

## Bach, Leipzig and the Mass in B minor

“The first chord of the *Kyrie* takes us into the world of great and profound emotions; We do not leave it until the final cadence of the *Dona nobis pacem*.” Albert Schweitzer

Following positions in Arnstadt, Mühlhausen, Weimar and Cöthen, Bach arrived in Leipzig, a city of about 25,000 inhabitants, on May 22, 1723. In his new position as *Cantor* at the St. Thomas School he taught vocal and instrumental music as well as Latin (a task he later delegated) to the 55 boys. His duties as *Director Musices* of the city required him to direct the principal chorus “at the two main churches on alternate Sundays, to oversee the work of the organists and other musicians there, and to be responsible for the performance material and the musical instruments,” according to biographer Malcolm Boyd.

He was also expected to compose. Musicologist Donald Grout states that “altogether, the Leipzig churches required 58 cantatas each year, in addition to Passion music for Good Friday, Magnificats at Vespers for three festivals, an annual cantata for the installation of the City Council, and occasional music such as funeral motets and wedding cantatas for which the Cantor received an extra fee.” By the end of the decade Bach had also assumed the directorate of the *collegium musicum* at the University. But, as conditions changed and his support increasingly turned to conflict, Bach began to turn his attention away from smaller works and devote his energies to writing extended works.

By 1733 Bach found himself continually vexed by strained relations with his superiors. In hopes of securing a better appointment or, at the very least, a title that would strengthen his troubled position at Leipzig, he sent his new *Missa* (the *Kyrie* and *Gloria*) to Friederick Augustus II, the newly ascended Elector of Saxony. His request went unanswered. He petitioned again in 1736 and Friederick Augustus, who had since been elected King of Poland, now bestowed upon Bach the title of “Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer,” a title which carried neither position nor salary, but at least the prestige that Bach felt he needed.

This new work seemed destined to remain a *missa brevis*, however, a few years before his death Bach compiled a *Symbolum Nicenum* (Nicene Creed), a *Sanctus* (which he had first used in 1723), and a final volume which included the *Osanna*, *Benedictus*, *Agnus Dei* and *Dona Nobis Pacem*, and bound the four sections under one hard cover. While many of these movements are reworkings of earlier compositions, dating as far back as 1714, this “parody” technique was common in the eighteenth century and demonstrates Bach’s great craftsmanship in being able to improve upon his previous creations. Indeed, for a work whose creation spanned 35 years, the *Mass* shows remarkable consistency.

It is unlikely that the composer ever heard a performance of the complete work, however, it is generally accepted that the first half was probably performed in Dresden in 1733, when Bach helped his son Wilhelm Friedemann settle into his new position at the Sophienkirche.

Bach scholar Yoshitake Kobayashi, after a detailed study of the dating of the master’s works, now concludes that the *Mass* is actually Bach’s *final* great work. Considering that no commission or dedication has been found, he concludes that Bach’s only reason for completing this work was to leave for posterity a monument which represents a summation of his life’s work as well as a synthesis of the various styles and compositional techniques known by him.

### The Lasting Quality of the Mass in B minor

The *Mass*, long recognized as the summation of the Baroque period, is also acclaimed for its longevity. Grout, however, convincingly argues that its “continuing vitality” is due to the qualities of the music itself, citing “the concentrated and individual themes, the copious musical invention, the balance between harmonic and contrapuntal forces, the strength of rhythm, the clarity of form, the grandeur of proportion, the imaginative use of pictorial and symbolic figures, the intensity of expression always controlled by a ruling architectural idea, and the technical perfection of every detail.”

### Musician and Theologian

The *Mass*, however, reflects a spiritual dimension that matches its musical qualities, for Bach was a competent theologian as well as a remarkable musician and composer. Musicologist Richard Dinwiddie writes that Bach “expressed his theology in music probably better than anyone has ever done. Raised as an orthodox Lutheran, his study of the leading theological writings of his day helped lay principles for the Christian life that he adhered to all his life.”

Bach's personal library contained fifty-two theological works, mostly by Luther and orthodox theologians, including a three-volume translation of the Bible in which he penned corrections and annotations. He believed that he was called to be a minister of music and sought his direction in the Scriptures. In the margin at I Chronicles 25, Bach wrote, "This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing music." A few chapters later he commented, "Music too was instituted by the Spirit of God through David." Later he wrote, "At a reverent performance of music, God is always at hand with his gracious presence."

The famous portrait of Bach reinforces the notion that he was "temperate, industrious, devout," but historian Karl Geiringer's research reveals that he was also "a home lover and a family man," and his nature was "genuine, hospitable, and jovial." So, while "frugality and discipline ruled in the Bach home" there was also "unity, laughter, loyalty, and love." It is not by accident that one finds so much joy in Bach's music, for his spirit was centered in his faith.

In 1987, when visiting German conductor Helmut Rilling led the Bach Society Chorus in a rehearsal of Bach's *Magnificat*, he pointed out that, for Bach, everything leads to the cross. It is no surprise, then, that the descending chromatic pattern, which symbolizes that path, is found in so much of his music.

### **The Compositional Style**

The *Mass in B minor* is technically described as a Neopolitan or cantata mass, i.e., the traditional five parts of the Ordinary of the Mass--*Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei*--are broken up into smaller movements. And, as expected in music of the Baroque period, each movement contrasts from the ones surrounding it: the key center, orchestral and vocal forces, tempi and meter all change. Bach provides even more variety through the use of three diverse musical styles: the *stile antico* (the "old" sixteenth century polyphonic style), the *stile galant* (the "new" concertato style with alternation between soli and tutti), and arias or duets with accompaniment by the continuo and, frequently, obbligato solo instruments. In summation, the *Mass* is a contrast of traditional and contemporary styles, of instrumental and vocal forces, of soli and tutti, of massiveness and virtuosity, of grandeur and humility.

## **An Inside View of the Mass in B minor**

### **Kyrie eleison I**

All the forces (with the exception of trumpets and timpani) combine to solemnly proclaim that God is the Lord. The tri-fold salutation of *Kyrie*, *Kyrie*, *Kyrie eleison* is an obvious reference to the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, have mercy on us. This bold proclamation is followed by a fugue lasting 122 measures; the subject, or theme, is based on a descending half-step (a standard Baroque device used to express grief or pain) that alternates with a steadily ascending step (indicating the heavenward direction of the prayer).

### **Christe eleison**

Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is symbolized by a duet. The animated setting of this movement represents Christ's human side. The noted Bach scholar Helmut Rilling, whose study provides the basis for much of this analysis, suggests the *Kyrie*'s elements of sighing and pleading are now replaced with "a confident, even joyous attitude...based on the trust in God's guarantee of mercy through Christ."

### **Kyrie eleison II**

As the text of *Kyrie eleison* is repeated, Bach excludes any subjective expression of the ancient prayer by utilizing the *stile antico*, the polyphonic style practiced by Palestrina. The instruments now play *colla parte*, i.e.; doubling the vocal parts with no independent parts of their own.

### **Gloria in excelsis Deo**

The full orchestra is heard for the first time to join the chorus in *Glory to God in the highest*. Bach employs the new *concertato* style with strongly virtuosic elements, placing great technical demands on both the singers and players. The movement opens with brilliant fanfare by the trumpets and this fanfare is soon imitated by the voices.

### Et in terra pax

After exploring the festive possibilities in the text Bach moves directly into the *et in terra pax*, dropping both the key and tempo to a reverent entreaty for peace on earth. Slurred pairs of notes provide a pleading effect to intensify this supplication. As the fugue develops a transformation takes place as Bach lifts the listener from his prayerful kneeling to stand in the full assurance of God's promised peace.

### Laudamus te

*We praise Thee, we bless Thee*, a duet for solo soprano and violin, features Bach's use of a *motive*, or musical figure, to suggest joy. From the first entrance of the vocal part this expression of joy is identified by a flourish of ascending trills.

### Gratias agimus tibi

based on BWV 29: Wir danken dir, Gott (1731)

The music for *Gratias* is a reworking of an earlier cantata and, as is most often the case in Bach's use of parody, the original text is in sympathy with its new counterpart. Here, the German text of the cantata, *We thank you, Lord*, corresponds perfectly to the Latin text of the Mass. The ascending vocal line represents our thanks being directed heavenward, and the steadily increasing dynamics represents God's "great glory." The same music is used at the end of the *Mass* with the text *Grant us peace*.

### Domine Deus

While the first four movements of the *Gloria* have centered on the praise of God, the *Domine Deus, Domine Fili* begins a trio of pieces that are "unified by the subjectivity of the prayer for God's mercy." The intimate relationship between the first two persons of the Trinity is represented in a duet in which Bach purposefully juxtaposes two portions of the text sung simultaneously to express this duality. The two voices alternate with canonic entrances, only to combine in harmony.

### Qui tollis peccata mundi

BWV 46: Schauet doch und sehet (1723)

The duet moves directly into *Qui tollis* and both are heard as a single musical unit. The mood is now further restrained as the chorus sings "have mercy on us" and "hear our prayers." The brighter first soprano part is now silent and the top voice rests in the warmer second soprano. Rilling states that "here we see clearly a characteristic Bach idea: that reflection upon the Lamb of God, who on the cross bore the sins of the world, is possible only in the tranquility of inward humility."

### Qui sedes

In the *Qui sedes* the warmer oboe *d'amore* complements the solo voice. The "close, canonic interweaving of the alto and the oboe and the immediately following unison writing for these solo parts—a most unusual compositional device—relates to the different forms of being of the Father and the Son who sits at His right side, whose works meld together into one."

### Quoniam tu solus sanctus

Rilling suggests that "the perfection of the risen Christ" is symbolized in the opening phrase of *Thou alone art Holy*, which is identical when read either forward or backward. A surprising element of this aria is that the low sounds of the bass solo voice with horn obbligato and two bassoons are selected as the vehicles to proclaim *You alone are high above all*. What could Bach have been thinking? The only explanation is that Bach is looking ahead and wants to make the greatest possible contrast with the following movement, *cum sancto spiritu*. So, before the excitement of the Holy Spirit, he prepares the listener with an atmosphere of serenity and regal splendor.

### Cum sancto spiritu

Without pause the *cum sancto* follows the final chord of the *quoniam*. And while its performing forces are identical to those in the first movement of the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, it surpasses the *Gloria* "in its concerted utilization of all the groups of the ensemble." What follows is some of the most virtuosic music one could find in all of Bach's writing.

After the concerted introduction there are two choral expositions of the fugue; the first accompanied only by continuo, and the second with orchestra. The contrapuntal technique is "amazingly playful." Each new entrance of the subject is surrounded with incomplete entries by the other voices, spaced only a single beat apart. Rilling concludes that here Bach "is toying, so to speak, with the expectations of the listeners who are familiar with fugue: he leaves them wondering which of the various entries . . . will be extended into the complete subject." One cannot help but draw the conclusion that, with the great activity and liveliness of the music, the Holy Spirit is everywhere among us.

The *cum sancto* is the conclusion to the initial *Missa*; "here Bach brings together all of his vocal and instrumental forces, as well as all the possibilities of vocal and instrumental technique, in praise of the majesty of God." Under the last measure of his score Bach writes *Fine--Soli Deo gloria*: The end. To God alone be the glory!

### **Credo in unum Deum**

The *Credo* is divided into nine movements—a perfect number—the Trinity thrice multiplied. The placement of choruses and solo arias—2 choruses, an aria, 3 choruses, an aria, 2 choruses—reveals an overall form in the shape of a cross, and the central point is found in the crucifixion, surrounded by the incarnation and the resurrection.

The agelessness of the first article of faith, *I believe in one God*, is represented by the ancient chant. In this manner Bach “fuses himself with the history of the church and its music.” The *Credo* unfolds as a seven-part canon, which includes two violin parts with the five-voiced chorus.

### **Patrem omnipotentem**

BWV 171: Gott, wie dein Name (1729)

The words “I believe in one God” continue to be repeated in the movement that immediately follows for the text *omnipotent Father, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible*. Since the musical style also changes from the old practice to the new practice Bach seems to be bringing the age-old belief right into his present day.

### **Et in unum Deum**

The second article of faith, belief in Jesus Christ the Son of God, is set as a duet, symbolizing the second person of the Trinity. Both the unity and difference between the Father and the Son is expressed by a single motive with two contrasting articulations: the all-powerful Father is represented by a stronger, detached delivery; the gentler Son is heard in a softer, slurred phrasing.

### **Et incarnatus est**

The descent of the Holy Spirit is heard in the falling chord tones for *and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary*. Underneath this theme is the omni-present throbbing in the basses, a symbol of impending doom anticipating what will soon follow in the *Crucifixus*.

From the outset the violins, playing a short motive in unison, make multiple references to the cross. Rilling describes the visual symbol of the cross: “if the second note is connected to the fifth and the third is connected to the fourth, the result is a reclining cross, which is also the Greek letter *chi*, the initial letter of the *Christos*.”

The two developments of the text are characterized by a meditative, almost mystical restraint, while the concluding passage, *and was made man*, establishes the connection to the *Crucifixus*.

### **Crucifixus**

BWV 12: Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen (1714)

Set as a *passacaglia*, in which the melody takes shape over a constantly repeated bass pattern, *and was crucified for us* is the central movement of the *Credo*. The bass *motif* consists of a chromatically descending scale, a symbol of grief and suffering; the pattern is repeated a full thirteen times, symbolizing Christ and the twelve apostles. In the orchestra part is another reference to the cross in the scoring of the flutes and violins, with the parts crossing both rhythmically and melodically.

The entire focus of this movement is on the word *crucifixus*. As the music proceeds the increased use of chromaticism in the melodic and harmonic writing creates even more intensity. Clearly among the most dissonant Bach music ever wrote, it provides an opportunity to literally “feel” the pain, the agony. As Christ’s body is finally laid in the sepulchre the throbbing pulse recedes, the music becomes deadly quiet, and Bach deftly provides a modulation to prepare a smooth transition to the next movement.

### **Et resurrexit tertia die**

After a brief silence the music springs to life with the brilliant sonority of D major to herald the resurrection. Rilling decrees “nowhere in the history of mass composition is the belief in the resurrection expressed with such absolute confidence as it is here.” The groundswell of the news of Christ’s resurrection is clearly heard through the overlapping imitative entrances running from the lowest to the highest voices.

The third section of the *Et Resurrexit*, which begins *And He shall come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead*, differs dramatically from the first two parts. The awesome terror of the Last Judgment is heightened by the “breathless” quality of a phrase so long the singers literally don’t have time to breathe. Notice the choice of high notes to represent the living (*vivos*), and low notes, especially at the final moment, for the dead (*mortuos*).

### **Et in spiritum**

Following the intensity and exhilaration of the three movements dealing with the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, Bach offers a brief respite before moving on to the profound *Confiteor*. Although *Et in spiritum* has the longest text of any movement in the *credo*, Bach avoids reference to any specifics and instead chooses a *ritornello*, or repeated form, to reinforce a light, cheery mood.

### Confiteor-et expecto

The *Credo* began with a pair of choral movements, and now concludes with another pair. Like the *Credo in unum Deum*, the *Confiteor* (I confess one baptism for the remission of sins) instills the listener with the historical implications of the text through use of the *stile antico*, or sixteenth century polyphony, supported by the continuo. As the movement progresses the ageless quality of the confession is reinforced by quoting an ancient chant. It begins in long notes in the bass voice, repeated a measure later in canon by the altos a fifth higher. The tenors then pick up this *cantus firmus* in even longer tones.

The first appearance of *and I expect the resurrection of the dead* is shrouded in a dark, mysterious quality. The music is highly chromatic—anticipating even Wagner—and abounds in tonal instability. With harmonic relationships that reach beyond our imagination, how can we mortals begin to comprehend the raising up of the dead?

### Et expecto

But the mystery soon gives way to triumph as the tempo quickens and the forces are impelled forward with trumpets and timpani. Rilling feels that this is “symbolic of the sound of the last trumpet and the quaking of the earth on the day of resurrection.” Sir Donald Tovey further suggests that the trumpets “proclaim the ascension of ransomed souls.” A timpani solo symbolizes “the quaking of the earth on the day of resurrection.”

### Sanctus

Communion Music for Christmas (1723)

The *Sanctus* is the only movement in the Mass in which Bach utilizes a six-part chorus. The text is found in Isaiah 6, verses 2 and 3: “Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to the other and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.’” The frequent alternation between the three-part choirs of high and low voices has been described as the flapping of angels’ wings.

The “glory” of God in *Heaven and earth are full of Thy Glory* is emphasized by stretching out the word *Gloria*, and passing this expression of praise from voice to voice. The music is incredibly virtuosic, but also quite playful, and is perhaps best sung by joyful angels who never have to be concerned with technique!

### Osanna

The *Osanna*, with twenty separate parts, has the greatest number of parts in the entire *Mass*; its two statements surround the *Benedictus*, which has the fewest number of parts. The chorus is divided into two alternating four-part choirs, while the opening is emphatically in unison! Rilling refers to this as “the emotional uniting of the terrestrial and heavenly hymns of praise.” As the movement develops the first choir gradually adds voices while the opposing choir consistently interrupts with shouts of *Osanna*. An even greater intensity is felt when all eight vocal parts culminate in ecstatic rejoicing.

### Benedictus

*Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord* is scored for only tenor, unspecified obbligato instrument and continuo. By placing this very tranquil setting between the two majestic statements of the *Osanna* Bach emphasizes the peacefulness of His coming. The instrumental solo, usually assigned to a flute, has a free-flowing, almost improvisational character. And the whole movement exudes an atmosphere of meditative restraint.

### Agnus Dei

BWV 11: Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen (1735)

The most immediate feature of the *Agnus Dei* is Bach’s striking choice of the key of g minor. With two flats, it bears no relationship whatsoever to B minor and its complementary keys of D, G and A major, and E and F# minor. Bach clearly wants the listener’s undivided attention. From the opening instrumental theme one notices its relationship to the chromatic half-steps of the opening *Kyrie* fugue, symbolic of grief and sorrow in this prayer for mercy now extended to the sacrificed Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. His cross is visually evident on the printed page as the violin and alto solo parts contain frequent sharps (or cross signs) and multiple melodic crossings.

When the opening melody is heard in its reprise Bach closes the phrase on a *fermata*, or hold, the only time in the entire mass it is used within, rather than at the end, of a movement. This device is also used in the *St. John Passion* and *St. Matthew Passion*, and Rilling surmises that in order for the listener to contemplate “the suffering, crucifixion, and death of Jesus, the music pauses to permit time for humble reflection upon the meaning of this suffering.”

### Dona nobis pacem

In the final movement Bach provides a noble prayer that transforms from a humble petition for peace to a bold declaration of confidence in God’s Word. His faith is resolute. As in the opening statement of the Mass, God is praised and we accept His promised peace with full assurance.