AN EXEGESIS OF THE KYRIE FROM BEETHOVEN'S
MASS IN C, OPUS 861

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Recorded excerpts from Beethoven's Mass in C, pertinent to Appendices 1 and 2, may be accessed at Religion and the Arts web page:

http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/relarts/mcgrann/mcgrann.html

What follows is more hermeneutics than exegesis, but the title is justified, not simply because the topic concerns a question of religious meaning, but because the basic intent of exegesis readily applies to music. Where, traditionally, exegesis seeks to grasp the “full thought” of a Biblical passage by a process of leading from its “literal sense” (what the passage says) into other readings that are found to be valid within the broader context of revealed knowledge, so too, if we are to find meaning in musical sounds (rather than just to receive their sonic qualities), we must follow a comparable process that leads from what the musical passage “says” to what various relevant contexts allow us to make of that passage.

While the basic paradigm applies in both cases, problems quickly arise when we try to define the components of exegesis in terms of music - what is the “literal sense” of a musical sound? - is the “full thought” nothing more than the sonic construct itself, the meaning of which is simply an explanation of the musical function of each passage within the total structure? - or can music convey (or should it be seen to convey) ideas beyond the sounds themselves? At issue are the perplexing and ever present questions of what music is and what it communicates. Abstract instrumental music has the best claim for limiting the scope of interpretation: here music is self-contained, without reference to other modes of communication, its sounds without denotative value, structured according to purely musical laws. However, music when accompanying a text is another matter; now it serves as an added medium for conveying the (relatively) more concrete meaning of the words. Here too problems arise, particularly as the musical setting can alter or shade the sense or tone of what the words seem to say. Any discrepancy between the verbal message and the musical message adds to the difficulties of the listener in understanding what is heard.
With this we have shifted into hermeneutics itself, for it is hermeneutics which asserts that such distances exist between reader and text. No matter how well people think they understand something, it is always to some degree "foreign" to them, and it is when one tries to bridge this "distance" (however great or small) that the search for meaning begins. The nineteenth century philologist Friedrich Schleiermacher proposed ways by which such gaps could be spanned: through so-called "grammatical" and "psychological" interpretations:

Understanding takes place only in the coinherence of two moments: ... to understand what is said in the context of the language with its possibilities [i.e. grammatical interpretation], and to understand it as a fact in the thinking of the speaker [i.e. psychological interpretation].

Given that communication results when an individual transforms a language in a particular way, to uncover this act of transformation (and thereby to “understand” what is communicated), Schleiermacher proposes to proceed through circles of reference, so-called hermeneutic circles, in which one shifts back and forth between investigating the language (the "grammatical") and the author’s individualization of that language (the "psychological"), and between considering the whole of the text and its parts to establish meaning. Hermeneutic circles serve as the checks and balances that confirm any exegetical reading as valid.

Admittedly these are the superficialities of exegesis and hermeneutics, but such ways of thinking are useful when trying to grasp how the author/composer transforms a language/music into a communication. To see this at work, let us ask what meaning we can ascribe to the music that Beethoven wrote for the Kyrie of his Mass in C, opus 86. How I arrive at a revelation of the full thought of the music takes into account three things: 1. the music of Beethoven’s Kyrie as we hear it in performance or see it in a published score; 2. Beethoven’s sketches, which allow insight into the composer’s thoughts and intentions at various stages of consideration; 3. perceptions of the music in light of various liturgical explications of the Ordinary text, sanctioned and promulgated by the Church.

Beethoven’s music provides the hermeneutic object for “grammatical” investigation (the sounds as a musical construct), Beethoven’s sketches (where he confronts and works out his individualization of the musical language) provide a more concrete source for “psychological” investigation than Schleiermacher conceived of in his theory, and liturgical explications