

## Mass in B minor

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Tonight's work is undoubtedly one of the supreme masterpieces of western art, a piece to put alongside the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Cologne Cathedral and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Like *The Tempest*, the *Mass in B minor* seems to be a sort of final testament by its author, a summing up and distillation of all that had gone before as a farewell to his art. Perhaps this is too romantic a vision, but it is certainly true that both were their creators' last completed works. Bach died in 1750, a year after the *Mass* was completed, and left unfinished *The Art of Fugue*, an instrumental final testament which is a counterpart to the vocal one of the *Mass*.

The *Mass in B minor* is, in fact, in a literal sense a summing up of Bach's career, as many of the movements are based on pieces that he had composed earlier, and which span virtually his entire creative life. The main body of the *Mass* consists of the two sections which were used in Lutheran services, the Kyrie and Gloria, which had been composed in 1733 for the Dresden court. Although Bach had a permanent post as Cantor at St Thomas's Church in Leipzig from 1723 until his death, he often felt undervalued there, and sought greater appreciation elsewhere. Like almost all composers of the baroque period, Bach was heavily dependent on the favour of royalty and the aristocracy for this, and he regularly presented pieces to them in the hope of payment or appointment to a paid position in the household (the *Brandenburg Concerti* are an example of this). When the Elector of Saxony, Augustus II, died, his son declared a five month period of mourning, including a suspension of all public music-making, which curtailed Bach's activities with Leipzig's Collegium Musicum society. Bach used this time to compose a work to ingratiate himself immediately with the new Elector, Augustus III, dedicating the two-movement Mass to him in the hope of gaining a royal appointment. On its completion, Bach visited Augustus and presented him with a copy of the Lutheran Mass, together with a petition to be given a court title, dated July 27, 1733. The petition was not immediately successful, but Bach was eventually made court composer to Augustus in 1736, the Mass having been performed before Augustus in Leipzig in 1733 during the ceremony of the Oath of Allegiance to the new Elector. It is not known when Bach decided to transform the short Lutheran Mass into a full Catholic Mass, but its completion took until 1749. The earliest piece which Bach reworked was for the Crucifixus, which had originally been the opening chorus of Cantata 12, first performed in 1714. The Sanctus had been written for the Christmas Day service in 1724. There is some disagreement about the date of composition of the Credo, some scholars believing it to date from the early 1730s, others to have been composed when Bach was compiling the whole Mass in 1748/9, but here, too, several movements can be traced to earlier sources.

As would befit a summing up, Bach displays a wide range of styles and techniques in the *Mass in B minor*. The choruses range from the severely polyphonic style of the second Kyrie, *Gratias agimus*, Credo and Confiteor which hark back stylistically to the age of Palestrina and Lassus, even, in the Credo and Confiteor, making use of plainsong in a way that goes back to the mediæval period. In contrast to what might today be called these "retro" movements are the brilliant high baroque Gloria, *Cum sancto spiritu*, *Patrem omnipotentem* and *Et resurrexit*. The Crucifixus is a chaconne (a piece based on a short, repetitive bass line) and the Hosanna is a double chorus of the sort used in the Venetian churches in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. The non-choral

movements display a range of solo arias and duets with a wide variety of obbligato instruments. It is interesting to note, however, that all the most deeply-felt sections are given to the chorus.

Given its almost patchwork origins, can the work be seen as an integrated whole? Certainly not in the sense that the spiritual journey of a Mahler symphony or the musico-dramatic narrative of a Wagner opera can. The unity of the *Mass in B minor* is closer to that of a mediæval cathedral or a picaresque novel; it is the unity of separate but complementary sections, a unity of sensibility and purpose. What Bach seems to have been doing at the end of his life in bringing together these movements spanning some 35 years of composition was saying “Here is the best that I can do.”

It may well be that Bach would be very surprised to see this performance tonight. Even in the manuscript volume of his final thoughts on the piece, bound together in 1749, the four main sections are given separate title pages and the whole is never referred to as a Mass. He never heard a complete performance himself, and some scholars believe that it was never really intended as a piece to be performed as a whole. Certainly its length would make it most unlikely to be used in a liturgical context, and the idea of the concert in the modern sense only came into being decades after Bach's death. Indeed, although it was known to the succeeding generation of composers (Haydn possessed a copy and Beethoven twice tried to acquire one), it was not published until 1818, and there is no evidence at all that it had ever been performed in its totality before the performance in Leipzig on 10 April 1859 (152 years ago tomorrow), and its first performance in Britain was not until 1876. We are luckier than the composer in this respect: the *Mass in B minor* has taken its rightful place in the repertoire, and we can hear and wonder at its glory. And what better place could there be to hear it than a great cathedral?

### Kyrie

The Kyrie consists of two solemn “stile antico” choruses which frame a duet for two sopranos. The first Kyrie begins with a stark, imploring request for mercy followed by a 5-part fugue of immense grandeur. The Christe duet is a much lighter movement in the major, seemingly acknowledging the more approachably human manifestation of God in the person of Christ. The second Kyrie, however, returns to the solemnity of an appeal to God the Father, its greater chromaticism carrying an even greater urgency.

### Gloria

The Gloria has eight movements. After the solemnity of the two Kyries, the joyous exaltation of the opening chorus with its trumpets and drums comes as a sudden sunburst. The Laudamus te which follows is for soprano with violin obbligato, and embodies the very baroque idea of praising God through ornament in a way not unlike the baroque Catholic churches of southern Germany and Austria. The third section, the Gratias agimus, reverts to a more severe, polyphonic style which at first seems at odds with the text's thanksgiving, but demonstrates a gratitude deeper than simple joy. The mood is again lightened in the succeeding duet, Domine Deus, for soprano and tenor which has a particularly lovely flute obbligato. The text addresses both father and son, and so a duet seems entirely appropriate. The descending intervals of the Qui tolis chorus which follows seem to mirror the laying onto Christ's shoulders of the sins of the world. The reflective atmosphere is continued into the Qui sedes, an aria for alto with oboe

d'amore obbligato. For the only time in the work, two arias follow in succession, this next, the Quoniam, being for bass with horn obbligato. It bridges the emotional tone between the thoughtful Qui sedes and the exultant Cum sancto spiritu chorus which concludes the Gloria.

### Credo

The nine movements of the Credo have a palindromic structure moving to and from the central Crucifixus movement: two choruses, an aria, a chorus, the Crucifixus, a chorus, an aria, two choruses linked together with a bridging passage. Bach gives an entire chorus to a setting of the first line of the Creed, writing in an archaic style. Over a walking bass line, Bach uses a plainsong melody which is repeated almost continuously throughout the movement in different voices. The use of this most ancient of western musical forms reinforces the timelessness and centrality of the statement of belief. The second movement of this section begins with a repetition of the first line of the text set against the succeeding text. In the delightful Et in unum duet for soprano and alto, Bach playfully gives the idea of the one lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God, to two voices which constantly echo each other's music. A sequence of three choruses provides the emotional centre of the Credo, and moves from the mystery of the incarnation in the Et incarnatus, where the dropping phrases seem to represent the descent of God from heaven into the world, through the anguished chromaticism of the Crucifixus, to the exultant, upwardly-leaping phrases of the Et resurrexit, where Christ rises from the dead. The rising phrases of the Et resurrexit balance the dropping ones of the Et incarnatus. The emotional temperature drops in the gentle bass aria Et in spiritum with its obbligato for two oboi d'amore. The section ends with the Confiteor, a remarkable chorus in three parts. The first is in the same severe, old style of the Kyrie and makes use of a plainsong cantus firmus like the Credo which opened the section. The tempo then slows for the harmonically audacious Et expecto, whose chromatic slitherings seem to depict the agony of apprehension at Judgement Day, only to explode into the joy of the resurrection of the dead as the tempo surges again and the lines constantly rise like the bodies of the faithful rising from their tombs.

### Sanctus and Benedictus, Agnus Dei, Dona nobis pacem

The final section of the Mass consists of five movements, of which the Hosanna is repeated. The Sanctus is a six-part chorus which takes the form of a French overture with a magisterial slow introduction followed by a lively fugue on the word "Pleni sunt caeli". The Hosanna for double four-part chorus, whose music was adapted from a secular cantata of 1734 which celebrated the accession of the Elector of Saxony to the Polish throne, is almost jaunty with its choral runs. The Benedictus is a lovely, reflective aria for tenor with violin obbligato, after which the Hosanna is repeated. The Agnus Dei is an aria for alto whose angular line and strange intervals express the anguish of the knowledge of the suffering that our sins have caused Christ to undergo. The concluding Dona nobis pacem is a four part chorus which repeats almost exactly the music of the Gratias agimus heard in the Gloria and ends the work on a note of serene certainty in God's mercy.

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