

theory that the passages about God tend to be in duple metre, while the human-on-earth passages are often in triple metre – one example being the transition from the ‘Kyrie eleison’ to the ‘Christe eleison’ (bar 86, track 1, 3’14”). That tentatively sits well with Rhorer. Also, his belief that the piece is actually a Passion oratorio finds convincing evidence in the stabbing gestures in the ‘Crucifixus’ of the *Credo* (bar 157, track 6, 2’02”).

For Rhorer, conducting often comes down to the art of transitions. When I ask which transition in the tumultuous *Missa solemnis* is the most challenging for him, he tells me it’s the *Credo*’s *pianissimo* mystery (bar 179, track 6, 4’30”) that leads to the exclamatory ‘et resurrexit’ (bar 188, beginning of track 7), if only because so many singers and instrumentalists are tasked with going to soft and loud extremes together on cue.

Among the more important set pieces is the violin solo in the *Sanctus*, often interpreted as the descent of the Holy Spirit and played on this recording by the much-in-demand Jonathan Stone, former member of the Doric Quartet (go to bar 111, track 9, 1’45”). Rhorer says they barely discussed it: ‘I didn’t want to interfere.’ Stone plays it with little vibrato and the kind of discreet portamento heard in the few surviving recordings of Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), whose lifetime came within four years of overlapping with Beethoven’s. Meanwhile, the images conjured in Rhorer’s mind’s eye during the solo include the Doge’s Palace in Venice, where super-elaborate ceilings look down at bare, polished floors.

The steepest challenge in the piece, arguably, comes in the *Agnus Dei* when the ‘pacem’ vocal writing that suggests happily tolling bells is invaded by war music that seems to advance from the distance (bar 164, track 11, 1’55”), leaving the soloists asking for mercy but ultimately prevailing with ‘Dona nobis

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pacem’. Rhorer’s interpretation: ‘It’s easy to forget the problems of conflict, but the problems come back. It’s about Beethoven’s faith in humanity.’ Then comes Beethoven’s single strangest contrapuntal passage – all instrumental, a seemingly random fusion of thematic fragments (bar 266, track 11, 4’24”). It’s music that’s likely to mean something different to listeners on any given day. In fact, some conductors have privately expressed the desire to cut it and much else in the *Agnus Dei*.

Nobody takes the same road to the *Missa solemnis*. For me, it began with the 1974 Herbert von Karajan recording – and not because it was good. The original pressings were so crusty that I sensed I was hearing only 70 per cent of the piece, so I located a score, beginning a journey with determination to hear it all. Rhorer’s *Missa solemnis* journey could be said to have started, however distantly, with Jessye Norman. As a choirboy in the mid-1980s, he sang in a Paris performance of *La damnation de Faust* in which she was Marguerite. He ran backstage to greet her afterwards: ‘She could see the stars in my eyes. She could probably feel that this was an important moment for me. She picked me up and took me in her arms.’ That’s when he saw his road ahead, which ultimately led to a repertoire that has included Berlioz, Brahms and Verdi, and repeated *Missa solemnis* encounters – with the inspirational memory of Norman still fresh in his mind. ③

► Rhorer’s *Missa solemnis* recording will be reviewed next issue

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