

# BACH

## MASS IN B MINOR

### Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750): Mass in B minor, BWV 232

*Bach's best vocal writing is all about helping his listeners to understand what choices they have: showing them heaven and then focusing on the real world and the available ways of dealing with it in terms of attitude and conduct. – John Eliot Gardiner*

Bach took some fifteen years, from 1733 to 1748, to complete what has been termed variously “the greatest work of music of all ages and of all peoples”, “the mightiest choral work ever written” and “an ideal of polyphonic sacred vocal music”. Whilst much of its architectonic structure was devised during the last decade of his life, the resources on which he drew date back to much earlier work, such as the Crucifixus, which adapts the opening passacaglia of Cantata no. 12, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, composed in Weimar for Easter, 1714 and a setting for the Sanctus, written for Christmas, 1724. The basis of the work is the *Mass* of 1733, one of four short masses for liturgical use composed around this time, consisting only of a Kyrie and Gloria. The specific provenance of this Kyrie was the funeral of Augustus the Strong, late Elector of Saxony, and of the Gloria, the ascension of his successor. This complex becomes the first of the four sections that make up the full work. It marked Bach's attempt to re-enliven the traditions of mass composition by enriching the detail of the score for an unusually large orchestra and elaborating the vocal composition to that for a five-part choir. As significant as both of these features was the considerable length: Kyrie and Gloria together take a full hour to perform. To these and the Sanctus, Bach added a lengthy Credo (entitled *Symbolum Nicenum*) as well as an Osanna reprised after the Benedictus, an Agnus Dei and a Dona Nobis Pacem. These latter components were the last to be



composed, following a period, during the late 1730s and early 1740s, when Bach immersed himself in work on the mass of earlier composers and contemporaries. As well as adding cornettos, trombones and continuo to performances of Palestrina's six-voice *Missa sine nomine* and Lotti's *Missa sapientiae*, he had added a plainsong intonation of Credo in unum Deum to a mass by Bassani and a contrapuntal expansion of the *Suscipit Israel* to a setting of the *Magnificat* by Caldara.

The opening Kyrie of the self-contained mass in three movements,

which constitutes the first section of the *B minor Mass*, declares through its contrasting styles of composition the ambitiousness that characterises the work as a whole. The five-part chorus launches, to orchestral accompaniment but without introduction, into an earnest, repeated cry of Kyrie, Kyrie eleison. This is followed by a gentle, *largo* orchestral passage before tenors lead the chorus into an extended fugal exploration of the phrase. The *Christe eleison* takes the form of a contemporary operatic duet between the two soprano soloists (in this evening's performance soprano

and countertenor) - despite Bach's undertaking, on his appointment to St Thomas's a quarter of a century earlier, that his music "not appear operatic in nature but, much rather, that it rouse the listeners to devotion". With an orchestral accompaniment that takes an almost equally significant role - setting a relation between instrumental and vocal music characteristic of the entire work - the interweaving of the two voices sustains the plea of the Kyrie which has preceded it, and provides an incitement to devotion that is realised in the clear, bright choral undulations of the second Kyrie, marked *Alla breve*. The three movements pass through a sequence of keys (B minor to D major to F-sharp minor) which, as well as forming a B minor triad, indicate the centring of the harmonic scheme of the entire work on the trumpet key of D major.

It is the trumpets that provide the strident opening to the orchestral introduction for the ecstatic, dance-like rhythms of Gloria in excelsis, which are sustained through the initially slower elaborations of 'Et in terra pax'. This first, of a complex of nine movements that make up the Gloria, is supplemented by three further choruses (Gratias agimus tibi, Qui tollis and Cum Sancto Spiritu) all comparably large in scale, though varying widely in mood. These, in turn, are interspersed with four equally impressive solo movements. Each presents a voice from one of the five parts of the choir, accompanied both by polyphonic orchestral and *obbligato* instrumental passages from one of the four orchestral groups (strings, flutes, reeds and brass). The Laudamus te combines second soprano with solo violin, the Domine Deus joins first soprano and tenor with the flute, alto

and oboe d'amore are linked for Qui sedes ad dextram Patris and bass and horn join in Quoniam tu solus sanctus.

The Creed, which forms the second section, is at the core of Christian faith and dogma - a feature indicated in the structure through which Bach organises its parts. It opens and closes with linked pairs of choruses, the first pair (Credo in unum Deum and Patrem omnipotentem) is followed by a duet (Et in unum Dominum) for first soprano and alto soloists, while the concluding pair (Confiteor and Et expecto) is preceded by the bass solo, Et in spiritum sanctum Dominum. Between the solo movements are three further choruses, at the centre of which is the Crucifixus, preceded by Et incarnatus est and followed by Et resurrexit. The chiasmic symmetry of this sequence provides an architectonic order for the interrelations between the central beliefs of Christian theology, which Bach parallels in the music. The opening Credo begins with the tenors' Gregorian chant of the fundamental statement of Christian monotheism and develops, in *stile antico*, through successive repetitions by all five parts into a fugal motet. The following chorus, by contrast, is a *concertato* fugue, linked with its predecessor through repetitions of the opening credo by all parts except the basses, who launch briskly into Patrem omnipotentem, to be followed, *fugato*, by the other voices after a further and final restatement of credo. The soprano and alto soloists' duet, Et in unum Dominum, is a delicate elaboration of profound belief in Christ as the only begotten son of God, with appropriate elaborations on the word "unigenitum", and is followed by the solemn, fugal awe of the chorus on Et

incarnatus est, asserting the myth of incarnation. The Crucifixus continues this sombre process, again *fugato*, to conclude in complex, dark chromatic harmonies on "passus et sepultus est". This central triptych of choruses is concluded with a joyful, staccato entry on Et resurrexit, celebrating the miracle of resurrection. The bass soloist then joins, to continuo accompaniment, in what is effectively a slowly undulating duet with the oboes d'amore for Et in spiritum sanctum, developing the further obligations of belief which follow from this. The first of the closing choruses, Confiteor unum baptismam, is composed, like the opening Credo, in *stile antico* and contains a melodious, contrapuntal echo of Gregorian plainsong. With a sudden change of time to *adagio*, the choir moves into the final chorus of the section with an initial statement of "Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum". The solemnity of the music here emphasises the precedent necessity of death to resurrection, and is balanced by a re-statement of the text, *vivace e allegro*, to provide a comparable emphasis on the triumph of resurrected life.

Bach presents the Sanctus as standing apparently alone in constituting the third section of this setting of the mass. In doing so, he followed Lutheran practice in Leipzig for polyphonic or concerted singing of it, which omitted Osanna and Benedictus on such occasions. Anchored initially by the basses' sonorous repetition of "sanctus", the remaining parts explore a series of harmonic variations into "Dominus Deus Sabaoth", eventually to be joined by the basses in their own elaboration of Sanctus, before the tenors step quickly into the enthusiastic fugue which celebrates "pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria ejus".

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Photograph: Appaloosa

Monument of Johann Sebastian Bach at the Tomaskirche in Leipzig

Bach then introduces the 'omitted' movements by doubling the choir for an immediate, joyful shout of "Osanna, Osanna". This is developed incrementally as a fugue between the two choirs, concluded with a celebratory orchestral fanfare. The music was composed originally for the first movement of a *Dramma Per Musica Overo Cantata Gratulatoria*, a secular work performed as a serenade to the king and queen of

Poland on their visit to the Leipzig Michaelmas Fair of 1734, and demonstrating here how the same music for Bach could be as suitable to sacred celebration as to its original purpose of secular festivity. It is followed by flute and continuo weaving a delicate introduction to the tenor's quietly confident invocation of the "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini", before the chorus repeats it in full.

The final section opens with the alto aria, *Agnus Dei*, to the accompaniment of unison violins and continuo, underlining the dignified certainty of its sustained plea for redemptive mercy. Slowly then, basses begin the final choral fugue, *Dona nobis pacem*, to the music of the *Gratias agimus* from the *Gloria*. Continuing to anchor the movement throughout, they commence the first undulating elaboration of "dona" which is taken up by the other parts, as Bach builds from this quiet beginning, swelling through deep rhythms to a final, trumpeted conclusion. More than a plea for the gift of peace, this becomes a song of praise on which to close the celebratory rite at the heart of Christian worship.

The entire work takes almost two hours and considerable choral stamina to perform, although Bach could have had no expectation of the possibility of an actual performance of such a *Missa tota*. Publication of it was not even announced until 1818 and only accomplished finally, by two publishers, in 1845, almost a century after his death. A first complete performance of it was eventually given in Leipzig in 1859, under the direction of Carl Riedel. The evangelical Lutheran protestantism of Bach's time favoured vernacular liturgy, though Latin settings of the *Kyrie*, *Gloria* and *Sanctus* were still performed into the eighteenth century. But Bach's layout, as well as his use of the Latin text for the newly composed closing sections, would have been liturgically impermissible for the time. Moreover, the length of the work meant that it went beyond both Protestant and Catholic conventions of liturgical performance – though each one of the four sections which constitute it could have been performed on its

own as part of a Lutheran mass, and some scholars have suggested that it is a collection of four works rather than a single whole. It is also most unlikely that the concertists and ripienists of the four choirs, serving five Leipzig churches, as well as the orchestral instrumentalists, for all of whom Bach was responsible as Kantor and Kapellmeister of St Thomas's, the town's principal church, were competent to perform a work of such sophistication and complexity. In his robustly worded 'Brief yet highly necessary outline of a properly constituted church musical establishment, with some sober reflections on the decline of the same', which Bach presented to the Leipzig town council in August, 1730, he declared that, of the 54 singers and musicians then available to him, there were only "17 usable, 20 not yet usable, and 17 unproficient". Those 'not yet usable', he explained, "first have to perfect themselves further, so that in time they can be used for figural music", while the 'unusable' were "not *musici* at all". Bach left to the council's "more mature reflection whether music can survive in such circumstances, or whether its still greater decline is to be feared", but there is no evidence that the situation improved markedly, despite the growth of his own reputation over the next two decades.

It seems then that Bach's intentions in providing such a musically extravagant and virtuosic setting of the ordinary mass may well have been directly comparable to his collation of *The Art of Fugue* and *A Musical Offering*. All three works were produced late in his career and provide in common as full an account of what could have been considered possible musically within the forms that they addressed. The B minor mass is described in the publication

of CPE Bach's estate, published in 1790, as 'The Great Catholic Mass', which may suggest that Bach had an ecumenical motive in combining both Roman and Lutheran liturgical practices. This inference of the work as an assertion of his theology is matched musically by Bach's use, according to the baroque parodic convention of *contrafactum*, of much of what he might have considered the most satisfying of his own earlier work, as well as some of the best of

his predecessors and contemporaries. It is a masterpiece, nevertheless, which, as Albert Schweitzer observed, remains "as enigmatic and unfathomable as the religious consciousness of its creator", whilst demonstrating John Eliot Gardiner's contention that "Bach's music is one of the touchstones of civilisation – to be treasured every time we hear or recreate it".

Paul Filmer  
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