

Mass in B flat, Op. 141, D324

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Although Schubert is today regarded as one of the great composers, this reputation was only fully established well into the 20th century. Even today, whilst his songs are absolutely central to the Lieder-singer's repertoire, his piano sonatas are still comparatively rarely performed and only his 8th and 9th symphonies are part of the standard repertoire. His operas are almost forgotten, as is his sacred music, of which we give a rarely-performed example this evening. Many music-lovers are unaware of any sacred music by Schubert, but he composed not only six Latin masses, a German "mass" (a setting of a sequence of poems by Johann Philipp Neumann rather than the standard mass text) and a German Requiem, but also 30 motets, several cantatas, and an unfinished oratorio. Although it seems faintly absurd to refer to some of the works by someone who died aged only 31 as "juvenilia", tonight's Mass (which was the composer's third mass) was composed in 1815 when Schubert was only 18 years old, so can reasonably be so called - though it must be remembered that Schubert wrote one of his greatest songs, *Erkönig*, in this same year.

1815 was a frantically busy year for Schubert; despite being employed fulltime teaching the youngest children at his father's school and taking lessons in composition twice a week with Salieri, he managed to compose 140 new songs, his second and third symphonies, four stage works, his first major compositions for piano, the string quartet in G (D173) and two Masses: those in G (D167) and tonight's work in B flat. We do not know what prompted Schubert to write this B flat mass, but it is thought that the soprano solos were written for Therese Grob, a singer whom Schubert hoped to marry. Unfortunately the laws which demanded that the bridegroom must be able to prove that he could support a family before any marriage could take place prevented this, and her father found a new suitor for Therese. It is highly likely that the mass was first performed in 1815 at the church in Lichtental, the suburb of Vienna where Schubert's family lived. The choir master there, Michael Holzer, was a family friend who had a close relationship with the composer. Another performance seems to have taken place in 1820, and a final one in Hainburg in 1824, at which the composer's brother Ferdinand played the organ. The mass was not published until 1837, nine years after Schubert's death, hence its high opus number.

One interesting aspect about Schubert's setting is that he omits several portions of the text of both the Gloria and Credo. It had always been considered that this was either oversight or carelessness, but more recently it has been suggested that this was an intentional reflection of Schubert's agnosticism and philosophical beliefs influenced by his reading of Goethe and Herder. In the Gloria he repeats the line "Domine Deus...miserere nobis" (Lord God...have mercy on us) twice but completely eliminates the following line, "suscipe deprecationem nostrum" (receive our prayer) placing an additional emphasis on the portion of the Gloria text that petitions for the Lord's mercy. In the Credo Schubert omits "Et unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam" (I believe in the one holy, catholic and apostolic church) and "Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum" (I await the resurrection of the dead), showing a disregard for ecclesiastical self-regard and a lack of belief in an afterlife.

Mass in B flat major "Harmoniemesse"

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Tonight's concert continues the Rochester Choral Society's traversal of all the late masses by Joseph Haydn with his final mass, the *Harmoniemesse*. This title, as with most of the titles of Haydn's masses (and, indeed, most titles of classical works which are not operas) was a publisher's invention and nothing to do with Haydn himself. It is also, for an English-speaking audience, somewhat misleading, as the immediate thought is that it is something to do with the mass having a "harmonious" or pleasing sound. In fact, the German word "harmonie" in this context simply means a wind band, and refers to the extensive and elaborate woodwind parts in the orchestra.

After he had completed his oratorio *The Seasons* in 1801, Haydn remarked that its composition had "broken his back." Nevertheless, in 1802, aged 70, he undertook the composition of tonight's work, which proved to be his last large work. As with the previous five settings composed between 1796 and 1801, this Mass was composed to celebrate the name day of Princess Marie Hermenegild, wife of his fourth patron, Nicholas II of Esterhazy.

The *Harmoniemesse*, under Haydn's direction, was sung at mass on September 8, 1802, the Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the Bergkirche (Mountain Church) situated at the top a small hill a short distance from the Esterhazy palace in Eisenstadt.

The Austrian ambassador to the Court of St. James, Prince Starhernberg, was present and recorded his impressions in his diary: "On September 8, the Princess's birthday, at ten in the morning, we with a great procession of Esterhazy attendants clad in the princely livery proceeded to Mass. Superb Mass! New excellent music by the famous Haydn, and directed by him! Nothing could have been more beautiful and better executed! After the Mass, returned to the castle.... Afterwards, a huge and magnificent dinner... with music during the meal. The Princess's health proposed by the Prince and echoed by fanfares and cannon, followed by several more toasts, including one to me and one to Haydn, who was dining with us, proposed by me. After dinner we dressed for the ball, which was truly superb, like a Court ball." It is interesting that Starhernberg noted that Haydn sat among the dignitaries at the birthday dinner table, and was treated with great respect. Unlike his father Anton, Prince Nicholas recognised the genius of his Kapellmeister, and provided that Haydn should receive annually six Eimer (literally "buckets") of table wine from the prince's vineyards in perpetuity. As the Haydn scholar H.C. Robbins Landon has said, "Within the span of his career, Haydn had seen a complete transformation of his position - from a servant in livery literally kissing the hem of the Prince's garment, to a distinguished artist invited to dine with the Prince and Princess and their guests, and the object of affection and adulation."

The opening Kyrie begins with a 16-bar orchestral introduction, whose overall quiet dynamic level lulls us into a frame of mind which is startlingly broken by the thunderous entrance of the full chorus on a diminished seventh chord rather than the tonic triad of B-flat major. This first statement from the choir acts as a powerful upbeat to the real start of the movement's exposition, the bass solo's entrance on the word "Kyrie". The entire movement delights in contrasts of dynamics and performing forces.

The Gloria begins with the solo soprano, but its grand opening section then continues with the forces of full chorus and orchestra. The solo voices in succession sing the principal theme of the slower middle section of the "Gloria" (Gratias agimus). A

delightful instrumental feature of this section is the quick descending quadruplet which follows each singer's completion of the first phrase of the melody; this quadruplet expands into a continuous figure running through the string and wind sections when the choir enters to declaim the words "Qui tollis peccata mundi". The Gloria is capped by another section for massed chorus and orchestra, culminating in a remarkable fugato with subject "in gloria Dei Patris" and countersubject "Amen" in contrary motion.

At the start of the Credo vigorous instrumental writing contrasts with less complicated rhythms for the choral statements. The sweet lyricism of "Et incarnatus est" is disturbed by the chorus's searing chromatic chords beginning with the word "Crucifixus". In the "Et resurrexit", Haydn's evokes the trumpet of the Last Judgment as horn and timpani introduce the words "judicare vivos". This grand gesture contrasts sharply with the hushed choral declamation of the word "mortuorum", almost a stunned silence, which precedes the brilliant fugue ("Et vitam venturi") which concludes the Credo.

In the Sanctus, the suddenly rising and gently falling violin figure comments upon the chromatically inflected choral harmonies. The suddenly jaunty close of this section features the full wind section in antiphony to the choir's "Hosanna". The Benedictus opens with a surprisingly sprightly tune over a "walking" bass line; when the full choir sings pianissimo the melody, it creates a sense of nervous awe. This section ends with the same "Hosanna" chorus which concluded the Sanctus.

The solo quartet sings the quietly lyrical Agnus Dei, pausing on the dominant chord of D major in preparation for the transition to the final "Dona Nobis Pacem" for full chorus and orchestra. The full wind section loudly repeats a D like a victorious military fanfare. The kettledrum pounds B-flat to usher in the full chorus in B-flat major. This joyful chorus, written during a brief lull in the Napoleonic wars, radiates faith in the achievement of ultimate peace. In its final phrase, the choir sings the word "pacem" on a B-flat major arpeggio which traverses the full register of each voice, from top to bottom.

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June 2018