

**BACH'S LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT**  
**The Completion of the Mass in B-Minor – Sanctus to Dona nobis pacem**

For the ASO Chamber Chorus  
by Jeffrey Baxter | February 21, 2013

**FINAL PHASE**

The last full year of Bach's life, August 1748 to October 1749 (he died in July of 1750), was consumed with the completion of his B-Minor Mass. For the rest of 1750 as his health declined and eyesight failed him, he spent his "composing" time on the details of editing and engraving his 1740s composition, *The Art of Fugue*. His work on the Mass during these months (1748-49) saw first the composition of the Credo section; then Part III of the Mass (for which he added his 1724 Sanctus setting) and finally Part IV (Osanna to Dona nobis pacem). These last four movements are all re-workings (parodies) of earlier works, except possibly the Benedictus.

Below is a reflection on the masterly combination of technique and inspiration in the final two portions of Bach's Mass.

**PART III – Sanctus**

Bach's solution for a Sanctus movement was easy: he had already written several Sanctus settings for liturgical use in Leipzig, and from these he chose one of his most brilliantly orchestrated and symbol-laden settings (from 1724).

The Holy Trinity is represented here by the pervasive presence of three: 3 trumpets, 3 oboes, a six-voice chorus (3 high voices *versus* 3 low voices, representing perhaps the 6-winged Seraph in Isaiah) – all proclaiming the text in a repeated triplet pattern – sometimes in 3<sup>rds</sup> and its inversion, 6<sup>ths</sup> – often in 3-bar phrases.

In a service, the Sanctus concludes the Preface (the portion preceding the Eucharist) which speaks of five groups who give praise before God:

1. Angels
2. Archangels
3. Thrones
4. Principalities
5. All the Company of Heaven

These five groups are represented in Bach's Sanctus by:

1. Trumpets
2. Oboes
3. Strings
4. Upper choir of voices (SSA)
5. Lower choir of voices (ATB)

While not technically "double-choir," this large scoring recalls the performing forces of Bach's Matthew Passion.

Structurally the Sanctus is like a bi-partite French Overture, similar to one of Bach's brilliant introductory two-part movements to his *Orchestral Suites*, with its opening slow fanfare-like section followed by a fugal *Allegro* section. Here, the use of a third oboe (and not the lower-pitched oboe d'amore) – aside from the symbolism of three's – also reflects the previous 1724 setting that doubled a choir of SSS-ATB.

The opening section in 4/4 (“Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth”) flows directly into the next section (“Pleni sunt coeli et terra”) in 3/8, where the 8<sup>th</sup>s of the former triplet become the 8<sup>th</sup>s of the new section: ♪♪♪ = ♪♪♪

The “glory” of “heaven and earth” is depicted in the ensuing fugal section in the form of a sprightly *Courante*, the French triple meter dance characterized by “running” 16<sup>th</sup>-notes. Its fugue-subject – with groups of high and low repeated notes – spans the distance between heaven [*coeli* (↑)] and earth [*terra* (↓)], while God’s glory fills in the space with a *roulade* on “glo-ria ejus” (adopting the customary Lutheran practice of “gloria ejus” [His glory] rather than “gloria tua” [Thy glory]):



Bach organizes this Fugue in two Expositions, with a central Episode and concluding Coda. Sometimes sections dovetail, overlapping in a fine musical “woodwork” – like a beautifully carved altarpiece:

**Exposition I** – ms. 48-78 (T, A2, S1, A1/S2 in 3<sup>rds</sup>, B). -A 5-voice fugue for six voices.

**Episode (Central)** – ms. 78-113. -A developmental episode that breaks down the theme in harmonic sequences, traversing minor modes over pedal-points. There are three full statements of the subject (T, S1, S1), with the final soprano statement also serving as the first statement of Exposition II (overlapping).

**Exposition II** – ms. 113-137 (S1, A1/S2 in 3<sup>rds</sup>, T/A1 in 3<sup>rds</sup>). -Three statements, but the strong cadence at the end of the first one (m. 118) makes statement No. 2 sound like the beginning of the section. Bach’s choice to strengthen this statement in mid-section was probably because he intuitively sensed that this was the durational Golden Mean (.618 of the whole Fugue). The last statement cadences in the subdominant (IV).

**Episode (Short, to Coda)** – ms. 137-153. –A descending sequence of suspensions in the bass lead the material out of the subdominant, ending with a full statement in D-Major by S1 (m. 147).

**Coda** – ms. 153-168 (S1, B). -An ascending bass-sequence with sopranos “running” in parallel 3<sup>rds</sup> (aided by a trilling Trumpet 1) courses towards a pedal-A, where the bass has the final triumphant statement in D-Major.

## PART IV – OVERVIEW

Bach grouped these four parts of the liturgy together because in the service they accompany the administration of the Sacrament. Notice below his organization of these text-settings. It represents, like many of his multi-movement works, a classic gothic cathedral-like chiasmic structure, symbolizing the cross:

B-Min. / D-Maj.

i I  
vi  
I  
iv  
I

OSANNA, BENEDICTUS, AGNUS DEI et DONA NOBIS PACEM

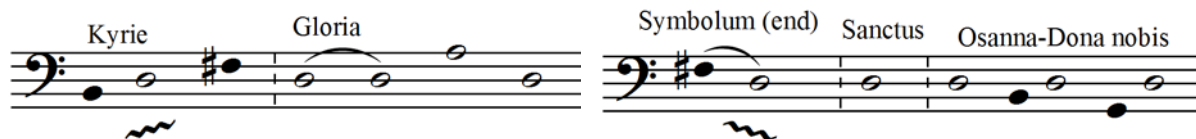
- 1. Osanna in excelsis (*chorus*)
- 2. Benedictus (*T solo, flute*)
- 3. Osanna in excelsis (*chorus repeated*)
- 4. Agnus Dei (*A solo, vln unis.*)
- 5. Dona nobis pacem (*chorus*)

The five movements of Part IV (counting the repeated Osanna) complete the overall symbolic structure of the Mass, by allowing the number of movements in the work to total 27: the Kyrie consists of 3 movements (representing the Trinity); both the Gloria and the Credo have 9 movements each (3 x 3), the centerpiece of the Credo is 3 linked choruses, and the entire *Missa* totals 27 movements as divided by Bach (3x3x3).

The sequence of keys in this final portion represents a progression through D-Major: D-b-D-g-D. The two movements which define the human elements of the Divinity (Benedictus and Agnus Dei) are given as minor-key solo-arias.

Furthermore, it has even been noted by some (notably Bach scholar John Butt) that the intervallic sequence of keys in the Mass's final portion represents an inversion of the sequence of its opening section:

Kyrie I	b-minor	↓	f#-minor	[ Confiteor Et expecto
Christe eleison	D-Major		D-Major	
			D-Major	Sanctus
			D-Major	Osanna
Kyrie II	f#-minor		b-minor	Benedictus
[ Gloria	D-Major		D-Major	Osanna
Et in terra pax	D-Major			
Laudamus te	A-Major		g-minor	Agnus Dei
Gratias agimus tibi	D-Major		D-Major	Dona nobis pacem





## PART IV – STRUCTURAL DETAILS

### 1. Osanna in excelsis

The Osanna movement is cast in a double-choir layout that recalls the antiphonal performing forces of Bach's *Matthew Passion* – but here it is only the choir that is split in “two” (S1-A1-T1-B1 / S2-A2-T2-B2). The large orchestra remains “one” (3 tpts, timp., 2 fl., 2 ob., str.).

The Osanna setting appears to be a parody of Bach's secular cantata, BWV 215 “Preise dein Glücke” (itself a parody of a lost model, probably BWV Anh. 11 “Es lebe der König” – both written for the Augusts of Saxony, father [1732] and son [1734]).

These courtly origins were remembered by Bach, and he cleverly recycled them for the Osanna. Not only did the number of syllables fit well for re-use, but so did the general mood of their underlying rhythmic gesture, that of a *Passepied* – the French dance-form that is a *Minuet* with an anacrusis 

often also having the characteristic rhythmic pattern of 

Here, as with Bach's other re-workings throughout the Mass, the original's introductory *sinfonia* has been removed, and – as with the Symbolum's “Et expecto” *Bourrée*-like finale – Bach again employs a form of worldly rejoicing he felt appropriate to “Hosanna in the highest.”

## 2. Benedictus

Since most of the final movements of the B-Minor Mass are brilliant re-workings by Bach of his own earlier compositions, many researchers have assumed that the Benedictus must also be a parody (from a now lost model). However, Bach scholar (and handwriting specialist) Yoshitake Kobayashi believes that the manuscript's notes penned in light ink and then written over in dark ink indicate a newly composed piece (first sketched into the score with brown ink, then later darkened with black ink).

The movement's melancholy tone (in B-Minor) certainly recalls Bach's 1739 Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B-Minor (BWV 1067) for flute and strings. Indeed, while in the Benedictus the solo obbligato instrument is not specified, it contains exactly the range of a transverse flute (nothing lower than a D) and recalls the character of the Orchestral Suite's 3/4 *Polonaise* (especially in that movement's B-section for flute and basso continuo only).

Of course it was Bach's intimate knowledge of the Scriptures that inspired his choice of solo-instrument and voice-part for the Benedictus. This section of the liturgy is taken from the so-called "Canticle of Zechariah" which is found in the Gospel of Luke and describes the words uttered as a song of thanksgiving by Zechariah upon the birth of his son, John the Baptist ["Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"]. These words are also uttered prophetically at Jesus's "triumphal" entry into Jerusalem (on what is called "Palm Sunday").

Bach highlighted musically what the liturgy connects (John the Baptist/Jesus) by composing a movement for tenor voice (as Handel did, incidentally, in *Messiah* for "the voice of him that crieth in the wilderness") and flute. It is the bird-like sound of the flute that suggests the Biblical account of Jesus's baptism by John, where the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descends from Heaven.

An introspective hollowness is evoked by Bach in the sparse 3-voice texture for flute, tenor and *basso continuo*, and the hooty "Moanin' Dove" timbre of the wooden transverse flute (as opposed to a recorder – or violin, as the old Bach Gesellschaft edition identified it) also contributes to a sense of hollowness of heart, waiting to be filled.

## 3. Osanna in excelsis (chorus repeated, as liturgically prescribed)

Some have suggested that the Osanna-Benedictus-Osanna (repeat) forms a *da capo* unit (A-B-A).

## 4. Agnus Dei

For the important text, "Lamb of God," Bach drew inspiration from his "Ascension Oratorio," BWV 11, with its moving alto aria, "Ach, bleibe doch, mein liebes Leben" [Oh, stay, my loving life]

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ezi7tbRU8ZE>

– itself also a parody of a lost model, most likely the 1725 Wedding Cantata, with its aria "Entfernet euch, ihr kalten Herzen" [Remove yourselves, ye cold hearts].

At several points throughout the Mass, Bach made significant use of D-Major's subdominant (IV) – in the first measure of *Christe eleison*, for the duet *Domine Deus/Domine Fili*, and at the end of the *Crucifixus* – all to depict Christ's humanity. Albert Schweitzer often referred to Bach's move to the subdominant as "bowing to the will of God." For the *Agnus Dei* Bach employs the minor subdominant (G-Minor), with its dark hues and potential for expressive writing on the G-string of the violin (as well as the hollow sound of its open G and D strings).



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* – specifying the choral doublings coming out of the double-choir Osanna with the indications: S(1/2)-A(1/2)-T(1/2)-B(1/2) – 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.

Bach scholar Yoshitake Kobayashi notes the difference in approach to this valedictory work from that of Mozart in his Requiem: “As death displayed Mozart’s iridescent personality in rather dramatic outlines, so Bach submitted to death in an acquiescent way. While Mozart, facing death, somehow composed the Requiem for himself, Bach wrote the B-Minor Mass in a more contemplative manner for posterity.”

But even though this movement (which concludes a two-hour intense meditation) represents – 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, it is also a summation of the composer’s lifetime of work in service to his art; his muse – or (as Bach described it), his creator:

“What I have achieved by industry and practice, anyone else with tolerable natural gift and ability can also achieve.

“Music’s ultimate end or final goal...should be for the honor of God and the recreation of the soul.”

- J. S. Bach - Leipzig, 1738

“Where there is devotional music, God is always at hand with his gracious presence.”

“*Jesu juva* [Jesus, help me]

“*In nomine Jesu* [In Jesus’ name]

“*Soli Deo Gloria* [To God alone the glory]”

- J. S. Bach - Leipzig, 1750

#### **FINAL FOOTNOTE – “BEFORE THY THRONE”**

The sublimely beautiful work for organ (the chorale-prelude, BWV 668a, *Vor deinem Thron*) is indeed Bach’s final composition, dictated in the composer’s blindness to his son-in-law, Johann Altnickol. It takes its title from the second stanza of the chorale-tune on which it is based and is a re-working of an earlier Weimar piece – re-composed to include Bach’s very personal numerology (the numbers 14 and 41).

14 is the sum of the numbers corresponding to the letters of the Latin alphabet in Bach’s name,

B-A-C-H

2–1–3–8

In this setting there are 14 notes in the chorale’s first phrase, and its final note lasts exactly 14 beats.

41, the mirror-image of 14, represents the sum of “J. S. Bach,”

J. S. B-A-C-H

9–18–2–1–3–8

There are 41 total notes in the entire melody of the chorale-prelude.

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