

Beethoven: Missa Solemnis, classical album review

Philippe Herreweghe's recording of Beethoven's piece Missa Solemnis has a seasoned, generous wisdom, writes Ivan Hewett.

★★★★★



Sudden excitement: Marlis Petersen

By Ivan Hewett

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Marlis Petersen (soprano), Gerhild Romberger (mezzo-soprano), Benjamin Hulett (tenor), David Wilson-Johnson (baritone), Collegium Vocale Gent, Orchestre des Champs-Élysées, Philippe Herreweghe

Outhere LPH 007, £13.99

Even Beethoven's most ardent fans admit the Missa Solemnis is a tough nut. Beethoven wanted it to be his crowning achievement, and lavished more care on it than any other of his works.

What emerged from his labours was an awe-inspiring but puzzling piece, radical in some ways and deeply conservative in others. It puts enormous strain on the chorus, especially the sopranos who are constantly asked to ring out fortissimo at the top of their range.

The sense of colossal aspiration mingled with physical difficulty means performances can sound laboured. This one never does.

Conductor Philippe Herreweghe has been conducting the piece for almost 20 years, and this recording has a seasoned, generous wisdom combined with the transparency and rhythmic elasticity of “period instrument” performance – a very rare combination. The chorus never forces its tone, and the quartet of soloists has an ease in its collective sound.

However, the real stars of the recording are the orchestral players. We’re used to associating period instruments with brisk tempos, but often Herreweghe’s speeds are tellingly spacious, as in the *Et vitam venturi*.

Combined with the transparent and highly coloured sound, it allows the strangeness of Beethoven’s sound-world to emerge with clarity. And also the sudden excitement in the final *Agnus*, with its unexpected military trumpets and kettledrums. If you’ve always had your doubts about the piece, this may be the recording that quells them.

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