

Programme notes for J.S. Bach *Magnificat in D Major* and Haydn *Nelson Mass*

Magnificat in D Major, BWV243

Johann Sebastian Bach (1695-1750)

When Johann Kuhnau died in June 1722, the post of cantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig became vacant. Seven musicians applied and several were offered the post, the most famous being Georg Phillip Telemann. After using it as a way of extracting a larger salary from the city council of Hamburg where he was cantor of the five most important city churches, Telemann then declined Leipzig's offer. Others turned it down because one of the stipulated duties was the teaching of Latin in the Thomasschule, which they were unqualified to do. At the bottom of the list of potential cantors came the almost unknown organist of the court of Cöthen, Johann Sebastian Bach. The by-now desperate Leipzig council agreed that Bach could hire a deputy to teach the Latin, and unenthusiastically offered him the post. A full year after Kuhnau's death, on 30th May 1723, Bach took up the post in which he would remain for the rest of his life. It was a hugely demanding post, involving directing the choir at the church boarding school, directing musical activities at the university, playing the organ, training the choir and composing the music for the city's two principal Lutheran churches as well as supervising and training the musicians at three others.

One of Bach's earliest compositions in his new post was a *Magnificat in E flat* which modern research has indicated may have been performed as early as July 2nd of that year. The work was divided into the standard 12 movements and scored for five soloists, five-part choir and orchestra. Bach was clearly pleased with the piece, as at Christmas the piece was performed again with the addition of four *laudes* (songs of praise) in a mixture of German and Latin inserted between the movements. This was Bach's first major composition in Latin, and it may seem surprising that he should have set the text in that language in the staunchly Protestant east of Germany, but Leipzig continued to use an unusual amount of Latin in its churches. The *Magnificat* was a regular part of Sunday services, being given in German on ordinary days and in Latin on the major feasts of Easter, Christmas and Pentecost and (perhaps even more surprisingly) on the three Marian feasts of the Annunciation, Visitation and Purification.

Bach's fondness for this work is shown in that ten years later, for the feast of the Visitation in 1733, he produced a revised version with expanded instrumentation, now consisting of three trumpets, two flutes, two oboes, strings and continuo. It was for this reason that the key was altered to D major: he wished to use trumpets for added effect, and D was the most convenient key for the pre-valve baroque version of the instrument.

After the lively, unbuttoned opening movement, the first aria, "Et exultavit", is given to one of the two sopranos. The third movement, "Quia respexit", which is given to the other soprano soloist, is in marked contrast to the florid vocal writing of "Et exultavit", using a plaintive oboe to give a sombre mood. The final two words of text of this section, "Omnes generationes", are set as a separate fourth movement for chorus, representing all the generations who will call Mary blessed. Each entrance of the main motive overlaps with the previous entrance, giving a tumultuous feel of vast numbers of people falling over themselves to praise Mary.

The following aria, "Quia fecit mihi magna", is given to the bass soloist, accompanied only by the low continuo instruments, in a sort of a duet between voice and cello. The

sixth movement, "Et misericordia", is a duet between the tenor and alto set above a slowly pulsing accompaniment which gives this plea for mercy a yearning quality. The seventh movement, "Fecit potentiam", is for full orchestra and chorus and displays the strength of God. It culminates in a representation of the dispersal of the proud, as the voices become scattered fragments flung from on high. The movement ends with a massive chordal passage reiterating the monumental power of God.

The eighth movement, "Deposuit potentes", is sung by the tenor. The downward runs represent the mighty falling, but they then ascend again to show the raising of the humble. The alto sings the ninth movement, "Esuriantes implevit bonus", to the accompaniment of two flutes, the three lines of music intertwining intricately. The tenth movement, "Suscepit Israel", is a trio for the two sopranos and alto. Above this Bach gives the melody of the German version of the Magnificat to the oboes in long sustained notes. Though it is stretched out over the whole movement, the Leipzig congregation would certainly have recognized this incorporation of the well-known hymn tune. Movement eleven, "Sicut Locutus est", uses a canon to show God's promise to Abraham and his seed being passed on to each succeeding generation.

The final movement, "Gloria patri", begins with full orchestra and chorus declaiming "Gloria" followed by an intricate, contrapuntal passage, beginning in the bass voices and ascending through the rest. This is repeated three times before, at the text "Sicut erat in principio" (as it was in the beginning), Bach returns to the music of the opening movement to bring the work full circle; the music returns to its own beginning.

Nelson Mass (Missa in Angustiis), H XXII:11 Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

By the time of the composition of the work we are hearing tonight, Haydn had been in the employ of the Esterházy family for 37 years and his position had become, in effect, part-time. Prince Paul Anton had appointed Haydn in 1761 but died only a year later to be succeeded by his son Nikolaus. Both of these princes were enthusiastic and knowledgeable connoisseurs of music who made full use of Haydn's talent. However Nikolaus's son Anton, who succeeded his father in 1790, had little interest in music, and one of his first acts was to dismiss most of the court musicians. Haydn was retained on a much reduced salary of 400 florins a year, but fortunately before he died Nikolaus had granted Haydn a pension of 1000 florins a year, so the composer was financially secure. As Anton had no particular use for Haydn's services, he was quite happy for him to travel abroad for extended periods and no longer expected him to accompany the court to the distant Esterháza estate during the summer months. It was during this time that Haydn made his very successful visits to London. In 1795 Anton died and was succeeded by Nikolaus II, whose interest in music was much more like that of his grandfather. The court musical establishment was revived and Haydn's position reverted to one much more like it had been, though on a more part-time basis. This was partly because of Haydn's age, but also because the composer now had a substantial home in Vienna and had come to enjoy both the variety of his life and the fame that his freedom during Anton's reign had enabled him to achieve.

One of the relatively small number of tasks which Haydn was expected to undertake was to write a mass each year to celebrate the name day of Nikolaus II's wife, Maria Hermenegild (a name day is the feast day of the saint whose name corresponds to a person's Christian name). Haydn composed six such masses between 1796 and 1802, including tonight's work.

Haydn called this work *Missa in Angustiis*, which translates as "Mass in Time of Trouble". It was written in July and August 1798 when the war against revolutionary France was going badly for the Allies and large parts of Austria were occupied by the French. In 1797 Napoleon had crossed the Alps, threatening Vienna itself, and in May 1798 he invaded Egypt in order to disrupt British trade routes to the East. Legend has it that Haydn was at work on tonight's mass when a messenger arrived with the news of Nelson's victory at Aboukir Bay, which became known as the Battle of the Nile, on 3rd August 1798. Haydn is supposed to have been inspired by this to write the stirring trumpet fanfare at the end of the Benedictus in celebration. The name *Nelson Mass*, however, does not stem from this but rather from a performance at the Esterházy court at Eisenstadt in 1800, when it was sung at a ceremony to celebrate the visit of Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton. Haydn and Nelson apparently became quite friendly, Nelson presenting Haydn with a gold pocket watch and he writing a piece for Lady Hamilton which he presented to her with the pen with which he had composed it. The title *Nelson Mass*, in fact, does not appear on any of the early editions and only became standard well into the 19th century.

Although the historical circumstances and the title given to it by its composer would lead one to expect a dark piece full of disquiet, this is not at all the abiding feel of the mass. This is, perhaps, not too surprising given that it was written to celebrate a name day. Unlike the more monumental masses in the repertoire, such as Bach's *Mass in B minor* and Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, the sections of the mass are not divided into a large number of separate movements alternating choral movements and arias. Indeed, although there are four soloists, none is given an individual aria; their parts are solo or ensemble sections which are generally woven into the choral texture. The structures of the movements are close to those of Haydn's symphonies, and H.C. Robbins Landon, undoubtedly the most important contributor to Haydn scholarship, has called the *Nelson Mass* "arguably Haydn's greatest single composition".

The opening "Kyrie" begins with low fanfares for the trumpets which give a sense of unease, but the "Gloria" is an almost wholly joyful movement. The military associations of the trumpets are heard again in the "Credo" and, more surprisingly, in the "Benedictus", a movement usually set as tranquil and comforting. The brief "Agnus dei" is followed by a jubilant "Dona nobis pacem" to conclude the work.

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