

At first glance, this concert program seems like a straightforward juxtaposition of light and dark: we have Leonard Bernstein's magnificent "Kaddish"—his prayer for the dead—and, on the other hand, Beethoven's genial Eighth Symphony. Tying them together—metaphorically if not musically—is Laurie San Martin's evocatively entitled, *nights bright days*.

But though there are plentiful juxtapositions in this concert, they are not straightforward. Take the Kaddish. Every end-of-life celebration, from the small-town Protestant funeral to a grand Roman Catholic Mass; from the Balinese *Nyepi* that marks the death of the old year to *Día de Muertos* serves in part to remind us of the imminence of our own demise. These rituals are often threaded with heartening memories of the departed, but they function primarily to contextualize our smallness in the grand scheme of things, to demonstrate our vulnerability.

But the Kaddish is a special case among rituals of mourning. For starters, there is not a single mention of death anywhere in the prayer. On the contrary the far more frequent references are to *chayim*, Hebrew for "life." Throughout, we sense the dualism of the Jewish tradition—the recursive embedding of life within death, and the poignant juxtaposition of "I and Thou." This latter idea makes the Kaddish into a personal prayer rather than an institutionalized homily. The familial intimacy with which a Jew addresses God allows her or him to speak with a frankness that would seem shocking and out of place in many other religions.

Bernstein, among the most personally expressive musicians of the 20th century (some might say idiosyncratic), takes fully to heart the invitation for unmediated and personal communication with God. As he does in his more stylistically eclectic *Mass*, he pushes forward in the Kaddish with heated, dissonant music then retreats in moments of suspended harmony. He gave the Kaddish a distinctly male, practically aggressive, perspective in his original 1963 version with a part for narrator that spoke on behalf of the patriarchy. Then 15 years later, he reversed that idea in a more moderate version of the text that allows for a female narrator. The symphony was premiered just weeks after the assassination of President Kennedy, who was a friend of Bernstein's from their Harvard days together, and still evokes the gut-punch of that fateful month. But the work is also about the struggle for belief in immediate post-Holocaust generation of Jews. In a symphony that seems to be about everything, to this listener the music walks right up to the line where it might be about nothing. But that is the gamble an artist might take in order to achieve great things.

Indeed, the incongruities—the brilliance mixed with the meandering—are dizzying: In the Kaddish, Bernstein purports to speak for his era, yet he wears his spiritual uncertainty and generational guilt like a badge. He wields his well-honed skill as a composer like a ginseng knife and at the same moment muddles his way through life in an existential fog. The embedded contradictions make his music function a little like a well-shaken bottle of warm Coca-Cola—a favorite past time of mine in 1963. Before too long everything is going everywhere!

But that is what makes this music seem more like life to me than death. Life is joyously sloppy and uncertain, while death—as the painter Mark Rothko once said of silence—is "so accurate."

The *riposte* to Bernstein in today's concert is Beethoven's light-filled *Eighth Symphony*, which he sometimes called his "little symphony in F" to separate it from the longer *Sixth Symphony* in the same key. The common mistake with Beethoven is to see his even numbered

symphonies, all written in sunny tonalities (D, B-flat, and F Major), as not just light-hearted but also light weight. While it's true that the even-numbered symphonies were generally sparer in emotional force and more classical in construction than their more dramatic odd-numbered counterparts, they also were written in times of particular distress in Beethoven's personal life.

The *Second Symphony* was created as Beethoven came to terms with his growing deafness. The *Fourth Symphony* was composed at one of Beethoven's many moments of existential uncertainty (witness as the composer tiptoes through a set of mysterious harmonies before finally declaring himself to B-flat major.) And the *Eighth* was made around the time that Beethoven wrote to his "immortal beloved," a woman to whom he pledged undying love and whose identity is still unknown. Some believe that she was the wife of a friend of Beethoven. With every loss—of hearing, of spiritual certainty, and of meaningful and requited love—Beethoven turned to the rational purity of classical forms for comfort. Beethoven's *Eighth Symphony* sounds a lot like Haydn, not out of nostalgia for a past master, but because the firmness of Haydn's classical language offered clarity and certainty in times of personal turmoil. On the other hand, one could argue that the stormy, dramatic symphonies required a modicum of personal security to counterbalance the artistic risks he took, and may have been the tokens of (slightly) happier times.

Laurie San Martin's brief overture to the program shows how dark and light can co-exist in the same musical framework. But whether we take this structure as the object lesson of today's concert or not, we nevertheless feel urged to find light where we might least expect it, and are warned that below a calm surface sometimes lies hidden turbulence.

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