

## MASS in B-Minor

J. S. Bach (1685-1750)

### An Overview

For the ASO Chamber Chorus  
by Jeffrey Baxter | January 15, 2013

#### BACH'S MONUMENT

The B-Minor Mass took over two decades to compose. It began life as a Lutheran *Missa brevis* (Kyrie and Gloria only) written for a catholic church in Dresden, and ultimately grew into what would be Bach's greatest (and final) large-scale work. In it he not only sums up the entire musical Baroque (it is a veritable musical lexicon of styles and statements), but all his life's work as well (as evidenced by the many re-workings - and transformations - in this Mass of earlier pieces).

1. Sanctus came first (1724) – performed on Christmas Day in Leipzig.
2. Kyrie and Gloria (1733) – as the *Missa brevis* for the Elector of Saxony in Dresden.
3. Credo (1748-1749) – the decision to enlarge the work to a *missa tota*.
4. Last four movements (all parodies of earlier works, except maybe the Benedictus)

#### SYMMETRICAL LAYOUT - Movements

In the overall layout of his *missa tota*, Bach employs an intentional (not accidental) sacred numerology: the Kyrie consists of 3 movements (representing the Trinity); both the Gloria and the Credo have 9 movements each (3 x 3), and the entire *Missa* totals 27 movements as divided by Bach (3x3x3). Notice (in the chart below) Bach's organization of the Gloria and Credo texts that he chose to set as individual movements. It is, as in many of his works, a classic gothic cathedral-like chiasmic structure, symbolizing the cross.

#### SYMMETRICAL LAYOUT - Keys

The choice of keys is intentional and logical – beginning in B-Minor, but ending in – and consisting mostly of – the relative Major (D-Major). In the *Missa* portion, the keys of the 3-part Kyrie outline a B-Minor triad: b-D-f# (supplicatory), while the Gloria's opening three movements outline I-V-I of D-Major: D-A-D (celebratory). The Kyrie's upward spelled triad of keys is recalled at the end of the Gloria, in the Domine Deus - Qui tollis/Qui sedes - Quoniam/Cum Sancto (G-b-D).

Note the key of the Gloria's central movement (Domine Deus): it is in the subdominant – “bowing (as Albert Schweitzer was wont to say) to the will of God” – while the Credo's central movement, (Crucifixus) is in the remote key of E-Minor (ii of D-Major's I) – its painfully chromatic twists and turns far from the joyful “resurrection” of D-Major. In the sequence of keys in final portion of Bach's Mass setting (Osanna-Benedictus-Osanna-Agnus Dei-Dona nobis), D-b-D-g-D, it is the two movements which define the human elements of the Divinity that are given as minor-key solo-arias.

#### SYMMETRICAL LAYOUT – Performing Forces

The first three movements of both the Kyrie and Gloria outline a symmetry:

- |                            |                            |                           |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Kyrie (Intro and fugue) | two-section chorus         | 1. Gloria/Et in terra pax |
| 2. Christe                 | florid solo mvt.           | 2. Laudamus te            |
| 3. Kyrie                   | <i>stile antico</i> chorus | 3. Gratias agimus tibi    |

In the Gloria section, all four solo voices are represented (S,A,T,B), and each family of the orchestra is represented in the solo *obbligati* (string, woodwind, brass). The Holy Trinity is represented in all the three's of the Sanctus movement which is scored for 3 trumpets, 3 oboes, a six-voice chorus (3 high voices versus 3 low voices representing perhaps the 6-winged Seraph in Isaiah) – proclaiming the text in a repeated triplet pattern. The Osanna movement is cast in a double-choir layout that recalls the opposing, dual performing forces of Bach's Matthew Passion.

## J. S. Bach: MASS in B-Minor, BWV 232

Kyrie = 3 movements

Gloria = 9 movements (3x3)

Credo = 9 movements (3x3)

Whole mass = 27 movements (3x3x3)

### B-Min. / D-Maj.

i  
III I  
v iii

#### KYRIE

1. Kyrie eleison
2. Christe eleison
3. Kyrie eleison

I  
V  
I  
IV ←---(central movement)---  
i vi/iii  
i vi  
I

#### GLORIA

1. Gloria in excelsis (*chorus*)
2. Et in terra pax
3. Laudamus te (*Sop., violin*) - [str.solo]
4. Gratias agimus tibi (*chorus*)
5. Domine Deus (*S/T, flute*) - [ww solo]
6. Qui tollis peccata mundi (*chorus*)
7. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris (*Alto, ob. d'amore*) - [ww solo]
8. Quoniam tu solus sanctus (*Bass, horn*) - [brass solo]
9. Cum Sancto Spiritu (*chorus*)

I  
IV  
i vi  
ii ←---(central movement)-----  
I  
V  
iii  
I

#### SYMBOLUM NICENUM

1. Credo in unum Deum (*plainchant*)
2. Patrem omnipotentem (*chorus*) - [1<sup>st</sup> person of the Trinity]
3. Et in unum Dominum (*S/A duet*) - [2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Trinity]
4. Et incarnates est
5. Crucifixus
6. Et resurrexit
7. Et in Spiritum sanctum (*B solo*) - [3<sup>rd</sup> person of the Trinity]
8. Confiteor (*plainchant*)
9. Et expecto (*chorus*) - [eternal life]

#### SANCTUS

I  
Sanctus

#### OSANNA, BENEDICTUS, AGNUS DEI et DONA NOBIS PACEM

i I  
vi  
I  
iv  
I

1. Osanna in excelsis (*chorus*)
2. Benedictus (*T solo, flute*)
3. Osanna in excelsis (*chorus repeated*)
4. Agnus Dei (*A solo, vln unis.*)
5. Dona nobis pacem (*chorus*)

## MUSICAL SYNTHESIS

Bach's decision in his final years to enlarge the *Missa* to a *missa tota* was done as both a personal and historical summation. Deliberately archaic musical styles (Bach's knowledge of the music of Schütz and Palestrina) are contrasted with modern ones, such as the pairing of the Credo and Confiteor movements (old-style compositions with plainchant grounding them as a *cantus firmus*) with the Patrem and Et expecto movements ("modern" Baroque, festal pieces). Unlike his Passion settings, however, there are no recitatives or *da capo* arias: in the B-Minor, all the *da capo* repeats are either written out, truncated or interrupted (as in the Gloria where the Qui tollis chorus "interrupts" what should be the *da capo* of the A-B-A Domine Deus duet).

## CONFESSIONAL SYNTHESIS

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):

Wilderer  
Soprano  
m. 11  
Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son, e - le - i - son, ...

Bach  
Tenore  
m. 30  
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.

## 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*.

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

**Sacred and Secular** – also musical styles, where the courtly music of the Brandenburg Concerto #1 becomes the tune for the Gloria text, “bonae voluntatis” and where French dance-forms “choreograph” praise to God (Et resurrexit, Osanna and Et vitam venturi).

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

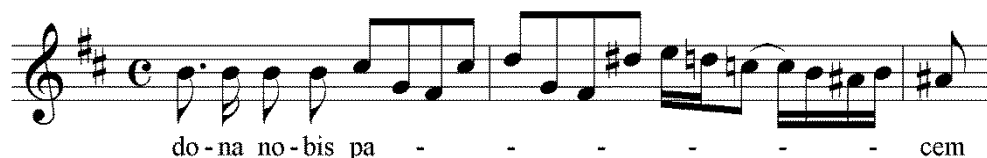
**Technique and Spirit** – craft and inspiration, or inspiration and “perspiration,” as Robert Shaw used to describe it. Bach himself verbalized it, writing in 1738: “Music’s ultimate end or final goal... should be for the honor of God and the recreation of the soul.” -Also: “What I have achieved by industry and practice, anyone else with tolerable natural gift and ability can *also* achieve.”

-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 expertly in this *opus ultimum*).

It is in the final pages, however, where there occurs one of the most notable transformative syntheses – not only of the work itself but of Bach’s personal lifetime of labor and faith (as well as the culmination of an artistic era) – in his choice of musical setting at the end of the Mass for the text, “Dona nobis pacem” [Grant us peace].

What is instructive is what Bach did *not* choose to do at the end. He could have neatly book-ended the work a different way, by employing the old technique of *Dona ut Kyrie*, where composers would re-cast the music from “Kyrie eleison” for “Dona nobis pacem” (both six-syllable statements). It could have sounded like this:



The work would have ended in B-Minor as it began, but as we have seen it is mostly a work in D-Major, and D is the key that would best follow the G-Minor tonality of his Agnus Dei setting. –But it is more than a choice of key that drives Bach. In this final movement, he musically quotes not only a different earlier movement in the mass, *Gratias agimus tibi*, but in doing so, also references its earlier German cantata-model from 1731, BWV 29, *Wir danken dir Gott* [We thank Thee, God]. The soaring theme (and slow amalgamation of instruments and voices) allows Bach to emphasize the word “pacem” and thereby transforms the traditional plea for peace into a hymn of thanksgiving for the gift already given. It is not only a summation of the previous two-hour intense meditation, but also of a composer’s lifetime of work

and – in its *stile antico, alla breve* motet-style in a “modern” orchestral setting – a summation of the “science” and expression of Western musical art by 1750.

Bach scholar and lifelong Buddhist, Yoshitake Kobayashi, observes in the B-Minor Mass a great paradox “that one of the most Christian works in all of sacred music transcends and dissolves its confessional limits, serving instead the whole of humanity – non-Christians included.”

Robert Shaw, as always, summed it up most eloquently at our performances in 1998:

“It is reasonable, it seems to me, to question the propriety of performing a work of music so specifically and exhaustively theological in text in so secular a setting, before an audience ranging in religious preference from the totally contrary to the totally committed, and ranging philosophically from welcome through indifference to distrust.

Certainly the masses of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, with their four to six movements are almost symphonic in nature and more appropriate to this hall.

Somehow, however, the fact that extra seats have had to be added for these performances attests to the unique position that Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* holds in the minds and hearts of men and women of all faiths -- and no faith at all -- except perhaps the oneness of humankind with the universe, and the responsibility of human life to seek beauty and to do good.

It may well be true that Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* -- assembled, no less than created -- has become, some two hundred and fifty years after he bound its 27 movements together, the most remarkable musical allegory of human existence -- its pain, aspiration and promises.”

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