had deprived him of “a sense I once possessed in the highest perfection, a perfection such as few in my profession have or have ever possessed” and led him to write in anguish, at the heart of the Testament, that he had been “forced to become a philosopher in my twenty-eighth year – though it was not easy, and for the artist much more difficult than for anyone else. Almighty God, who looks down into my inmost soul, you know that it is filled with love for humanity and a desire to do good”. He concluded with the resolve to confront his deafness and continue his work, asserting his belief that steadfastness and endurance are the most important personal qualities with which to face adversity.

If anything, misfortune seemed to intensify Beethoven's concentration; as he wrote to Wegeler: “I live entirely in my music; and hardly have I completed one composition than I have already begun another. At my present rate of composing, I often produce three or four works at a time”. This extraordinary productivity of work of the highest quality has been the basis for the general critical view that his middle period work represented the fullest musical aesthetic realisation of bourgeois enlightenment humanism. Despite the aristocracy of several of his patrons, from whom

he received guaranteed stipends, the court society to which they belonged was fast declining in the face of growing nationalism and republicanism across Europe, and it was against the background of these political changes that Beethoven developed his commitment to self-realisation through art. From the outset of this period, he had developed from his late classical training, through the individualist reorientations of romanticism, to a capacity for virtuosic expression of the dominant secular forms of contemporary orchestral, chamber and solo instrumental music. The security of his stipends had also enabled him to enjoy the creative freedom from court patronage that Mozart had failed to achieve, negotiating sponsored performances and publication contracts for his music to provide himself with an additional, independent income.

It is in this biographical and artistic context that we can look at the significance of *Christus am Ölberge*. Notwithstanding Beethoven's claim that he wrote it in a fortnight, it seems much more likely that he began it in the autumn of 1802, on his return to Vienna from Heiligenstadt after completing the Testament. The idea of Christ's lonely vigil on the Mount of Olives, resolving to confront the suffering that lay ahead of Him, suggests a clear metaphor for Beethoven's view of his own plight at the time, and he recruited Franz Huber, editor of the *Wiener Zeitung* and an occasional librettist, to collaborate with him on the text. By the time of the 1811 revision, however, he was dissatisfied with the libretto, telling his publishers that he "would rather set Homer, Klopstock, Schiller to music. If they offer difficulties to overcome, these immortal poets are worthy of it". They agreed and the writer Christian Schreiber was commissioned to carry

out extensive revisions – in the event, unsuccessfully. Beethoven remained dissatisfied: "I know that the text is extremely bad, but if even a bad text is conceived as a whole entity, it is very difficult to avoid disrupting it by individual corrections". This conclusion would seem to indicate that, for all its shortcomings, the work belonged to the particular, highly significant moment in Beethoven's life when it was conceived and that subsequent 'corrections' would affect its integrity 'as a whole entity'. By the end of his middle period, when he decided to publish *Christus*, he had formulated clearly his humanist perspective, grounded in a firm belief that art was generated by the aesthetic vision and intellectual energy of artists themselves, rather than a result of divine inspiration. As secular phenomena, works of art could not have a purpose greater than the celebration of humankind. As well as attempting to realise aesthetic ideals, works of art should also relate to human experience. It would follow from this that, whilst it might not measure up to the aesthetic standards Beethoven had set himself by 1811, *Christus* was nevertheless the product of his particular situation a decade earlier, of confronting the alienation imposed on him by his deafness and his resolution to persevere working in spite of it. It would have made sense, therefore, to limit any revisions to those essential for publication and to leave the work as far as possible in its original form.

The sombre theme of the work is set by its lengthy orchestral introduction, followed by the passionate anguish of Jesus's opening recitative, a cry to God for strength to bear his imminent fate. A linking orchestral passage introduces the aria 'Meine Seele ist erschüttert...' in which Jesus expresses his fear and agitation to the accompaniment of

rapid strings, contrasting with calm, almost lyrical passages in which He begs God to take away His cup of sorrow ('O Vater! nimm den Leidenskelch von mir!'). In a brief recitative, followed by a more elaborated aria, the Seraph then depicts the redemptive promise for humankind of Christ's divinely ordained sacrifice, accompanied by the chorus in celebrating the bliss awaiting those to be redeemed, whilst warning of the curse that will fall on those who fail to hold their faith. In linked recitatives, Jesus asks the Seraph whether He will be shown God's mercy, and is told that the mystery of atonement by death must be realised, a fate which he accepts as final in a sustained duet which concludes with His welcome to death as the agency for saving humankind ('Willkommen Tod!').

The martial rhythms of a brief orchestral interlude signify a shift of mood, as the drama of Christ's passion begins to unfold. The chorus sing both as soldiers hunting for Jesus as He sings, with resigned acceptance, of the subordination to God's of His own will, and as Christ's disciples pleading for mercy. In a passage of recitative, Peter intervenes in an attempt to protect Jesus, who forbids the challenge, pointing out that if it had been God's will to protect Him, legions of angels would have been sent to do so. A didactic trio ensues, in which Peter, Jesus and the Seraph set out the moral imperative of Christ's sacrifice and its implications for the salvation of humankind. This is reinforced by the chorus, alternating once again as soldiers and disciples, declaiming their complementary roles in the tragedy. A calm, concluding recitative allows Jesus to reflect that his redeeming work is soon to be complete, before the chorus unite as angels, commanding the world to sing of His grace and glory in a developing, triumphal fugue.