

**Program Notes**  
**by**  
**Adriana Rättsch-Rivera**

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn in 1770 and died in Vienna in 1827. He was one of the most revered composers of all times and a man of many mysteries. These mysteries have continued to intrigue us, from his lifetime up to the present day. The recently-surfaced piece of his skull in Danville, and his lock of hair purchased at Sotheby's in London (now at the Ira Brilliant Center for Beethoven Studies at San Jose State University) are among the many unsolved mysteries about this famous composer; however, there are even some encouraging recent developments about the identity of his "Immortal Beloved", the unknown woman with whom he was secretly obsessed for a short time in 1810.

Some scholars consider Beethoven a great composer solely on the basis of his piano and symphonic music. It's surprising to realize, by looking at the statistics, that he was in fact a prolific song writer. According to the Kinsky-Halm thematic catalog, Beethoven wrote over 1,340 vocal works that include songs, arias, canons, airs and cantatas. He used over 50 poets for his vocal works including several female poets. Many of his opus numbers after his opera *Fidelio*, and over 60% of his works without opus numbers, are for vocal works.

Compared to the famous chorus of the Ninth Symphony, the vocal music of Beethoven is not as well-known. In fact, many people are under the impression that Beethoven could not write a memorable tune like Mozart or Schubert, famous for their *Gassenhauer* (a term used to say it's sung in every back alley), but his Ninth Symphony defies that notion. Beethoven treated the human voice like instruments, and some of the slow movements of his instrumental sonatas sound like song tunes. There is a particular equality in his vocal writing that sets the vocal music by this composer apart from his contemporaries.

His *Mass in C*, Op. 86, written in 1807 for the religious name anniversary of Princess Maria von Liechtenstein, is an example of how Beethoven incorporated solo voices, chorus, and orchestra in a united effort to express the meaning of this religious Mass. From the ancient Greek *Kyrie Eleison*, he builds up to the *Gloria in excelsis deo* by using the voices of the chorus in staggered entrances like instruments. The human voice truly becomes equal to the orchestra in this fugal approach. By the time he has warmed up to the *Credo*, Beethoven now employs word painting. He takes the

## Program Notes, continued

liturgy of the mass very seriously. There is no holding back when the chorus sings *Ascendit in coelum*, (ascend to heaven) with the strings playing their upward scales to express the deeper meaning of the text.

On the word *judicare* he creates tight harmonies that are undoubtedly intentional. This Mass, however, did not find favor with the Count that commissioned it; the only logical explanation could be that this work is extremely challenging, and musicians cannot do justice to it in a few rehearsals only--which was probably the case back at the court of Esterhazy. The dedication went through several other recipients before it was finally dedicated to Count Kinsky.

In *Meeresstille und Glückliche Fahrt*, Op. 112, (1814), a work for chorus and orchestra, Beethoven uses a pair of short poems by Goethe to express dramatic contrast. The stagnant silence of the sea is exemplified with monotone, recitative-like voices that are very soft (*pianissimo*), almost inaudible. There is a static to this first poem to describe the utter motionlessness of the sea. Voices move slowly in half steps as if they are imprisoned by sound; a very Beethovenian reality in 1814. Again, Beethoven uses voice painting with the dramatic German text and creates close harmonic progressions on words like *fürchterlich*, ("horrible"), with *sforzando-piano*, and on the word *Weite* the "expanse of the sea", tied whole notes. In the "Happy Journey" (*Glückliche Fahrt*) in contrast, he switches to a 6/8 rhythm conveying the swaying back and forth of the ship with increased speed, upward scales, and dynamic expression in the orchestra.

The *Elegischer Gesang* Op. 118 (1814) for chorus and string quartet is based on a profound short poem and was written to commemorate the third anniversary of the death of a very young noblewoman who died in childbirth. The poet is unknown, but it is nevertheless a powerful text. The tempo marking *Langsam und sanft* matches the first word *sanft*, which means "gentle". This work profoundly expresses the suffering and pain brought by untimely death.

*Adriana Rättsch-Rivera is Founder and Artistic Director of The Beethoven Academy of Music, whose mission is to benefit the community with excellence in classical music. She holds a BMus from the University of Hawaii and an MA in Music from the California State University, East Bay.*