

Johan Sebastian Bach: Mass in B Minor

Bach finally assembled the various components of his great Mass in B Minor in 1748, 15 years after he had begun composition of the first section. He had no deadline to meet, and there is no evidence that the work ever received a complete performance during his lifetime. It is probable that he compiled it when he was 63 years old to demonstrate and record his superior choral writing skills, just as he had previously published Part III of the *Clavier-Übung*, his great collection of Chorale Preludes which record his genius as a composer of organ music.

The Mass is divided into four distinct sections: I Kyrie, II Gloria, III Credo, IV Sanctus, Benedictus, Agnus Dei. In Bach's original manuscript each section has its own frontispiece on which are noted the different musical resources required. The first two sections of the work – Kyrie and Gloria – make up an entire 'Missa' section and were composed by Bach by taking music from some of his existing cantatas and adapting them to the Mass text.

Augustus II King of Poland and Elector of Saxony had died earlier in 1733, so Bach used the five months period of mourning during which public music making was suspended to work on a Missa – the part of the Latin liturgy common to both the Roman Catholic and Lutheran rites.

His motive in doing this was to advance his career by presenting the work to the new Augustus III who he hoped would give him a court title to add to his existing titles of Cantor of St Thomas Church and Music Director of the City of Leipzig. The Kyrie and the Gloria were first performed at the festival of the Oath of Allegiance to the new sovereign whose initial response to the work was underwhelming: perhaps he had other matters on his mind. Nevertheless, in due course Bach's ambition was realised when in 1736 he became court composer and was promoted to the top of his profession as Hofkapellmeister to the Elector of Saxony and King of Poland.

It is uncertain when or why Bach subsequently completed the entire liturgical Mass fifteen years later by adding the Creed, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei which are a mixture of re-worked previous music and specially composed sections. In choosing to reuse earlier material he may have felt himself to be selecting his finest work, laying it out for inspection, and putting it to the service of praising God. A liturgical complete performance would have been impossible because the work takes some two and quarter hours to perform in its entirety and the closing text fails to conform to the Roman Catholic rite. Perhaps he simply regarded it as part of his musical legacy to record his genius for posterity. Whatever his motivation might have been, Bach left us one of the supreme achievements of classical music which never fails to challenge, inspire and offer new insights into musicians and audiences whenever it is performed.

Bach himself never heard the *Mass in B Minor* performed in its entirety. It is possible that he only intended that parts of the *Mass* be used when appropriate - such was the case when his son C.P.E. Bach first performed the *Credo* in 1786. Although various other sections of the *Mass* were performed over the next sixty years, it was not until 1859, more than a century after Bach died, that the entire work was performed at a single sitting.

What is most remarkable about the overall shape of the *Mass in B Minor* is the fact that Bach managed to shape a coherent sequence of movements from diverse material, whether he intended it or not. (When he presented the *Missa* in 1733 he had clearly viewed that as a complete and independent work.)

The magnificence of his great composition is signalled at the very outset with the mighty adagio five-part setting of the words *Kyrie eleison* succeeded by a fugal section of architectural grandeur and complexity. The *Christe eleison* is a gentle duet for sopranos with a charming ritornello for strings. The second *Kyrie*, for four-part choir, has an intense, chromatic fugal subject.

The first part of the *Gloria*, a joyous outpouring, was probably reworked from a now lost instrumental movement. The setting of *Et in terra pax* was grafted on to it without a break. The *Laudamus te*, with its beautiful soprano solo balanced by an equally beautiful violin obligato, has all the hallmarks of having originally been a violin duet. The *Gratias* is a fairly straight copy of the opening chorus of *Cantata No. 29* (1731), the words of which 'Wir danken dir, Gott' ('We thank Thee, O God') represent a literal German translation of the Latin text set here with such solemn nobility and assurance.

The *Domine Deus* is a duet for tenor and soprano, with accompaniment for flute and muted strings. It leads directly into the *Qui tollis*, a revision of part of the opening chorus of *Cantata No. 46* (1723), 'Schauet doch und sehet' ('Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto His sorrow'). In *Qui sedes*, the alto solo is matched by the instrument of corresponding pitch, the oboe d'amore. The *Quoniam*,

with its dark tones of horn obligato and well-rounded bassoon duet figurations, provides an impressive vehicle for the bass soloist, and leads straight into the gloriously jubilant *Cum Sancto Spiritu*, complete with agile choral fugue, marking the end of Bach's original *Missa*.

Like the *Missa*, the *Symbolum Nicenum* has its own cohesive structure. It is a superlative example of Bach's concern with symmetry: *Crucifixus* is the central pivot and the centre of the trinity of movements concerning Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection.

The *Credo* bursts forth with two vibrant fugal choruses. The first, in antique style, is based upon the plainchant associated with the words '*Credo in unum deum*' and symbolises strength of faith; the second is adapted from a chorus of praise from *Cantata No. 171* (1729) 'Gott, wie dein Name, so ist auch dein Ruhm' ('God, your fame is as your name'). The duet *Et in unum Dominum* is set for soprano and alto with oboe and strings. The chorus *Et incarnatus est* depicts an intense awe, an emotion that is deepened into despair in the *Crucifixus*, reworked from a chorus in a youthful *Weimar Cantata, No. 12* (1714) 'Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen'.

The depths of hopelessness are forgotten with the jubilant *Et resurrexit*, again apparently reworked from an instrumental movement. The symmetry is apparent as the bass aria, *Et in Spiritum*, recalls in tone *Et in unum Dominum* and the fugal *Confiteor*, like the first movement of the *Credo*, harks back to the older church style and uses plainsong to underpin the firmness of the belief it represents. It is linked to the final joyous *Et expecto* by a passage of the strangest, most haunting quality - quite a contrast with the exuberant chorus that ends the *Credo*.

Bach's magnificent *Sanctus*, with its exultant fugue, was written originally for Christmas Day, 1724. The choir for this piece is divided into six parts. But a double (eight-part) chorus is required for the sprightly *Osanna*, based on the opening chorus of the secular *Cantata No. 215* (1734) 'Preise dein Glucke, Gesegnetes Sachsen' ('Praised be your fortunes, ye most blessed Saxons'), a piece performed in honour of the coronation of Augustus III as King of Poland. As one critic has observed, "In a society which regards Kings as divinely appointed by God, he [Bach] would have seen no incongruity in using the same music to praise the King of Poland and the King of Heaven".

The *Benedictus*, apparently the vestige of a lost tenor aria, with its slow, long, graceful vocal and instrumental lines is an evocation of serene love and longing. The *Agnus Dei*, which follows a straight reprise of the *Osanna*, is scored for alto solo matched to a low-lying ritornello for strings. It uses almost the same music as 'Ach bleibe doch, mein liebstes Leben' ('Oh, stay with me, my dearest life'), from *Cantata No. 11* (*The Ascension Oratorio*). The *Dona nobis pacem* reprises the music of *Gratias*, bringing the *Mass in B Minor* to a triumphant close and linking majestically the concepts of peace, praise, and gratitude to God.

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