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## Who was Beethoven's Jesus?

Beethoven's factotum Anton Schindler was the composer's steady companion in his last decade. At the time of the *Missa Solemnis* in 1823 Schindler relates the following incident about a previous Beethoven Mass written some fifteen years earlier. Like all Masses, it had been written in Latin (*Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei*). In order to reach a wider audience – as well as to comply with newly established State requirements – Beethoven had the Latin text paraphrased in vernacular German.

Schindler writes: “The twentieth of April 1823 – we were at table around noon – the *Haushofmeister* of countess Schafgotsch brought the score for the C major Mass of 1807 with the new text in the vernacular . . . . Beethoven opened the manuscript and began to read rapidly. When he came to the *qui tollis* (“Who takes away” – the sins of the world) from the *Gloria*, the tears were running down his cheeks; at the *Credo* he began to weep loudly and had to stop reading. “Yes” he said, “that is how I felt when I wrote that!” . . . Never have I seen Beethoven so devastated by remorse as in that moment . . . It was the first and last time that I saw him in tears.”

What then does the German paraphrase of the *qui tollis* say? “He carries with tender love even the sinner with true Father's care, full of compassion. He is the support of the weak. He is the help of the oppressed. He is the hope of those who are tired of life. No complaint but finds its way to Him, no tear is wept in vain.”

Romain Rolland, who describes the scene, continues as follows: “He is the compassionate Savior, the divine Friend in whose arms contrite sinners, the oppressed and the broken come to sob. It is He, the Lamb, who carries the sins of the world. It is His thought, His face that inspire the poignant *Miserere*, “have mercy,” that follows the *qui tollis*.”

How can one doubt the truth of the tears that Beethoven weeps in spite of himself in front of Schindler? They tell us the secret of all the tears he wept in solitude .... The face of Christ was at the center of this thought and prayer. If he did not like to speak about it, it was because he observed a ferocious silence about what was most profound and most dear to him. Did he say any more about the “Immortal Beloved?”

### Please note.

1. The piano scores with text-analysis underlay have been rendered in expressive calligraphic script by Margo Sundberg. Your understanding and enjoyment of this recording will be greatly enhanced by consulting these three scores, EVEN if you are not familiar with music notation. You may find the first page on the cover of this booklet and Margo's complete calligraphy of all three “Jesus” works in the PDF files included on this disc.

2. All footnotes to this insert can be found on my website [www.willemibes.com](http://www.willemibes.com) under “Beethoven's Jesus 2015.”

## Hammerklavier sonata Opus 106, 3rd movement

Palm Sunday

*Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini*

“Blessed Who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Varied as may be the meaning ascribed to this third movement by well-intentioned commentators, they all agree about its serious, if not outright sorrowful undertone. Carl Czerny, Beethoven's student, speaks of its “highly tragic and melancholy character,” expressing “the feelings of the aged master oppressed in body and soul.” Subsequent

that grief and that joy. Every performance of this piece I have ever heard, makes those notes into an upbeat to the next measure and thereby destroys – as Beethoven complained so bitterly in a letter to Karl Holz (August 1825) – “my meaning.” That is the tragic contagious harm of the romantic virus.

Do compare the theme of this third movement to the stepwise progressing *Jesu meine Freude* countersubject in the Fugue of opus 110, and the second variation in C# minor with its “sobbing hockets,” to the Arioso of opus 110's third movement, both of course based on the *Jesu meine Freude* text. As the pace picks up in the 32nd notes of the last variation, picture the care-free child of the Trio movement in opus 110, hop-skipping at an accelerated pace and—exhausted—falling asleep at the end as in Schumann's little vignette by that name *Kind im Einschlummern*. The hemiola in the first violin's very last measure subtly hints at that tender moment by dividing the measure in three instead of two main beats.

I am reminded of a teisho by Harada Sekkei Roshi, my Zen Master at Hosshinji, a Buddhist temple in Obama, Japan.

“Students have come here from all over the world to have a genuine Zen experience. They needn't have come here; they can find that in many places in Japan. To Hosshinji students have come for five hundred years now to “die the great Death” the death of self.”

Beethoven, especially in this last work shows us the joy “dying the great Death” makes possible. He has made real in and through his own life and suffering what Christianity and Zen and all the great religions and Ways of life point us to, that, “unless the kernel of grain falls in the earth and dies it will not bear fruit.”

It is abundantly clear that in this movement the composer has fulfilled Jesus' admonition “unless you become like a child, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven.” Alas, the same holds true for the performer .... and the listener!

The quartet's next and last movement is further confirmation that the composer has entered that Kingdom. See footnote 4.

The journey has been arduous beyond the ken of most of us. The decision to embrace the Fate, Beethoven in the middle period of his life had vowed to take by the throat, was a hard one, and it took him more than twenty years to get to this point. In this last movement of his last quartet in the last year of his life, Beethoven is ready for the final, the eternal Resurrection. As always when he has achieved “realized” his intended goal – *die Unsterbliche* in opus 101, the *Freude* in opus 110, *Unser Gott* in opus 111 – he stretches in the penultimate measure the *Es muss sein* to “*Es m u s s sein*” and ends on the strong first beat “*It m u s t be*.” The motif, inverted to reach up instead of bowing down shoots straight up as a rocket. “Gazing upward” *Der Blick nach oben*, it is certain to attain its goal.

The quartet is finished October of 1826 and Beethoven dies five months later. After his long fight on earth (he loves to quote Homer's sea-faring Odysseus on this!) it must have been an almost imperceptible transition from this world to the one which, in the words of his other role model Socrates, “our soul once knew when she was still connected to God and had the glance directed to what is real, *ta onta*” (*Phaedrus Dialogue*). His mission on earth accomplished, Beethoven was ready for that last journey. There is no doubt in our minds that he will live forever.

sales rep:  
1st ofa date:  
artist:  
cust:  
control:  
job #:  
rel #:

Page 2

Page 11

# DVD1200S 12 pg Fold qxd 07/11/05 jgs

## String quartet opus 135 third movement (Db major) **Assai lento**

Preliminary remarks.

See footnote 3.

### Opus 135

We are immediately struck by how short the work is, by the fact that all movements are in a major key and not least that a usually hidden *soggetto cavato*, is fully disclosed in the last movement. *Muss es sein? Es muss sein.* “Must it be?” followed by the answer “It must be.” This question / answer dialogue is further accompanied by the terse confession “The decision made with difficulty.”

As so often, one despairs to reach with words the transcendent *Ding an sich*, the “Thing (God, music, love, even any material object) in Itself.”

Heidegger speaks of “transcendental reduction” as a methodology to achieve that goal, and interestingly adds, at the end of his life, that he is beginning to understand Zen as pursuing a similar purpose.

Perhaps the *bon mot* of Arthur Rubinstein states it most simply. When asked by a high society lady “could you tell me what Beethoven is trying to tell us in this sonata” he answered in the affirmative, returned to the piano and began to play the sonata again. When all is said and done, that is the only appropriate answer.

There are a few things we can say with certainty about this third movement. Akiko and I are playing it in a piano duet transcription.

1. It consists of a Theme and four Variations in the key of Db major except for the second variation which is in C# minor. The time signature is 6/8, a compound meter, which means that the tempo indication, *Assai lento*, refers to two, not six beats.

For the *Adagio sostenuto* of the Hammerklavier sonata Beethoven indicates an eighth note at a metronome marking of 92 equaling around 30 for the dotted quarter note. Assuming that *Assai lento* is a bit slower yet, an eighth note between 66-76 or dotted quarter at 22-25 is the absolute slowest that one may take the tempo. This in turn means that every string quartet we have listened to plays it almost two times slower than the composer intended.

2. Difficult as it may be to understand – and so much more difficult it is to act on that understanding – this movement may not be played “beautifully!”

It should in fact not be played at all but may only be played.

It is an impossible demand to make on any group of four virtuosi string players and yet, Beethoven has no intention whatsoever to write a beautiful third movement. Putting all reserve and inhibitions aside, the composer shares here his innermost vulnerable heart-secret, *das Ding an sich*. In this case Beethoven gives us the meaning, not “the talk around it,” of his complete, loving surrender to Jesus and of the depths of what his suffering has been over innumerable deaf, lonely and loveless years.

3. The Romantic virus (see footnote 2) here seems to me even more damaging to the child-like simplicity this act of trust, love and surrender demands. In the second variation in C# minor, the sixteenth notes at the end of each measure belong **within** that measure and may not be “rolled over” into the one following it. These sobbing sixteenth notes speak to the human heart of joy even in deepest grief; they give voice to

pundits and performers seem to have agreed. I certainly was one of them! After all, the work is in F# minor. Its first page with the enigmatic opening chords expresses seriousness and high purpose. I had no trouble at all imagining the next page, the “bridge,” as a solemn procession, the funeral of a slain hero. (The heartbreaking “*Marche Funèbre*” cortège of J. F. Kennedy came vividly to my mind.) Neither did I have many qualms about slowing the tempo down a bit, adding a little pathos in appropriate places and doing some tweaking here and there so as to make the rest of the movement fit the mold.

It certainly seems a staple of human DNA that we want heroes to admire, and equally as much that we want them to suffer, preferably more than we ourselves suffer so as to make up for the disparity in talent. Some of us remember the hue and cry when the Sistine ceiling was to be cleaned of smoke and soot accumulated over the centuries. The grime had given numerous authorities grounds to commiserate with the abused Michelangelo. When the ceiling turned out to be a joyous explosion of brightly colored panels, several long-held theories bit the dust.

At the end of 2013, I took another look at this third movement of opus 106. Puzzled as always by the abrupt change from F# minor to G major in measure 14, I finally found the answer. This passage and those that follow are identical with the violin solo in the *Benedictus* section of the *Missa Solemnis* – same register, same key, same tempo, same melody, same profound emotion. It was gestating in the same womb and time period as the *Hammerklavier* sonata. Before the singers take over with the actual text, the solo-violin anticipates it and soars the melody *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini*. It is worth noting that the *Benedictus* in the *Missa Solemnis* copies the sonata opus 106 and not the other way around. The Mass saw the light of day five years after the sonata.

Opus 106 opens with the Sign of the Cross, “In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit” in its abbreviated form, “In the name of the Lord,” (*in Nomine Domini*). Uttered softly, *una corda*, the two dotted quarter notes, like massive twin pillars, intone this (undisclosed) text. We will find more of these pillars strategically placed in the score after this first set has made the ascent to the altar of the Exposition where Beethoven will lay his homage to Jesus, his friend and Master:

1. Announcing the bridge
2. Announcing the second thematic group in D major
3. Before the Development
4. Before the Recapitulation
5. Before the bridge in the Recapitulation
6. Before the second thematic group in F# major
7. Before the Coda
8. Before the Epilogue
9. Four more times in the concluding measures.

Besides the opening twin pillars, twelve (actually eleven and a half) additional pillars will support the sonorous dome Beethoven builds for Jesus.

See footnote 1.

Using the structure of the Sonata-Allegro form, what follows that first measure is the narrative from Matthew’s Gospel (21:6-12) describing Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.

[See text not included here.]

sales rep:  
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artist:  
cust:  
control:  
job #:  
rel #:

Page 10

Page 3



# DVD1200S 12 pg Fold

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## Exposition

“Blessed (is He) Who comes in the name of the Lord.”

The sublime first page of the movement, a profound meditation on the meaning the text holds for Beethoven, does not lead, as I had imagined, to a funeral march on the next page. Quite the opposite! This bridge passage on the second page of the score, preceded by its twin pillar, is filled with a kind of giddy excitement. Crowds are coming and going, milling around, bass voices singing over and over *Benedictus, Benedictus*, others repeating the syncopated *venit's* (“He is coming”). A third singer adds to the mix an ever more lyrical soprano part, *in nomine Domini*. In true contrapuntal fashion, this is all going on simultaneously.

One would, incidentally, be quite challenged to find another *Adagio sostenuto* with such a constant onrush of activity and excitement.

The third movement of the *Hammerklavier* sonata has thus begun with the Sign of the Cross, twin pillars intoning *Nomine Domini*. It then goes on to explore what can only truly be heard and understood “with the ear of the heart.”

After the bridge, the Exposition continues with a second cluster of themes. Again preceded by a twin pillar, it is in the customary “related” key of an exulting D major. (So much for Czerny’s “old man’s melancholy”!).

The Development section appears next on the canvas. Pillar number 4 (in measure 68, not measure 67 as Vincent d’Indy observed) opens the portal to it.

This Development section is uncommonly short and occupies less than one page out of a total of eleven. Yet it is here that things swing into high gear. After an expressive reminder of the opening measures of the movement, the Be-ne-Dic-tus chanters are interrupted by a group of boisterous newcomers, “strangers in Jerusalem,” looking for a party and a good time.

Neither the tone painters of the Renaissance, nor the composers of program music who were to appear in the romantic period, could have been more explicit in setting the two texts from Matthew’s Gospel. Beethoven’s protestation in the Pastoral Symphony, “more an expression of feelings than tone-painting,” can be maintained even less in the scene starting in measure 78 and ending in measure 87. The young men are yelling, “Who is coming?” with sforzando accents on the “Who,” *Qui venit?*

Matthew’s crowd, a group of cognoscenti who have walked with the miracle-worker for a long time, quietly (*una corda*) answer antiphonally that this man is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee, *Qui venit in nomine Domini* “Who comes in the name of God Himself.” Beethoven uses here, as he does throughout, the age-old techniques of augmentation and diminution—the dotted quarter notes from the opening’s third measure are cut down to one-third their size—to express with the greatest clarity the exact meaning of this marvelous scene. The young fellows calm down, the dynamics dwindle to a pianissimo. A hushed mysterious fifth invocation *in nomine Domini* ushers in the Recapitulation.

## RECAPITULATION

The ensuing 26 measures of this repeat follow the Exposition section to a T except for the —most likely unintentional—omission of measure 38. But one could be excused for

**Beethoven**  
“Jesu meine Freude”  
Opus 135 iii  
arranged for piano solo

De-coding  
Willem Ibes  
Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo.

Più lento.

sales rep:  
1st ofa date:  
artist:  
cust:  
control:  
job #:  
rel #:

# Page 4

# Page 9

# DVD1200S 12 pg Fold

qxd 07/11/05 jgs

in measures 100, 101, 102, 103, finally bursting into the long *Freud'* of measure 104. But the full flowering of that joy won't arrive until the very last measure where Beethoven ends in his signature fashion, stretching out the theme a little so as to end on the strong first beat.

I must not let myself get carried away and just draw your attention in the next Scherzo movement to the four measures—repeated five times—of downward somersaulting *Jesu meine Freude's*, rebounding to dizzying height with a fortissimo *Freude* (measures 48 seq.). Even more endearing, while all that activity is going on in the right hand, there is a little kid, oblivious of what that right hand is doing, hop-scotching—the hop-scotch pattern is of course not horizontal but straight-up-in-the-air vertical—in a syncopated rhythm in the left hand, *Jesu meine Freude* ending on the strong first beat. If this sounds like a mouthful, please consult Margo's calligraphy. The dwindling *una corda Freude's* announce the end of the Trio. The Scherzo section returns, concluded by the Coda. In this movement too, the *Freude* is only complete in the last measure with the rest-interspersed augmentation ending on the strong beat.

Nowhere is the influence of J. S. Bach—whose text of the motet *Jesu meine Freude* forms the “motto,” the *soggetto cavato* of the sonata—more vivid than in the third movement. Its less than two pages could be lifted straight out of one of Bach's great Passions. A single-measure *Jesu meine Freude* is proposed to us three times as subject for meditation. A Recitative then explores this proposition in more detail with the extraordinary series—fourteen in all!—of *Bebung's* on the almost feverishly repeated invocation of the name *Jesu*. This leads to the most poignant C flat in the history of music, *Jesu meine Freude*, my joy even in deepest grief.

The following *Klagender Gesang*, the *Arioso dolente* (the “Sorrowful little Aria”) not only uses the same text but also exactly the same melody as Bach composed for his funeral motet. All this is explained in detail in “A Beethoven Triptych.” Somewhat surprisingly, even in this grief-filled third movement the last *Freude* is stretched just enough to allow for ending on a positive note on the first beat.

The Fugue on the new text, *Herr Gott dich lob' ich, alleluia*, follows without a break. It is truly a feast for mind, heart, and ear to savor how marvelously Beethoven weaves in the original subject, *Jesu meine Freude*, now in its function as countersubject (see Margo's calligraphy). After the above-mentioned inversion of the Fugue, the *alleluia's* and shouts of praise, *Herr Gott dich lobe ich*, are gaining the upper hand, while the one-measure sixteenth notes in the bass *Jesu meine Freude* try manfully to keep up with what is going on “up high.” I picture bass-fiddlers scrambling to match the tempo of their nimbler counterparts in the soprano!

Incidentally, realizing the identity of the 16th notes contraction *Jesu meine Freude* in measure 19 of the first movement and here in measures 174 seq. was my “eureka” moment for identifying the countersubject of the Fugue.

By now, in these last pages, Beethoven seems to have forgotten that he is writing a piano sonata and not a huge orchestral work with a massive chorus of hundreds of singers. As was his wont, the limited possibilities of a single artist concern him no longer and he demands, unflinchingly, that the poor piano player turn his ten fingers and one grand piano into a hundred-piece orchestra and equal size chorus. After a last stratospheric *Alleluia*, the *Jesu meine Freude's* cascade down like Niagara Falls, then rise up once more in stretched out note-values (augmentation), to end on the strong first beat:

**J E S U M E I N E F R E U D E**

not recognizing the similarity. The solidity of the predominantly harmonic first theme-group of the Exposition—where the horizontal contrapuntal voice-lines are less evident than the vertical harmonic structure—now becomes vaporized, atomized, filled with air and endless movement. It is nothing but melody as in an Indian raga. It is the world of Gregorian Chant that caught Beethoven's interest at about the same time as he studied the Renaissance masters. Although the harmonic structure still holds the vocal ecstasy in check, it is the world of pure melody, bombarding and delighting our ear as a pointillist painting delights the eye with its ever changing, shimmering surfaces.

The composition of the crowd has shifted from different groups going their separate ways to one dancer in the middle entranced in the Spirit with the multitude getting caught up in the marvel of it all, both solo dancer/singer and crowd stimulating each other to ever higher levels of transcendence. One wonders, who is this person taking center stage? Is it Anthony Quinn in *Zorba the Greek*? Is it King David dancing the Ark of the Covenant into the city that Jesus is just now about to enter? Or is it simply Beethoven in one of his out-of-mind states he called “raptus,” raising voice, hands, heart in exalted rapture?

The magic of these next two pages is simply impossible to describe. In his better moments, Beethoven was aware of being the voice, not of his individual self, but of all that is divine in man and woman; we will not go far wrong imagining one of us being that sacred dancer.

The rest of us are just as involved, rhythmically swinging, singing and clapping our hands ever more fervently. The right hand enraptured in mystical contemplation exulting *Benedictus qui venit*, the left hand antiphonally completing the sacred text *qui venit in nomine Domini* “Who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed! Blessed!”

The rest of the Recapitulation, soon abandoning the minor for the luminous keys of F# and especially G major, leads us deeper into that mystical vision. If “being one with God” could qualify for exemplary saintly status, Beethoven, the Rhinelander, would join the ranks of a Thomas a Kempis, a Jan Ruysbroec, a Meister Eckhart, the artist's soul bestowing—what the aborigines of New Guinea so beautifully recognize as the highest gift true music can bring—“a dwelling place for the Spirit.”

It seems the movement is coming to a close, but the composer, being Beethoven, cannot, will not let go. He adds a Coda *Benedictus qui venit, Benedictus, Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini*, that transports us, as he will do in his last piano sonata, from the earthly to the heavenly Jerusalem. Just before the gates of heaven open with a contraction of the first 26 measures into a mere 7, the pace picks up in almost dizzying 32nd note rushes and makes it seem, unseemly though this may sound, that people are pushing each other out of the way to get inside!

One more set of twin pillars finds everyone at peace, rhythmically swinging branches on the top tier, *Benedictus qui venit—venit*, the second tier emphasizing the *venit's*, the lower tier in peaceful contemplation extolling the *Nomine Domini's*. All of this is in the key of F# major, symbolizing the resurrection of all flesh. One last reminder of the earthly Jerusalem, then three and half more twin pillars in F# major *Nomine Domini*. The dynamics dwindle to an unusual triple *piano*. The rest is Silence.

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control:  
job #:  
rel #:

**Page 8**

**Page 5**

# DVD1200S 12 pg Fold qxd 07/11/05 jgs

## SONATA in A flat composed 1821

Moderato  
cantabile molto espressivo

Je — su mei-ne Freude — Je — su meine Freu — de  
*p con amabilità*

Je — su mein' Freu - de Je — su mein'

Freu - de Je — su mein' Je — su meine  
*cresc.*

Je — su — meine Freude *p leggiermente* Je — su meine  
Je su meine - Freud'

Je su mein' Freud'

### Opus 110

When after years of analysis the *soggetto cavato* “O Jesus, my joy” *Jesu, meine Freude* imposed itself on me some twelve years ago I was totally incredulous. Could this be? Is this the Beethoven who had risked being excommunicated for likening Jesus to just another Jew hanging on a cross? How right Joseph Haydn had been when he spoke of the young man seeking his lessons as someone with several heads several hearts and several souls! A chasm separates one heart, one head, one soul from the other, and to integrate those will take Beethoven up to his deathbed. (See below)

We have seen how in the Recapitulation of opus 106 the original verticality of the first theme is taken apart in separate horizontal strands of Gregorian-style melody. Here, in opus 110, we do not have to wait so long for that to happen. The homophonic opening motif in measures 1 and 2 becomes pure melody in measures 12 and following, where the soprano’s dolphin-plunges *Jesu meine Freude* are, in imitation, underscored by the bass’s steady *Jesu mein’ Freud’*. (Please consult the first page of Ms. Sundberg’s calligraphic representation.)

(The extensive analysis of this penultimate Beethoven sonata is part of my CD issued together with two other late Beethoven sonatas, “A Beethoven Triptych.” It can be found on my website [www.willemibes.com](http://www.willemibes.com) and can also be ordered from [www.csbsju.edu/bookstore](http://www.csbsju.edu/bookstore)

As to the last movement of opus 110, the Fugue, two centuries of music theorists have tried to convince us that a few melodic similarities in intervals suffice to establish the similarity/identity of the sonata’s first theme and the Fugue theme in the last movement. These themes could hardly be more different. We need only follow Beethoven’s advice to “put a fitting text to a passage and sing it” to realize the absurdity of treating them as the same. No, the Fugue theme is quite *sui generis*.

Immediately prior to the composition of his two last sonatas Beethoven writes himself a reminder to examine old Catholic church music, as well as a plan for a future composition, “Adagio Cantique / devout Chant in a symphony in the old modes . . . *Herr Gott, dich loben wir, alleluia* . . .”

The composer never wrote that huge instrumental/choral symphony/oratorio. Instead, after years of physical, spiritual and emotional exhaustion he gives thanks by setting to music the text of the age-old church hymn *Te Deum laudamus*, “O God, we praise Thee.” The composer does however make two changes. The language in Opus 110 is German and the plural “we” becomes the singular “I”: *Herr Gott dich lob’ ich, alleluia*, “Lord God, I praise Thee, alleluia.” Shortly before the end of the sonata Beethoven references his recovery in the Fugue’s *una corda* inversion, “gradually coming back to life.”

May I single out—among a hundred others—just a few of my personal favorites? If so, please have the score with text-underlay at hand.

In the first movement the opening two-measure subject (theme) is contracted into one (diminution) in measure 11; incidentally that explains the unusual eleven measure (instead of eight or twelve) first sentence. Measures 12 seq. mentioned above continue with dolphins diving down and flying up again in pure jubilation, as Margo Sundberg’s calligraphy makes clear. Measures 30 and 31 are repeated with downward cascading 32nd notes in measures 32 and 33, and we must resolutely guard against having measure 31 spill over, “resolving” into measure 32. That would be one more victim of the romantic virus! See footnote 2.

Do note that the short Development, measures 40 to 56, is much more contrapuntal than we usually play it. One more treat in this first movement is the hesitant *Jesu mein’* series

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1st ofa date:  
artist:  
cust:  
control:  
job #:  
rel #:

Page 6

Page 7