

Vesperae Solennes de Confessore, K.339

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Although there are a few great, popular masterpieces among Mozart's works (the *Requiem*, the *Mass in C minor* and the *Coronation Mass* being the prime examples, the first two of which were left unfinished), religious music was probably the least important genre in his output. The world had changed drastically in the 50 years between Bach and Mozart; the rise of opera and the beginnings of what might be called the infrastructure of concert going which began to be put in place in the middle of the 18th century meant that fewer composers found themselves employed almost exclusively by the church. On the intellectual level, the Enlightenment saw fewer people considering religion as the central point of life. For the first time, many educated people began to take the viewpoint memorably enunciated by Sportin' Life in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*: "The things that your li'ble to read in the Bible – they ain't necessarily so". The contrast between Bach and Mozart is a paradigm case in this: Bach spent the last 27 years of his life as Kantor of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, producing over 300 cantatas (of which over 200 survive) and being (as far as we can tell from the very limited historical evidence) a devout Lutheran. Mozart, however, seemed to have very little interest in religion, and his relationship with his principal religious employer, Hieronymus Colloredo, Prince Archbishop of Salzburg, was famously fraught.

Very much against his father Leopold's wishes, Mozart had resigned from Colloredo's service in 1777 in order to tour continental Europe, with the intention of supporting himself through performances and commissions for new works. Although he had some success, he was no longer the child prodigy who had delighted courts in his first journeys with his father, and found that he could not make sufficient money. His father had refused to accompany him, so his mother had done so, but in Paris in the summer of 1778 she died; this was the last straw for Mozart and he reluctantly decided to return to Salzburg. A vindicated (at least in his own eyes) Leopold petitioned Archbishop Colloredo on his reluctant son's behalf for the post of court organist. Somewhat surprisingly, Colloredo re-employed Mozart in February 1779 with the stipulation that Mozart would compose new works in addition to his court and chapel duties.

Unfortunately, the relationship was set to founder from the start. Colloredo was entirely sympathetic to the series of religious reforms instigated by the emperor, Josef II, and made these part of the terms of employment. Josef considered himself to be a child of the Enlightenment, and the Cartesian rationalism of that movement believed that all true knowledge was from the mind, not the emotions, so music was regarded as merely a "decorative" art. The emperor therefore decided to do away with elaborate, concerted musical settings of the mass, demanding short and relatively simple choral music, without aria-like solos or choral fugues, which he regarded as merely (to use a term of Bertolt Brecht's) "culinary". The "rule" was that all of the music in a service should not exceed 45 minutes' duration in total or employ operatic conventions. Such restrictions did not appeal to Mozart at all, and Colloredo seemed to take pleasure in rubbing Mozart's nose in his having to return to Salzburg. At table he was placed above the cooks but below the valets and was refused permission on a number of occasions to earn money by playing at concerts (including one time at a concert attended by the emperor, which would have earned him a fee equivalent to half his annual salary). In May 1781 he had a particularly stormy interview with Colloredo and asked to be discharged from the archbishop's service. At first this was refused, but in June he was released "with a kick on the arse... by order of our worthy Prince Archbishop", as he wrote to his father.

The service of Vespers is the seventh of the eight daily 'hours', and is held at sunset. The *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore* were so named because they were written for performance to with orchestral accompaniment, on a day for celebration of a

“confessor”, which simply means a saint and has nothing specifically to do with the confession of a sin. These Vespers were written in 1780, possibly for the feast of St Jerome, Colloredo’s name day, or for St. Rupert, the patron saint of Salzburg, both of which are celebrated in September. Although composed only 18 months after he was employed, this was the last work Mozart wrote for Colloredo.

From the beginning of the work, Mozart seems determined to defy Colloredo’s stipulations with an almost operatic immediacy. The first movement “Dixit Dominus” starts with an emphatic declamation of its opening words until the brief entry of the soloists for ‘Gloria patri’. The movement ends with the conventional practice of returning to the opening musical themes of “sede dextris” for the singing of “sicut erat in principio” before an operatic series of closing “Amens”.

The second movement, “Confitebor”, begins with an austere, plainsong-like choral unison of the opening phrase which repeats the form of first movement in its re-using of the “sicut erat” before a flourish of “Amens”. An echo of choral plainsong returns before the solo quartet reinforces the operatic structure of the movement, ending with a resounding “Gloria patri”.

The third Psalm “Beatus Vir” is divided equally between choir and soloists. Its opening phrases move from bold statements to elaborations before the soloists initiate “Gloria et divitiae” introduced by a string melody which is reprised towards the end for the soprano soloist’s “Gloria patri” and elaborate “Amens”.

The fourth movement, “Laudate Pueri”, is an exercise in traditional, strict counterpoint, which begins as a fugue, but is modified after the opening phrases by the movement of a descending scale on “Quis sicut Dominus” with which it continues to alternate until interrupted by a hushed “Et humilia respicit”. This mood is continued into the “Gloria” preceding the concluding “Amens”.

“Laudate Dominum”, the fifth movement, is by far the most famous movement in the work, and is often sung as a separate piece. It is a gentle, floating aria for solo soprano whose sense of rapture is sustained as the choir steals in quietly half-way through for the Gloria, echoing the same tune in four-part harmony before its hushed “Amens”, over which the soprano soars once more in a glorious descant. It is difficult to see how even Colloredo could have objected to this sublime movement.

The concluding “Magnificat” begins adagio with the choir underpinned by energetic triplets in the strings. The solo soprano’s “Et exultavit spiritus meus” then adds excitement. The chorus returns for “Quia respexit”, only to give way to the solo quartet for “Et misericor”. The concluding “Gloria Patri” is given to the quartet of soloists before the chorus return on “sicut erat”, dropping suddenly to pianissimo for the final “saeculorum” before brisk, concluding “Amens”.

Mass in B flat major *Theresienmesse*

Franz Josef Haydn (1732-1809)

RCS’s survey of the six mature masses which Haydn wrote for the name day of Maria Hermenegilde, the wife of his patron Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, tonight reaches the mass written the year after the Nelson Mass.

As with all of these six masses, its title was not given by Haydn. The titles of most of the other masses are easily explained, but no-one is entirely sure about why this mass gained its title. It would seem obvious that it refers to Marie Therese, the wife of the Emperor Franz II, who was certainly very keen to have Haydn write pieces for her, though the Esterházy’s were rather less enamoured with the idea of “their” composer writing for anyone else, even the empress. She had succeeded in 1799, when Haydn had written his *Te Deum* for her. The *Theresienmesse* was also written in 1799, so it is possible that she was successful again, but there is no documentary evidence for this, and the mass was first performed on September 8, 1799 in the

Bergkirche, near the Esterházy family seat in Eisenach to celebrate Maria Hermenegilde's name day. There is also no evidence of the empress ever having attended a performance, which would be very odd if she had had Haydn compose the works for her, especially as she was very musical and had a soprano voice good enough to sing the solo soprano parts when Haydn's *The Creation* and *The Seasons* were performed at court in 1801.

The *Theresienmesse* was written at the very peak of Haydn's mastery, between his two oratorios, *The Creation* and *The Seasons*. One unusual aspect of the work's scoring is the paucity of wind instruments; Haydn uses only two clarinets and two trumpets. The apparent reason for this was a shortage of wind players at Eisenach at this period – a fact which casts further doubt on the mass having been commissioned by Marie Therese, who would have had no such supply problem.

The *Theresienmesse* interweaves the solo quartet with the chorus. The style is generally lyrical rather than dramatic, though it is a work of marked musical contrasts, with slow, quiet passages, such as the very opening of the Kyrie, set against vigorous, loud sections like the final pages of the Credo. Simple hymn-like textures contrast with complex fugal movements such as the difficult, chromatic fugue on "Et vitam venture saeculi" at the end of the Credo. The quartet of soloists is sometimes heard in dialogue with the chorus and sometimes in extended sections of its own, notably at "Et incarnatus est", also in the Credo, but there are no solo arias.

The adagio opening of the Kyrie gives a sense of serenity, but this is soon disrupted by chorus basses, trumpets and timpani with a lively allegro for the opening movement proper. This choral fugue is replaced by a "Christe eleison" for the solo quartet based on material from the opening.

A spirited "Gloria" for chorus and orchestra follows which is in three extensive sections that mirror the text. Haydn theatrically reiterates the word "Te" (Thee) before being temporarily stilled by the minor-key "et in terra pax". This becomes C major, which heralds the solo quartet's "Gratias". An agitated ostinato triplet announces the chorus's "qui tollis", after which the haunting a cappella "miserere nobis" merges into an optimism from the chorus on the "Cum sancto spirito".

The "Credo" then cracks open with an opening allegro, but lowering in pitch and dynamics on the words "descendit de caelis". The "Et incarnatus est" for soloists alone is a thoughtful meditation. This celestial quality takes us towards a "Crucifixus," devoid of the drama found in other Haydn masses. But the ecstasy of the life to come is ultimately celebrated in the lively fugue, "Et vitam venturi", bringing this exuberant section to a close.

The intimate opening to the Sanctus becomes vigorous at "Pleni sunt coeli", Haydn moving from the minor into the major in a joyful, if rather restrained, "Osanna".

A pastoral "Benedictus" proceeds gently until trumpets and drums blaze forth with the section built around a central choral climax characterized by powerful choral unisons and wild dynamic fluctuations.

The "Agnus Dei" begins as a hushed piano featuring wailing violin figures that conjure a veritable "Sturm und Drang" before returning to a more rustic style in the home key. The movement draws to a magnificent close as the tempo increases to allegro on the words "Dona nobis pacem". This final "Dona nobis pacem" seems to contradict the meaning of the words ("grant us peace") with its celebratory character. When asked why he often set the "Dona nobis pacem" in this way in his masses, Haydn is said to have replied, "Because, when I think of God, it makes me happy."

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