

# BACH'S PLEA FOR MERCY

## The Kyrie of the Mass in B-Minor

For the ASO Chamber Chorus  
by Jeffrey Baxter | February 13, 2013

### BACH'S MONUMENT

The great tripartite opening [Kyrie-Christe-Kyrie] of what would ultimately become Bach's complete Mass "in B-Minor" began life as an offering for the Catholic Elector of Saxony in Dresden in 1733. It was a *Missa brevis*, or "Lutheran Mass" (Kyrie and Gloria only).

### SYMMETRICAL LAYOUT - Keys

Bach's *Missa* begins in B-Minor, but ends in – and mostly consists of – the relative (D) Major. The keys of the 3-part Kyrie outline a B-Minor triad: b-D-f# (supplicatory), in contrast to the Gloria's opening three movements whose keys outline I-V-I of D-Major, D-A-D (celebratory).

KEY	TITLE	STYLE
b	1. Kyrie I (Intro and fugue)	two-section chorus
D	2. Christe	florid solo mvt.
f#	3. Kyrie II	<i>stile antico</i> chorus

### MUSICAL SYNTHESIS

Bach began his Mass as he would end it, by deliberately juxtaposing archaic musical styles (that of Palestrina and the generation after) with modern Baroque styles. It is seen initially with the *Missa's* contrasting second movement, Christe eleison – where the florid, more "modern" operatic vocal style of the Dresden court is interpolated between two austere contrapuntal choral movements that display Bach's mastery of old-style (Renaissance) sacred music.

### BACH'S INSPIRATION

Bach's Mass also represents a confessional synthesis of Catholic and Protestant tenets of faith, seen in the origins and inspirations of its opening Kyrie movement. In the work's gripping opening bars, the melodic contour of the 1<sup>st</sup> soprano (and flute/oboe) outlines in B-Minor the basic melody of Martin Luther's 1526 *Deutsche Messe*:

Martin Luther, *Deutsche Messe* 1526  
Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son.

Martin Luther (?), *Braunschweig* 1528  
Chri - ste, du Lamm Got - tes

J. S. Bach, Kyrie  
*Flauto traverso I*  
*Oboe d'amore I*

*Soprano I*  
Ky - ri - e, Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, e - le - i - son.

The ensuing fugue subject of the tenor, however, seems to be inspired by a Catholic mass setting that Bach owned (and had copied out) by Johann Wilderer, a Kapellmeister at Düsseldorf and Mannheim (1670-1724):

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'Wilderer Soprano' and 'm. 11'. It features a melodic line in G major with lyrics: 'Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, e - le - i - son, ...'. The bottom staff is labeled 'Bach Tenore' and 'm. 30'. It features a similar melodic line in G major with lyrics: 'Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son'.

Indeed, Bach’s entire Kyrie-Christe-Kyrie setting resembles structural similarities to the Wilderer work, with its short *Adagio* opening, the main fugue subject mentioned above, the duet of voices in both Christe eleison settings and the general melodic contour of both final Kyrie’s. –But, as always with Bach, what he borrows musically (either from himself or others) he repays ten-fold, with a richness and density of expression often greater and deeper than the original.

### BACH’S ORGANIZATION

Bach introduces his opening liturgical statement (inspired by the Luther *Messe* and Wilderer *Missa*) with a solemn four measure introduction that contains all the musical material for the ensuing nine minute meditation on the words, “Lord, have mercy.” The bass (and soprano) lines employ eleven notes that suggest the outline of the main fugue subject:

Introduction (ms. 1-4):

The image shows two musical staves for the introduction. The top staff is labeled 'S1' and the bottom 'Bass'. Both are in G major and 4/4 time. The Soprano part has lyrics: 'Ky - ri - e, Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, e - le - i - son.' The Bass part has lyrics: 'Ky - ri - e, Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, e - le - i - son.' The notes are numbered 1 through 11, corresponding to the main fugue subject.

Main Fugue Subject (ms. 5-8 in flute/oboe; ms. 30-33 in tenor):

The image shows a single musical staff for the main fugue subject. It is in G major and 4/4 time. The melody is: 'Ky-ri-e e-le - i - son, Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son,'. The notes are numbered 1 through 11.

The grand 5-voice Fugue that unfolds contains a *melisma* of rising and falling pairs of half-steps that express in a single melody – on a single syllable – both aspiration (a plea to a higher power) and frailty (the weight of the human condition). In the mirror-image of these rising and falling pairs Bach evokes both doubt and faith; hope and despair. The voice of the celebrant seeks answers to the seemingly unanswerable age-old questions of life and death by looking outward and inward, heavenward and earthward. –But in spite of the duality

expressed in this *melisma*, the general contour of the four-bar melody (like Luther’s original tune) is ascending – suggesting, perhaps, that hope lies above?

Because of the richness (and length) of this fugue-subject, Bach is able to work out his argument thoroughly – both in the phrase-extensions between statements and the intense developmental episodes that follow each fugal exposition.

The multi-layered musical experience that Bach presents us sounds – at first hearing – like a grand 5-voice Fugue, with traditional *Ritornelli* (instrumental interludes):

SECTION	LOCATION	KEY (TONALITY)	
Introduction	ms. 1-4	b	
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Ritornello (orchestral)	ms. 5-30	b	(i)
Fugue à 5	ms. 30-72	b	-with 3 additional fugal entries
Ritornello (orchestral)	ms. 72-81	A	(II)
Fugue à 5	ms. 81-126	b	(i) -with 3 additional fugal entries

-But upon closer examination one notices a hidden “6<sup>th</sup>” fugal entry in the Soprano 2 and Violin 2 at m. 48 (and again at m. 102 in Sop.1 and Vln.1). These turn out to be “Hidden” orchestral *Ritornelli*, with the choral voices added, -or “built-in” (German, “einbaut”). Traditional *Ritornelli* are combined with these “Hidden” *Ritornelli*.

Bach thereby has crafted a large-scale *Ritornello* movement (Concerto-style) as well as a Fugue, where the fugue serves as a “decoy” to the underlying logic of the piece:

SECTION	LOCATION	KEY (TONALITY)	
Introduction	ms. 1-4	b	
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Ritornello (orchestral)	ms. 5-30	b	(i)
Fugue à 5	ms. 30-48	b	
Ritornello (“6 <sup>th</sup> ” entry)	ms. 48-72	f#	(v) -complete statement in F#-Minor (dev. episode) “Hidden” <i>Ritornello</i> , w/ coro <i>einbaut</i>
Interlude (orchestral)	ms. 72-81	A	(II) -The Golden Mean (major mode at .618)
Fugue à 5	ms. 81-102	b	(i)
Ritornello (“6 <sup>th</sup> ” entry)	ms. 102-126	b	-complete statement in B-Minor (dev. episode) “Hidden” <i>Ritornello</i> , w/ coro <i>einbaut</i>

The sections dovetail, overlapping in a fine musical “woodwork” – like a beautifully carved altarpiece.

The two “Hidden” *Ritornelli* (ms. 48-72 and 102-126) are the Fugue’s developmental episodes where the subject is broken down into its component parts, worked through keys, and – in the upper voices (Sop.1-2 and the doubling violins, oboes and flutes) – traded back and forth in *Stimmtausch*-fashion. This “voice-swapping” of segments of the musical theme creates an unsettling sense of disorientation – the world is turned on its head. It is the bifurcated self in search of wholeness, and this propels Bach’s “plea for mercy” forward.

There is one small ray of hope a little over half-way through the piece – a brief modulation to the major mode at m. 77 – and it occurs exactly at the movement’s durational Golden Mean (.618 of the whole).

### CHRISTE ELEISON

The human side of the “Word made Flesh” – represented by the text “Christe eleison” – is often set by composers in a softer, gentler fashion, to contrast with the solemnity of the cries of “Kyrie.” Here Bach assigns two soprano soloists this task, in D-Major and accompanied by unison violins over a “walking” bass. The introductory violin-figure, with its low-voicing and descending gestures evoke a “down-to-earth” sense of humanity. There is even a move in this first measure towards the Subdominant (G-Major, or IV) – a gesture in Bach’s music that Albert Schweitzer often called “bowing to the will of God.” -Here, a musical depiction of genuflection?



The voices sing in perfect harmony (dulcet 3<sup>rds</sup> and 6<sup>ths</sup>) as well as in overlapping imitative counterpoint, suggesting that Father and Son are one. The splintered self of Kyrie I here finds a balm in Gilead, “to make the wounded whole.”

Vocally, Bach undoubtedly had in mind the fine court singers in Dresden who excelled in the operatic repertoire. For this Christe setting he crafted a “modern,” Baroque vocal duet – but not operatic, rather, like one from his Lutheran cantatas – in contrast to the austere Kyrie that preceded it and to the one that will follow.

### KYRIE II

Since what follows is a 4 (and not 5) -voice Renaissance style motet (“accompanied” by *basso continuo*) – and given the clean appearance of the manuscript for so complex a fugal movement – suggests that this was not a new composition, but rather one based on a lost model.

Bach returns to the minor-key realm of Kyrie I, but here composes a *ricercar* (canonic imitation in *alla breve* notation). The fugue’s subject chromatically twists and turns, literally “crossing” itself, as Bach often did in his Matthew Passion for the word “crucify.” Its meaning here is obvious: redemption through sacrifice.









The fugue is structured with exquisite logic and contrapuntal mastery, but unfolds inevitably and naturally. It is both “old” and “new” in its 16<sup>th</sup> century notation and imitative style, but adhering to the rules of 18<sup>th</sup> century tonal harmony.

Structurally, Kyrie II looks like this:

Exposition 1	ms. 1-18	(4 voices enter, low to high, 3 meas. apart: B-T-A-S)	F# Minor
Exposition 2	ms. 18-32	(3 voices enter, high to low, 7 and 5 meas. apart: A-B-T)	F# Minor
Episode	ms. 32-35	(in lieu of 4 <sup>th</sup> entry, development of theme, in <i>stretto</i> entries, low to high: B-T-A-S)	modulations
Exposition 3	ms. 35-43	(4 voices enter; paired imit., 2 beats apart: A/T, S/B at Golden Mean, .618 of whole)	F# Minor
Episode	ms. 43-54	(development of theme in paired <i>stretto</i> entries, then 4 high to low <i>stretto</i> entries: S-A-T-B)	modulations
Exposition 4	ms. 54-59	(final statement by bass/soprano)	F# Minor

### **RHYTHMIC SYNTHESIS – Metric Relations**

Writer Erik Reid Jones suggests a temporal relationship between the Mass's opening three movements. He believes that Bach's many indications in the Mass to proceed *attacca* (without pause) to the next movement often imply that performers should maintain the same basic tempo. Bach's notation at the end of Kyrie I ("Sequitur Christe") suggests that the Largo of the main fugue can apply to both the Christe and Kyrie II. Jones's justification is grounded in the rhythmic layering Bach uses:

	<b>Meter/Tactus</b>	<b>Note of Motion</b>	<b>Smallest Note</b>
Kyrie I	Quarter		
Christe	Quarter		
Kyrie II	Half		

Even though the same *tactus* (or pulse) is felt for all three movements, both the note of motion and the smallest note used create a perception of three different tempi.

### **UNIVERSALITY**

The "confessional" synthesis in Bach's B-Minor Mass is not restricted just to the world of two different Christian modes of belief, but represents a broader universality of spirit – a union of opposites:

**Old and New** – musical styles: *stile antico* of the Renaissance vs. Baroque *stile moderno*.

**North and South** – musical styles: Kyrie I showing a fusion of the North German Baroque (Fugue) with the Italian style *Ritornello* (concerto) principals of the South.

**Horizontal and Vertical** – musical elements: Bach's perfect union of melody and harmony.

**Sacred and Secular** – also musical styles, where the florid (operatic) vocal style of the Dresden court is wedded with Bach's contrapuntal mastery of sacred music in the Christe eleison setting.

**Protestant and Catholic** – a conciliatory spirit in the musical fusion of two sometimes opposing paths to enlightenment.

**Technique and Spirit** – A marriage of craftsmanship and inspiration that seemed to invert the idea expressed in the first chapter of the Gospel of John: here was the “Flesh made Word,” something “equally miraculous and no less divine,” to quote Robert Shaw.

-And finally, the pair of opposites:

**Death and Life** – the basic issues faced by all of humanity. One can see this in the liturgy’s poetic juxtaposition of “Kyrie eleison” (a plea for mercy) and “Gloria in excelsis Deo” (praise to the creator): two aspects of the same thing. Bach was keenly attuned to this concept and spent a lifetime grappling with it artistically – perhaps most profoundly in what would become his *opus ultimum*.

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