

II. The Heritage of King and the Kennedys

The Schiller Institute NYC Chorus presents

DONA NOBIS PACEM:
1968-2018



LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN'S
MASS IN C MAJOR
AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUALS

FEATURING
Sarah Abigail Griffiths, Soprano · Linda Childs, Alto
Gregory Hopkins, Tenor · Paul An, Bass
John Sigerson, Conductor

SCHILLER INSTITUTE CONCERT

With Beethoven to the Mountain-Top

by Dennis Speed

June 3—The Schiller Institute New York City Chorus, in a [concert on June 10](#), will perform Beethoven's *Mass in C Major and African-American Spirituals*. The concert follows the International Schiller Institute's one-day conference on June 9, "Dona Nobis Pacem—Give Us

Peace, Through Economic Development." The following meditation introduces the concert.

Pianist Claudio Arrau once commented, concerning his love for the compositions of composer Ludwig

van Beethoven, that all of his pieces express an internal struggle and battle, “but in the end, they *win*.” The Fifth Symphony in C Minor is a famous example of that. This concert the Schiller Institute New York City Chorus has prepared for today, proposes that each of us consider that to rise above our present sense of national tragedy—a sense that in truth goes back not merely to the events of September 11, 2001, but rather to the quadruple assassinations of 1963-68—it is necessary to “think like Beethoven.”

The five-year assault on the American Presidential

or culture is truly powerful; it is only the illusion of power in the minds of those culturally oppressed by those dying institutions, that gives strength to the deception. By supplying people with, not popular culture, but Classical culture as a social practice, they become capable of finding their own voices, much in the way that Malcolm X or Robert Kennedy found theirs—by confronting the need to change axioms of behavior, and by developing the courage to change those axioms, no matter how controversial an undertaking that may appear to be.

The night of Martin Luther King’s assassination,



NASA

President Kennedy speaking at Rice University, Sept. 12, 1962.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968.



Evan Freed

Robert Kennedy campaigning in Los Angeles, 1968.

system, a process that began with the November 22, 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy and culminated in the June 5-6, 1968 shooting and death of Presidential candidate Robert Kennedy, caused the re-direction of the United States from its promise of pre-eminent greatness into a nearly five decades long wilderness of decline. Those two assassinations—the bookends of a period that also included the assassinations of Malcolm X (Feb. 20, 1965) and Martin Luther King (April 4, 1968)—are America’s “dream deferred.”

It is time to attain that dream, by properly placing the voices of the American people to speak truth to “the powerlessness of power.” For no dying empire, nation,

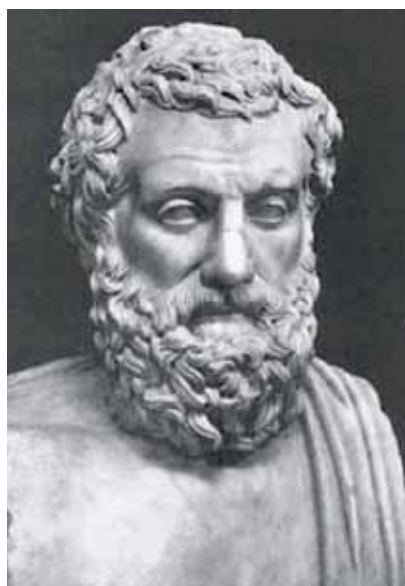
Robert Kennedy spoke to the enraged and anguished assembly about Aeschylus. He said:

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust against all white people, at the injustice of such an act, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote:

“Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black.



Aeschylus
(525-456 BCE)

The tragedies of Aeschylus were meant to be used in precisely the way that Kennedy did that night. Classical tragedies are not “fictions,” just as Classical music is not “entertainment.” The purpose of each is to provoke the individual to demand more of himself or herself “*from the inside out.*” No exhortation can make a person feel differently than he or she does about anything. But it is possible for a person to choose to be better, to choose to be wiser, rather than to choose to merely be “as he has always been.” Each human being can be greater than his destiny, and the destiny of each person is not determined by his death, especially the way that he dies, but by his immortality, by the way that he or she

lives. Beethoven’s compositions, in spite of his deafness, are the most eloquent demonstration of that principle.

Think Like Beethoven!

The pressures of popular culture are exactly what both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy found themselves compelled to defy. King, on April 4, 1967, intruded into the war in Vietnam, making himself a world leader, rather than merely an American leader,

without asking for anyone’s permission. He confronted his greatest challenge and greatest fears by announcing that he would oppose the Vietnam war on moral grounds, saying that the choice was now, worldwide, “not between violence and nonviolence, but between nonviolence and nonexistence.”

Six days later, on April 10, New York Senator Robert Kennedy (who would finally decide to run for U.S. President in 1968) was confronted with a greater expression of American poverty than he had bothered to know existed, in the rural

South. Kennedy’s encounter with poverty in America’s poorest state, Mississippi, was an epiphany for him.

When he was asked by CBS reporter Daniel Schorr, “Senator, what do you make of the problem of poverty in this poorest state?”, a deeply affected Kennedy, after a pause, replied, “Well, I think it’s obviously as great a poverty as we’ve had in our country, and I think that considering we have a gross national product of some \$700 billion and that we spend \$75 billion on armaments and weapons, and that we spend almost \$3 billion a year on dogs in the United States, as American



Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

citizens that we could be doing more for those that are poor, and particularly for our children ...” Martin Luther King’s Poor People’s Campaign, which was opposed by the majority of his own organization, was in part inspired by Kennedy’s reaction in Mississippi.

Kennedy’s now nearly forgotten speech, “The Mindless Menace of Violence,” given the day after King’s April 14 assassination, includes the following passage, still controversial today:

No wrongs have ever been righted by riots and civil disorders. A sniper is only a coward, not a hero; and an uncontrolled, uncontrollable mob is only the voice of madness, not the voice of the people.

Whenever any American’s life is taken by another American unnecessarily—whether it is done in the name of the law or in the defiance of law, by one man or a gang, in cold blood or in passion, in an attack of violence or in response to violence—whenever we tear at the fabric of life which another man has painfully and clumsily woven for himself and his children, the whole nation is degraded. . . .

. . . Too often we honor swagger and bluster and the wielders of force; too often we excuse those who are willing to build their own lives on the shattered dreams of others. Some Americans who preach nonviolence abroad fail to practice it here at home. Some who accuse others of inciting riots have by their own conduct invited them.

Some look for scapegoats, others look for conspiracies, but this much is clear: violence breeds violence, repression brings retaliation, and only a cleaning of our whole society can remove this sickness from our soul.

The beautiful planetary landscape of the Earth, seen from the perspective of the Moon for the first time by



NASA

Apollo 8, the first manned mission to orbit the Moon and return to Earth. The mission entered lunar orbit on Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 1968.

the Apollo 8 Mission in December 1968, showed mankind what the true stage is upon which the larger drama of human greatness, folly, and progress is being staged. The momentary concerns of the Vietnam War, the thermonuclear arms race, the explosive violence then erupting throughout the urban centers of America, mass drug use as recreation, and grinding poverty in rural and urban areas, were swallowed up in the vastness of space and the capacity of the human mind to conquer the stars, if it could first conquer itself.

Neither King nor Robert Kennedy would ever see that Apollo image, but, as King had said the night before his death, “I’ve been to the mountain-top, and I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the Promised Land.” Kennedy and his brother had authored the policy of the Apollo Moon shot; they had envisioned it, and it would happen. Immortality is a choice. Immortal men and women defy comprehension by mortals. Beethoven once said that “Music is the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind but which mankind cannot comprehend.” It was that power that once moved King and the Kennedy brothers to “think like Beethoven,” and it is that power that today’s concert seeks to impart to us.