

BEETHOVEN'S GREAT GIFT TO THE CHURCH

the "expression of a childlike serene mind"
E.T.A. Hoffmann, contemporary music critic

THIS EASTER—according to the Orthodox reckoning May 1, 2016—at Saint Augustine's Orthodox Church, THE AMBROSIAN CHORISTERS, soloists and orchestra will present the Mass in C, op. 86 by Ludwig van Beethoven during the celebration of the Solemn Mass of Pascha.

This musical setting of the words of the Mass was composed by Beethoven for the celebration of the Name's Day of the Princess Maria Hermenegild Esterházy and sung during the celebration of the Mass on the Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God on September 8, 1807 at the Bergkirche of the Esterházy estate in Hungary.

For many years before, Prince Nikolaus Esterházy II had regularly commissioned a setting of the Mass from his Kapellmeister of 40 years, the incomparable Franz Josef Haydn. Haydn's last six settings of the Mass are legendary in their spiritual and musical artistry. "The father of the string quartet" and master symphonist had lavished all of his creative genius on these Masses, which are recognized by many as some of his greatest works. Now that Haydn had retired and moved to Vienna, the Prince desired that the new musical "rising star" should be given the commission for the new Mass.

Beethoven confessed in a letter to the Prince: "may I just say that I will hand the mass over to you with great trepidation, as Your Serene Highness is accustomed to having the inimitable masterworks of the great Haydn performed." Lewis Lockwood, the Beethoven scholar writes:

On accepting the prince's commission Beethoven had praised Haydn's masses, calling them "inimitable mas-

terpieces." Beethoven meant it. He clearly studied Haydn's masses while composing his own, no doubt for reasons far beyond the fact that the Esterházy's had commissioned it, as we see from his sketches for the *Gloria*. The sketches include two pages copied from the Gloria of Haydn's *Schöpfungsmesse* ("Creation Mass"), one of four late Haydn masses easily available to Beethoven in published editions.

Beethoven, who had never written a setting of the Mass before, took the commission very seriously. Although he was very familiar with the Mass he had the Latin text translated into a literal German text so that he could be absolutely sure of the meaning of each of the sacred words.

What followed was one of the greatest Liturgical masterpieces ever written: a work of great piety, devotion, majesty and musical excellence. Each of the movements captures the essence of the meaning of the sacred text in a unique way.

We are very happy that we are able to present this Mass on the greatest day of the year—Holy Easter. This splendid work has not been heard at St. Augustine's Church since 1986.

Our augmented AMBROSIAN CHORISTERS with a larger professional orchestra and four vocal soloists—Ruth Carver, *soprano*; Teleri Gee, *mezzo-soprano*; Joshua Zabatta, *tenor*; and Tom Sitzler, *baritone*—will be under the direction of Richard Robertson. Frank Slechta will be organist and director of the *Schola Cantorum*.

Also to be heard at Mass is the Easter Offertory, *Terra Tremuit* by Josef von Eybler, Mozart's *Ave verum corpus* and at the end, the mighty Hallelujah! from Beethoven's "Christ on the Mount of Olives."