

Missa Latina pro pace

A regional premiere

Program Notes

This evening Mendelssohn Club presents the Philadelphia premiere of Roberto Sierra's critically acclaimed *Missa Latina (Pro Pace)*, set for soprano, baritone, chorus and orchestra. Commissioned and premiered by the National Symphony and the Choral Arts Society of Washington in 2006, it has received numerous subsequent performances across the United States, including the Casals Festival in Puerto Rico, and has been recorded by Andreas Delfs and the Milwaukee Symphony. Mendelssohn Club also welcomes soprano Heidi Grant Murphy and baritone Nathaniel Webster who were featured in both the premiere performance and the recording of *Missa Latina*.



Composer Roberto Sierra is familiar to both Philadelphia and Mendelssohn Club audiences. He served as composer-in-residence to the Philadelphia Orchestra during the 2000-2001 season and composed the *Concerto for Orchestra* for their centennial. Mendelssohn Club commissioned Sierra's *Lux aeterna*, which was premiered in 1996. Sierra was born in Puerto Rico and studied at the Conservatorio de Música and University of Puerto Rico, the Royal College of Music and University of London, and the Institute for Sonology in Utrecht. He spent three years studying composition with Györgi Ligeti at the Hochschule für Musik in Hamburg. Sierra has served as Director of Cultural Activities at the University of Puerto Rico, Chancellor of the Conservatorio de Música de Puerto Rico, and since 1992 has been on the faculty of Cornell University where he currently serves as Chair of the Department of Music. He has also served as composer-in-residence for the Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra, the New Mexico Symphony, and the Milwaukee Symphony, which has recorded a number of his works. Sierra's music has been commissioned and performed by major orchestras throughout the world. *Sinfonía No. 1*, commissioned by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, won the 2004 Kenneth Davenport Competition for Orchestral Works. The Milwaukee Symphony's recording of his *Sinfonía No. 3 "La Salsa"* was awarded the 2007 Serge and Olga Koussevitzky International Recording Award. His 2009 *Sinfonía No. 4* was the inaugural work from the prestigious Sphinx Consortium, a group of 12 orchestras and organizations including the Philadelphia Orchestra, which seeks to build the repertoire from Black and Latino composers.

The title *Missa Latina* refers not only to the traditional Latin mass but also to the Latino music and rhythms of Sierra's native Puerto Rico. It should not, however, be thought of as merely a salsa mass or a Puerto Rican *Misa Criolla* (Ariel Ramírez's popular Spanish language mass setting, based on Argentinean folk melodies and heavily featuring

traditional instruments). Sierra's mass owes its heritage and form more to the classical concert masses of Haydn and Mozart, even to the point of retaining the customary fugue setting of the *cum Sancto Spiritu* text in the *Gloria*. And while Latino rhythms and percussion instruments figure prominently in the *Missa Latina*, they are only one element in a sophisticated and eclectic musical palette which also draws on plainsong chant, Bach, jazz harmonies, Renaissance polyphony, Romantic lyricism and contemporary dissonance.

Sierra subtitled the mass *Pro Pace* and intended the *Missa* as a plea for peace, noting "...I don't remember living in a period where there was not a war going on that did not affect people I knew." To that end, Sierra added carefully selected texts from the Proper of the Mass (prayers for a specific Sunday in the liturgical calendar) to the usual mass parts. Sierra's setting is as complex emotionally as it is musically. It frankly acknowledges doubt, uncertainty and anxiety as well as faith, affirmation and hope. But Sierra also appends jubilant, energetic alleluias to both the *Offertorium* and *Agnus Dei*, and in the end one is left with a feeling of joy and optimism.

The mass opens with the *Introitus*, or entrance prayer, the first of the additional texts from the Proper of the Mass. The soprano enters quietly with the text *Da pacem, Domine* (Lord, grant us peace). The beautifully lyrical melody is based on the traditional Gregorian chant setting of that same text. After a brief orchestral interlude, the women's voices enter, singing a soft, highly rhythmic setting of the opening of Psalm 122 (I rejoiced when they said unto me). This quiet, introspective setting provides something of a contrast to the text, a device to which Sierra returns several times in the *Missa*. An orchestral coda introduces the principal rhythmic motif of the *Missa*, the 3+3+2 *tresillo* rhythm, heard in the quiet pizzicato of the string basses. This unobtrusive appearance of the *tresillo* demonstrates the versatility with which Sierra uses Latino rhythms; they are not only for bouncy, exuberant music.

The *Kyrie* provides an immediate contrast, opening with fortissimo chords from the orchestra and an impassioned plea for mercy from the chorus. Historically, the *Kyrie* was pared down from a much longer litany to just three lines which comprise its core message. In like manner, Sierra focuses on that core meaning. Despite the appearance of the *tresillo* rhythm in the orchestra and a highly syncopated setting of the *Christe eleison* text for the soloists, the music has a serious and sometimes anguished intensity which lends a sense of immediacy to the plea for mercy. The movement ends with a slightly unsettling tonal ambiguity, a sustained D pedal set against a B-flat chord.

The *tresillo* rhythm finally comes to the fore in the opening of the *Gloria*, with ascending scales in the orchestra and the sequential entrance of the choral voices all joining that 3+3+2 rhythmic motive. The opening phrase of the *Gloria* is scriptural – the greeting the angels gave to the shepherds at the birth of Christ as recorded in the gospel of Luke – but the rest of it is drawn from *psalmi idiotici*, prayers written by individuals in imitation of the Biblical psalms, each with its own style and intent. Sierra's setting of the *Gloria* reflects this structure, with each individual phrase receiving its own musical treatment. The opening phrase, with its driving *tresillo* rhythm, gives way to a baritone solo in

which the women's voices provide a sort of rhythmic ostinato set above a repeating orchestral vamp inspired by the Cuban *son montuno*. The men's voices enter with yet a different syncopated rhythm, a *tumbao*. This layering of different rhythmic patterns is another characteristic of Latino music that Sierra employs throughout the *Missa*.

Sierra has a wonderful gift for melody which is displayed in two sections for the soloists: a beautifully lyrical, soaring melody for the soprano (*gratias agimus tibi*) and a duet for baritone and soprano (*qui tollis peccata mundi*) which is largely set as a canon. As is traditional in classical concert masses, Sierra sets the final phrase of the *Gloria* (*cum Sancto Spiritu*) as a fugue, but with his own unique touches: a highly angular fugue subject in which the voices enter at the interval of a tritone (three whole steps) rather than a more consonant interval. The fugue theme is eventually passed to the soloists while the chorus sings *Amen*, the entrances staggered so that the words don't align, creating an effect like a crowd murmuring assent. And in a wonderful touch, Sierra then reprises the opening *gloria in excelsis* music, bringing the movement to a joyous conclusion.

The *Credo* is the longest and most complex movement in the *Missa Latina*. As in the *Gloria*, Sierra sets each phrase of the text individually, sometimes almost on a word by word basis. He takes advantage of opportunities not only for word painting but also for contrasting the musical setting with the meaning of the text. This latter occurs even with the first word of the movement, *credo* (I believe). After a fortissimo chord by the orchestra, the soloists and chorus enter quietly, almost haltingly, and with a tonal ambiguity which represents doubt and uncertainty to the composer. In some ways, the opening section unfolds like a long journey from uncertainty to belief, with long, sinuous phrases which move variously by whole and half steps and polyrhythmic sections which again contrast the text – *credo in unum Dominum Jesum Christum* (I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ.) The music slowly builds momentum until reaching the first words of praise – *Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine* (God of God, light of light) – set in the now familiar *tresillo* rhythm.

The text *et homo factus est* (and he was made man) represents one of the central tenets of the *Credo* and is traditionally set off musically in some way from the rest of the text. Sierra follows this tradition, bracketing that text with brief passages for orchestra alone. In a subtle gesture, the rapid, ascending scales of the introductory passage recall the opening of the *Gloria*, and the angelic words which greeted the actual incarnation. Sierra saves some of his most interesting word painting for the next sections. The text *et ascendit in caelum* (he ascended into heaven) features not only an ascending musical line, but a divisi chorus which enters sequentially from bass to soprano on successively higher pitches. The text *et unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam* (one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church), is also set for divisi chorus and both soloists, but with each of the ten voices moving with different rhythms, reflecting for the composer a diversity of faiths and beliefs, all seeking the same God. The *Credo* ends with a quiet, chant-like *amen* followed by a brief orchestral melody of Coplandesque beauty. It is an unexpected serenity, as if doubt and uncertainty had been finally laid to rest.

The *Offertorium* is the second section of the *Missa* taken from the Proper of the Mass. It opens with a rather agitated orchestral introduction, contrasting again the calm quiet with which the *Credo* ended. The initial section is set for baritone solo, with the chorus entering on a single word, *pax* (peace). An *a cappella* section follows, set for chorus and soprano, a beautifully harmonized depiction of *Sion* – Jerusalem, the City of Peace. Pizzicato cellos and string basses introduce a *clave* rhythm and the chorus joins in with a highly syncopated *laudate* (rejoice). Sierra appends an extended, colorful, energetic and highly rhythmic *alleluia* to conclude the *Offertorium*.

In the opening of the *Sanctus*, the meter alternates between 3/4 and 5/8, providing a propulsive force which moves the music forward at a somewhat breathless pace. The soprano solo introduces the delightfully joyful *pleni sunt caeli* (heaven and earth are filled with your glory), set to a *tresillo* rhythm accompanied by a *son montuno* orchestral vamp. The chorus adds a highly syncopated *hosanna* as a rhythmic ostinato. The *Benedictus* features a simple but beautifully lyrical melody for the soprano solo. The chorus and baritone solo are added with an equally beautiful harmonization. The *hosanna* melody quietly returns, this time in the sopranos of the chorus. The hosannas fade away, ending on a widely spaced chord which once again does not quite resolve.

The *Agnus Dei* is the final movement of the *Missa*. It opens with chant-like, melismatic passages for the baritone solo which are echoed in the orchestra. On the text *peccata mundi* (sins of the world), divisi men's voices enter sequentially, each voice with a different rhythm, a graphic illustration of the chaos introduced by the sins of the world. There is a seriousness and urgency to the *Agnus Dei* setting which recalls the earlier *Kyrie*. Sierra uses the final word of the *Agnus Dei*, *pacem* (peace), as a segue into the last of the additional texts. This is the blessing Jesus bestowed on the apostles after the Resurrection, *pacem relinquo vobis* (my peace I give you), and is used liturgically in the Mass at the Kiss of Peace. The soprano takes that text while the chorus repeats the word *pacem* over and over again. The baritone suddenly intones the word *alleluia*, to which the chorus replies. This leads to an exuberant, joyful *alleluia*, again in *tresillo* rhythm and set against a *son* accompaniment in the orchestra, which brings the *Missa Latina* to its glorious conclusion.

– Michael Moore

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