

What did the Missa solennis mean to Adorno?

Introduction

I'm not an Adorno scholar. I'm certainly not a Beethoven scholar. I'm someone who loves the *Missa solennis*, happened once to read Adorno's essay on it, and felt that I recognized there something of my own experience. I asked myself "what did the *Missa solennis* mean to Adorno?" because I thought I saw an affinity with what it meant to me. I pondered this question during performances and while listening to recordings and imagined that in doing so I was having profound thoughts about the work. So naturally I blushed rather deeply when I came across the great Charles Rosen's account of the essay, which begins: "The most spectacular critical failure of Adorno's Beethoven studies is the essay "Alienated Masterpiece: The *Missa solennis*." This paper is the product of a lingering curiosity about Adorno's interpretation and of course a desire to save face by vindicating in some way, however meager, the affinity I initially felt with it.

I don't mean to say that I had been independently struck by an analogy between Beethoven's music and Hegelian philosophy. But I have found myself thinking that an artwork such as the *Missa* has to be understood not only in terms of its formal musical properties and its strictly aesthetic properties, but also as a claim about the nature of human existence. That is the kind of "meaning" that I take to be in dispute. And that, in the first instance, is what I admired about Adorno's approach. (commonality with Nietzsche)

Adorno's critical approach to the question is of course being embedded in an idiosyncratic, psychoanalytically informed version of Hegelianism that requires the reader to accept a large number of controversial presuppositions. But important elements of the music criticism are detachable from that broader Hegelian framework and have found assent amongst those who do not share all its premises.

The most famous example is to be found the work of Thomas Mann, who, in writing *Doctor Faustus*, adopted Adorno's view of Beethoven's late works, attributing it to his character, Wendell Kretzschmar. Mann did so because he found that it resonated deeply with his own way of thinking. The 'boundless subjectivity' and 'radical will to harmonic expression,' in Beethoven's earlier works, Kretzschmar tells his audience,

gives way in the late works to ‘a new relationship with the conventional, a relationship defined by death’ (Woods, 57). In a dramatic hiatus Kretzschmar stutters violently before forcing out his most important claim:

Where greatness and death came together, he declared, there arose a sovereign objectivity amenable to convention and leaving arrogant subjectivity behind, because in it the exclusively personal – which after all had been the surmounting of a tradition carried to its peak – once again outgrew itself by entering, grand and ghostlike, into the mythic and the collective. (Woods, 57)

Of course, these are not Mann’s own assertions, but the words of a fictional character (in part based on the musicologist Hermann Kretzschmar). We know that much of Mann’s material in these sections of the novel is drawn from the writings of Adorno as well as correspondence and conversation with him. The provenance of this constellation of claims about death, objectivity, and convention, however, is particularly complex.

What Mann says about this in his book on the writing of *Doctor Faustus*, his *The Story of a Novel*, is interesting. He credits Adorno outright with a great deal of the musical analysis. But the ‘comments on the uncanny relationship that death establishes between genius and convention’ are ones, he says, that resonated with him on the basis of his own earlier insights. He notes that, ‘after prolonged activity of the mind it frequently happens that things which we once upon a time set upon the waters return to us as recast by another’s hand and put into different relationships but still reminding us of what was once our own.’ And he tells us that Adorno’s ideas ‘about death and form, the self and the objective world’ strike him as recollections of himself. (p.46) He does not claim that Adorno has consciously or unconsciously taken these ideas from his own early work, but he certainly sees a convergence of views. I think that the sources of this convergence are deep and investigation of them is illuminating.

When Wendell Kretzschmar describes Beethoven’s exertions in writing the *Missa Solemnis*, he is bringing to bear this complex of views about the artist confronting death, hinting at the interpretation of the *Missa* that Adorno will later make explicit in famous ‘Alienated Masterpiece’ essay. It took Beethoven months to complete the Credo, the centerpiece of the Mass. Kretzschmar offers us an imagined glimpse of Beethoven

laboring day and night on the Credo: ‘In disheveled clothes, his facial features so distorted that they could inspire fear, his eyes glistening and filled with mad abstraction, he had stared at them, looking as if he had just come from a life-and-death struggle with all the hostile spirits of counterpoint. (Woods, 63) For Adorno, too, the *Missa solemnis* is a work that exhibits a struggle with death, with the limits of subjective expression in the face of death; it portrays a conflict between the human and the transcendent. It expresses tremendous religious yearning but also battles with that yearning and does not ultimately find peace with it. I want to look at why this reading has such significance for Adorno.

Death

Adorno’s *idée fixe*, throughout his career, seems (to me anyway) to have been the thought of death and whether or not it is possible for us to confront it in an authentic way. From *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic* to *Negative Dialectics* it is a persistent and striking theme. It is certainly the *idée fixe* at the heart of Mann’s fiction too, as the most cursory acquaintance with *Buddenbrooks*, *Death in Venice*, *The Magic Mountain* or *Doctor Faustus* will reveal. They approach the subject with a shared set of premises, though Adorno does not assume Mann’s detached, ironic attitude in the face of them. In a discussion with Ernst Bloch in 1964, Adorno describes the way in which the idea of death has shaped his thought:

There is something profoundly contradictory in every utopia, namely, that it cannot be conceived at all without the elimination of death; this is inherent in the very thought. What I mean is the heaviness of death and everything that is connected to it.’ (Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing (1964), 10)

What is this ‘heaviness’ of death for Adorno? Unlike Kierkegaard, or Heidegger, or any of the disciples of that existentialist mode of “authenticity”, Adorno finds death philosophically unassimilable.

In his *Negative Dialectics*, he tells us that ‘human consciousness to this day is too weak to sustain the experience of death, perhaps even too weak for its conscious

acceptance' (RW, 181). What is significant here is his focus on the *experience* of death. He is not concerned so much with how we relate, theoretically, to the inevitability of our own deaths, but with the actual death that constantly surrounds us. Twentieth century Europe was piled high with corpses but the living, on Adorno's view, were unable to integrate knowledge of death as a primal, biological phenomenon into their culture. Adorno tells us that any attempt to do so only results in a falsifying transfiguration 'of that which the stench of cadavers expresses' (RW, 179). The proof of this unassimilability, for him, can be found in the camps: 'The somatic, unmeaningful stratum of life is the stage of suffering, of the suffering which in the camps without any consolation, burned every soothing feature out of the mind, and out of culture, the mind's objectification' (RW, 178).' Suffering and death cannot and should not be rendered meaningful.

Awareness of death in that material, organic sense is constantly suppressed in adult life. But Adorno tells us that 'Children sense some of this in the fascination that issues from the flayer's zone, from carcasses, from the repulsively sweet odor of putrefaction, and from the opprobrious term used for that zone. The unconscious power of that realm may be as great as that of infantile sexuality' (RW178-9). But adults find ways to flee from this knowledge, to sublimate it in artworks and philosophies, both religious and non-religious, which present death, deceptively, as a form of transcendence.

This concern with the cultural fantasies that mask our knowledge of death as something organic, as putrefaction, can be found in many of Mann's early works, but it is the very core of his magnum opus, *The Magic Mountain*. In one extraordinarily vivid scene (certainly known to Adorno) he prefigures Adorno's insistence that children have a heightened awareness of the physical reality of death even as they have begun to accept the idealized fiction of death that is culturally acceptable. The experience of Hans Castorp, standing as a child beside the body of his grandfather at his wake, is described thus:

There was something religious, gripping, and sadly beautiful, which was to say, spiritual about death and at the same time something that was the direct opposite, something very material, physical, which one could not really describe as beautiful, or gripping, or religious, or even as sad. The

religious, spiritual side was expressed by the pretentious lying-in-state, by the pomp of flowers and palm fronds – which he knew signified heavenly peace – and also, and more to the point, by the cross between the dead fingers of what had been his grandfather... But they also served another purpose – one that little Hans Castorp likewise noted, if not admitting it to himself in so many words in particular, the masses of flowers and more especially the very well represented tuberose were there for a more sobering reason – and that was to gloss over the other side of death, the one that is neither beautiful nor sad, but almost indecent in its base physicality, to make people forget it or at least not be reminded of it.

But it is the magical allure of the spiritual and sad idea of death to which the adult Hans succumbs in the sanatorium on the magic mountain, though Mann continues to juxtapose this aestheticized idea with the disgusting physical reality.

Adorno cannot tolerate the idea of death in its idealized, sublimated form. Again and again he wants to deny us its consolations. In his *In Search of Wagner*, drafted in the late 1930s, he deplores Wagner's music dramas, in which 'death is celebrated ...as 'soaring joy' and greatest good.' (Livingstone, 135). And after the war, in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, he attacks the Heideggerian approach to death, saying, "Whatever announces itself as "higher" than mere empirical certainty ...falsely cleanses death of its misery and stench...This cleansing occurs in the same manner as a Wagnerian love-or-salvation-death' (Tarnowski & Will, 129). He also tells us that 'If Heidegger had made the transition from the inorganic to the organic, the existential horizon of death would have been thoroughly changed' (130). His objection is epistemic (the mythologized account of death is false), but it is also, most importantly, a moral objection and it gains special urgency, for him, by awareness of the horrors of Auschwitz and a powerful conviction that we should not be permitted to turn away from those horrors.

Art and transcendence

For both Mann and Adorno, form in art, and in music in particular, comes to be identified with transcendence and the transcendent is viewed as a trick that transfigures death. Formal perfection, the final resolution of all the tensions that subjective expression (or in the sonata form, development) creates, subordinates individual subjectivity to a higher objectivity. Adorno comes to see in Beethoven's early and middle works a *violent* imposition of form in which subjectively expressive details are permitted only insofar as they enter into the larger, harmonically perfected totality of the work.

The connection of the parts to the whole, their annihilation in it, and therefore their relation to something infinite in the movement of their finitude, is a representation of metaphysical transcendence... Beethoven's art achieves its metaphysical substantiality because he uses technique to manufacture the transcendence, the *coercion*, the violence. This is probably the deepest insight I have yet achieved into Beethoven.
(Beethoven, 77-8)

Convention, similarly, evokes transcendence as it negates individual, subjective expression. Hence the link that both Adorno and Mann draw between confronting death and seeking refuge in conventional modes of expression: this is the point at which expression can no longer be rooted in subjective experience and reaches beyond itself.

Adorno points out that Beethoven was himself aware of this tendency
On the technical identification of the expression of the 'mystical'. In late Beethoven un-plastic, uncharacteristic motifs are used, quoted... The *relationship* can be felt, although the model is not manifest. Hence the expression of the mysterious. Extremely important. Note Beethoven's dictum on natural genius and the chord of the diminished seventh. 'Dear boy, the surprising effects which many attribute to the natural genius of the composer alone, are often achieved quite simply by the correct use and resolution of the chords of the diminished seventh.' (*Beethoven*, 129)

He himself was aware that the evocation of transcendence is a transfiguring trick, attained by conventional means, rather than something that emerges organically out of subjective expression.

The meaning of the *Missa Solemnis*

This is all very metaphorical. And in relation to Beethoven's absolute music the metaphors might strike some as strained. But the *Missa Solemnis*, being a work with a religious text, deals directly with death and transcendence. And on some views it unequivocally celebrates transcendence in its most confident, religious form. Here is Charles Rosen's description from *The Classical Style* (375):

The Mass in D provides a musical equivalent for almost every word of the Creed: the music is no longer just a framework, a setting, against which the words are to be understood. Not even the greatest difficulties are shirked. The magnificent and seemingly endless series of crossing scales at the end of the *Credo*, which seem to go ever higher and lower like a Jacob's ladder as the complexity of the sound hides the new beginnings, must be accepted as Beethoven's audible image of eternity and they are the equivalent of the words, 'I believe in the life to come, world without end, amen.'

There is no ambivalence in the *Missa* on this reading. The *Credo*, taken to be a sincere expression of faith, is seen as the center of the work, expressing its essential meaning.

But for many others the Credo is much more ambiguous. The *Missa* seems to begin anew after the *Credo*. In fact, the most striking feature of the Mass, and the one that generates the most difficulties for any overall interpretation, is often taken to be the peculiar character of the final movement, the *Agnus Dei*, where we are brought abruptly down to earth by trumpets and timpani intruding on the sacred atmosphere with a military theme, evoking the perpetual earthly conflict between war and peace as the plea 'dona nobis pacem' is sounded.

Apart from the enormous musical challenges of the work, its complex harmonic progressions, formal idiosyncracies and abrupt dynamic shifts (it is notoriously difficult to conduct, so difficult that Fürtwängler never attempted to produce a recording), it is very difficult for the listener to make sense of what it means as a whole. As Drabkin points out, music theory, as the analysis of dynamic processes within music, cannot

provide us with any definitive answer to these larger questions about the overall meaning of a work. The *Credo*, for Adorno as for Rosen, is the center of the work. But for Rosen the repetition of the word *Credo* is an emphatic affirmation of faith. On Adorno's view (following Steuermann) Beethoven has 'the fugue theme repeat the word *Credo* as if the isolated man had to assure himself and others of his actual belief by this frequent repetition.' (577) To Rosen, this interpretation is a "cheap joke". But it is how I heard the *Credo*, too, on first listening.

On Adorno's view, the peculiar character of the *Missa* stems from 'Beethoven's despairing desire for salvation.' (576) The music is distinctive in its use of archaic forms, its refusal of thematic development, its lack of a dynamic pull. He tells us that 'the *enigma* of the *Missa Solemnis* is the tie between an archaism which mercilessly sacrifices all Beethoven's conquests and a human tone which appears to mock precisely this archaism' (576-7). In the *Kyrie*, for instance, the first part 'includes Beethoven's standpoint of subjective-harmonious being' but that that standpoint is quickly pushed 'into the horizon of sacred objectivity, it takes on a mediated character as well, separated from the composed spontaneity – it is stylized' (575). But the obvious stylization reveals too clearly the struggle with the subjective, it sets the transcendent and the human in opposition to one another rather than presenting transcendence as the completion of our humanity. There is no cleverly manufactured sense of reconciliation.

In his notes on the *Missa*, Adorno writes: 'Humanization and stylization. The sacred receding in favor of the human. ...Is the aesthetic problem of the *Missa* that of the leveling down to the universally human?' When I listen to the *Agnus Dei*, I find that I just naturally answer that question in the affirmative. The unison voices of the chorus singing 'dona nobis pacem' are a human community making a plea for a humane world. As Adorno says, 'as early as the words 'Et homo factus est' the music is warmed as if by a breath' (*Beethoven*, 149). I don't mean to say that we feel this to be an unambiguous good – in fact to many the *Agnus Dei* is a disappointment, since the religious yearning expressed in the *Kyrie* and the *Benedictus* is so real and so moving. We want to be transported, as we are in the *Mass in B minor*, but Beethoven, having shown in the first two movements that he is entirely capable of delivering that, finally denies it to us.

What did the *Missa* mean to Adorno? The triumph of the humanistic, and also the pathos of that triumph.

Conclusion

It is not easy to see how the interpretive dispute between Rosen and Adorno could be definitively resolved. It may be that such holistic interpretations of musical works are simply underdetermined by the musical and textual materials being interpreted. We have to resort to arguments about how things strike us, or what a phrase “sounds like” to us, where there is an inevitable subjective element. This does not necessarily imply, however, that interpretation must be epistemically and ethically unconstrained. Adorno’s interpretation is grounded in his most fundamental values. He refuses the consolations of sentimental religiosity. For him we have a moral obligation to refuse to wallow in artificial presentiments of transcendence and immortality. In *The Jargon of Authenticity* (16), he writes: ‘that religion has shifted into the subject, has become religiosity, follows the trend of history. Dead cells of religiosity in the midst of the secular, however, become poisonous.’ They prevent us from acknowledging the gruesome reality of death. They permit us to turn away from the meaning-defying facts of suffering and carnage that it is our moral duty to recognize.

Adorno seems to me to make available to us an interpretation of the *Missa solemnis* that does not require of unbelievers a sentimental, inauthentic indulgence in manufactured forms of transfiguration. It makes sense of the work in a way that allows us to remain true to our beliefs and values. It may not be the last word on the *Missa* but an interpretation that accomplishes that does not seem to me to be a ‘spectacular critical failure.’