

ORATORIO

RTHK Radio 4
10:00 – 11:00

Programme 4
Sunday 27 May 2007

KANE: Hello once more, and welcome to “Oratorio”, a short weekly *series* of lesser-known, or perhaps largely *unknown* oratorios, both old and relatively new. I’m Ciaran Kane; and I’ve started off with *speech* today because the work I’m presenting is short enough to fit entirely into the programme’s allotted time-span. So you get to hear the *whole* thing, *including* its orchestral introduction, *uncut* and *un-interrupted*. The work is Beethoven’s one and only oratorio, “Christ on the Mount of Olives”, written shortly before the composer started on his masterpiece ‘Eroica’ symphony number 3. His only opera, ‘Fidelio’, came not long afterwards. Beethoven wrote his oratorio quite quickly in early 1803, and it had its first performance in Vienna that year. The text is by Franz Xaver Huber, who was a well-known libretto-writer in Vienna around 1800. Unlike conventional settings of the Passion of Christ, Huber’s text is confined to what happened in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, and ends with Jesus’ arrest there, without mention of any subsequent events. The high point comes after the intense spiritual, internal struggle and suffering of Jesus accepting His Father’s will for Him, and His submission to being taken. The oratorio here switches to a hymn of praise for Christ’s act of redemption, as if to indicate that the *physical* suffering of the Passion is less important than the internal, psychological struggle. It’s been suggested too that Beethoven’s intimations of his coming *deafness* may be reflected in this emphasis. “Christ on the Mount of Olives” has no *narrator*, and the text is also rather remarkable in having almost *no* direct quotation at *all* from *any* of the gospel accounts of Jesus in the garden. All the action takes place in monologues or dialogues by the three individuals and three groups who are the “actors” in the piece: Jesus, a Seraph (angel) and Peter; and soldiers, disciples and angels. In this recording, Jesus is sung by tenor Placido Domingo, the Seraph by soprano Luba Orgonasova, and Peter by base Andreas Schmidt. The Rundfunkchor Berlin is

directed by Simon Halsey, and the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin by Kent Nagano. Beethoven's "Christ on the Mount of Olives" begins with an orchestral prelude leading to Jesus, in a recitative and aria, calling on God: 'My father, O send me comfort, strength and power', and pleading in fear and distress, "take this cup of sorrows from me".

MUSIC: Beethoven --- Christ on Mount of Olives CD 65263 ## 1 – 3 12:19

KANE: In the next number of Beethoven's oratorio "Christ on the Mount of Olives", the angel of God, a Seraph, sings of Christ's generosity, ready to suffer the most agonising of deaths in order that mankind whom He loves may rise from the dead and live eternally. The seraph sings praise of the Redeemer, and is joined by the choir of angels in a warning to those who would dishonour Him.

MUSIC: s a m e ## 4 – 5 9:02

KANE: The first part of the oratorio concludes with a recitative and duet between Jesus and the Angel, both struggling with the will of the Father: though the torment and the terror are great, "even greater is my love with which my heart embraces the whole world".

MUSIC: s a m e ## 6 – 7 6:30

KANE: The second part of the oratorio builds a crescendo of conflicting forces: an aggressive chorus of soldiers coming to arrest Jesus, and the apprehensive chorus of His disciples: and Jesus Himself coming to terms with His fate, "Yet, not my will but Yours be done".

MUSIC: s a m e ## 8 – 11 7:01

KANE: Peter protests and seizes a sword to protect and avenge, but Jesus says 'No!', in a recitative between them. Then, in the following Trio between Peter, Jesus and the Angel, the conflict is resolved as each in turn clarifies their attitude: 'O sons of man, learn this holy commandment: love him who hates you, only thus will you be

