

Resurrection in Music
By
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The Easter season, beginning with the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, is the central and most important time of the liturgical year, for “if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching in vain, and your faith, also in vain: (1 Cor 15:14).

At Easter time, the word alleluia takes on a life of its own with its many melodies soaring high above all others. The word alleluia comes from the Hebrew, *hallel*, which means the spontaneous and joyful praise of God to God. It is with great conviction that Christians sing the text “Jesus Christ is ris’n today, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia,” in its various musical settings.

Cantilena Romana

Some 3,000 plainchant melodies of *cantilena romana* were composed fifteen hundred years ago and are our closest link with the Apostolic Church. They form the most perfect artistic achievement in the Golden Age of music. The unity of text and melody radiates a depth of spiritual power capable of moving hearts at their very core.

The plainchant alleluia is especially rich with every embroidered syllable that wafts and undulates, rising and falling, *arsis* and *thesis*. In fact, the Benedictine Monks of St. Joseph Abbey, Solesmes (near Ls Mans), France, have re-issued their entire repertoire of Gregorian chant on CDs, and the renditions for Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter are sure to intensify one’s prayer. The monks of Solesmes have long studied the chant, and there is little question as to their vocal mastery in all aspects of the chant. Their recordings remain the gold standard of chant interpretation.

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A Lle- lú- ia.

Il le chante en entier trois fois, élevant chaque fois le ton, et à chaque fois le Chœur le répète après lui sur le même ton.
Puis le Chœur poursuit :

C Onfitémini Dó- mi-no, quó- ni- am

bónus : quó- ni-am in saécu-lum mi-se-ri-

córdi- a * é- jus. (*On ne répète pas Alleluia.*)

Three Classical Compositions

There are three musical compositions in the classical repertoire that convey resurrection joy to their listeners: George Friedrich Händel’s “Hallelujah” chorus from his oratorio, “Messiah,” Ludwig van Beethoven’s Ode “To Joy” from his Ninth symphony, and Gustav Mahler’s finale of the second symphony, “Resurrection.” This last piece is less known to the wider audience, but it received special attention a few years ago. The reason for this will be made clear toward the end of this essay.

Händel’s “Messiah

Toward the Easter section of the oratorio “Messiah,” the “Hallelujah” chorus has not only retained its wide popularity since its first performance in 1742 but has also gained in popular appeal since then. Perhaps because of its festive character, it is more often performed during the Advent-Christmas season than at Easter, the appropriate time to hear it sung.

After Händel had finished composing the “Hallelujah” chorus, he exclaimed with unmitigated joy, “I did think I saw all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself.” The text of the music tells us what to believe, the music, what to feel:

Hallelujah! (Repeated);
For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Hallelujah! (Repeated);
And he shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah! (Repeated)
King of Kings and Lord of Lord.
The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.
And he shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah! (Repeated). – Rev 19:6; 11:15; 19:16

Most of us can hear the music even while reading the text from the Book of Revelation. With the dramatic introduction, the full-throated chorus bursts forth with the Hallelujah. The text proper proclaims the reign of the omnipotent Lord God. The music itself bursts forth with sheer vitality. The string section skips with exuberance while the brilliant, penetrating Baroque trumpets rouse the spirit together with thunderous timpani. In concert halls and even in churches, it is a custom to stand when listening to the “Hallelujah” chorus. In 1743, King George III stood in utter amazement at its glorious sound, and he set in motion this tradition. The music uplifts the whole person to feel Christ’s Resurrection as one’s own.



Beethoven's 'Dark Night of the Soul'

In 1800-01, the thirty-year old Beethoven was experiencing a hearing loss from which he never recovered. By the time the Ninth symphony was composed in 1823, he had been completely deaf for about twelve years. He spared no effort to stem his deafness. He cursed his fate. He prayed for divine mercy. Why would God take from him his most prized possession? How could God be so cruel!

To grasp Beethoven's 'resurrection' in his Ninth symphony, we must look to his indomitable will, a power so strong that it moves the listener to tears. His determination, his enormous powers of concentration, and his musical genius changed the course of music history. Slowly, his pain began to intensify his creativity. How he did this we can never know, but with God's grace, he stopped cursing his fate and made peace with it. The dissonance in his life was finally resolved into harmony—and even joy. As he integrated the inner battle with his life-vision, his final compositions express this integration. Not the living death of deafness, but an ode to resurrection joy.

Beethoven's Ode "To Joy"

Beethoven's last period (1815-27), though marked by isolation from others, is one of intense creativity and joy. If the Fifth Symphony finds meaning in life despite suffering, the Ninth Symphony discovers meaning through suffering. In the final movement, his Ode "To Joy," Beethoven unites himself with the universal human family, children of a heavenly Father. The refrain of the text, written by Frederick Schiller reads: "All men shall be brothers under your protective wing." Shouts of *freu/Freude/Freunde* (joy and friendship) convey his inner joy never to be taken from him. The phrase, *mit Gott* (with God), climbs to musical heights as though he

has been granted a vision of God. Suffering becomes enlightenment.

History records that at the conclusion of the first performance, the audience stood to give Beethoven a thunderous ovation. With an assistant at his side, he had kept the rhythm going throughout. But with his back to the audience, he couldn't hear the applause. The first soprano led him to the edge of the stage where he could see the applause for himself. The tears in his eyes said it all! Beethoven's Catholic faith, expressed in his music, is one man's view of universally-held beliefs.



When the first sounds of the new millennium began to sound in the Far East and then across the continents, Beethoven's Ode "To Joy" pealed majestically in a world searching for the meaning of life. Beethoven found not despair but joy, not nihilism but meaning in life. His 'candle' had to burn itself out in order to give off its light!

Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony

Gustav Mahler's marital and professional life were difficult challenges. Still he rose to high acclaim in Viennese musical circles, but hostility from an anti-Semitic press prompted him to convert from Judaism to Catholicism. He would then be more acceptable to the Viennese musical *hoi polloi* in securing the prized directorship of the Vienna State Opera Company.

Universal questions plagued him: why am I living, what is the purpose of my suffering; has life been a huge, frightful joke? These questions find expression in his highly-charged emotional symphonies. When one symphony ends with tentative hope tinged with doubt, he asks the same question in the next symphony. His "Resurrection" symphony seems to be his best attempt to answer the question, earlier rather than later. Despite anxiety, anguish, fear, and pain, his final movement struggles with the pursuit of love that leads to enlightenment and elevation:

Believe, my heart. O believe, naught shall be lost to you . . .
O believe: thou wast not born in vain!
Thou has not lived and suffered in vain! . . .
All that has sprung passed must rise again!
Now cease to tremble!
Prepare thyself to live! . . .

To soar upwards to the light which no eye has penetrated!
Its wing that I won is expanded and I fly up.
Die shall I in order to live. Rise again, yes, rise again.
Will you, my heart, in an instant! That for which you suffered,
To God will it lead you!

The text, most of which Mahler composed himself, is neither explicitly religious nor confessional. Yet, it is man's innate hope reaching out to God.

September 11, 2011

To commemorate the tenth anniversary of that dark day in 2001, Mahler's "Resurrection" symphony seemed to express the unimaginable pain that was thrust on the thousands. The country had been plunged into suffering that encompassed the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. This suffering pushed reason and faith to the very edge, and neither could alone address the overwhelming tragedy. Many turned to God for consolation. Others could not even touch the pain.

On September 11, 2011, Allan Gilbert, music director of the New York Philharmonic orchestra, chose to perform Mahler's "Resurrection" symphony at a "Concert for New York." Before conducting the symphony, he reflected:

On 9/11, we witnessed devastation, bravery, and heroism. We joined agony with hope. . . . When the boundaries of our reasoning are strained, what do we do? We listen to music, we speak through music, we question through music.

Conductor Gilbert's preface responded to a largely secular audience still conflicted with aspirations of hope yet tinged with doubt. Christians however did sense a ray of light in the darkness.

In the face of September 11th, Christian hope was possible only in the light of Christ's redemption "in the coming of absolute love that identifies itself with suffering and with the sufferers of the world" (Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 161-2). Jesus in his human nature suffers in solidarity with us. While he brings us to the cross, the last sound is not the shrieking finality of death without hope but a symphony of resurrection joy.

