

Bach: Mass in B Minor



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The musical genre of the mass Ordinary

The Mass in B Minor dominates Bach's oeuvre as a work reaching well beyond the bounds of its practical and stylistic context. Bach was doubtless aware that he was compiling a work within the longest tradition of compositional genres, one which would probably continue for several centuries after his death. The mass text itself dates back to the earliest years of the Christian era and is an important symbol of the western cultural tradition. The earliest notated sources of music include settings of mass texts and the tradition for assembling musical cycles of the Ordinary (those sung parts of the mass which are not varied according to the liturgical calendar) stems from the fourteenth century.

Only with the stylistic developments around 1600 did the mass cease to be the most important single musical genre. The growth of operatic styles and the increasing autonomy of instrumental music are symptomatic of broader changes in cultural perspective. Nevertheless the musical genre of the mass was not laid aside: composers who were primarily concerned with the early operatic genres of the *seconda prattica* (such as Monteverdi and Cavalli) continued to compose masses. These were generally in the 'old style', the *prima prattica* as codified by theorists such as Zarlino and most commonly associated with the compositional style of Palestrina and his contemporaries.¹

The early eighteenth-century mass is no longer the single specific genre of the high Renaissance; rather it is a conglomeration of musical structures drawn largely from the immediate environments of court and theatre. The text is the single unifying characteristic. Nevertheless the strict contrapuntal idiom of the sixteenth century was still stylistically valid; it was rather the intervening music of the seventeenth century which was now out of date. Palestrina's masses were still such a part of the staple repertory of the Roman Catholic court chapel at Dresden that the court composer, Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679–1745), replaced mass sections absent from the

manuscripts at his disposal with parodies of the existing movements and sometimes even with pastiches of his own in Palestrina's style.²

That Bach himself should have undertaken an extensive study of the *stile antico* in his later years – copying and performing works from the high Renaissance – suggests that he too respected the purity and durability of the old style.³ His study may well represent a period of stylistic preparation for the Mass in B minor, in particular for the two *stile antico* sections of the *Symbolum Nicenum* ('Credo in unum Deum' and 'Confiteor'). Like Zelenka he generated much of the music for the complete mass by parodying existing works; however, these were all of his own composition. The parody technique had been a standard compositional procedure in Renaissance masses too, so Bach's approach in compiling the Mass in B Minor – far from suggesting an indifference to the genre or a decline in inventiveness – may reflect a respect for tradition: the best music from other 'occasional' genres is abstracted and reworked into a more enduring and seemingly 'timeless' context.

The activity and repertory of the court at Dresden is fundamental to the immediate historical background of Bach's Mass. For the composer dedicated the first part – containing the Kyrie and Gloria sections (together titled *Missa*) – to the Elector of Saxony in 1733, in the hope that he would receive a court title and further commissions for Dresden court music. Furthermore Dresden is the most likely source for much of Bach's own collection of modern – and perhaps ancient – church music.⁴ Indeed Bach's copy of a Lotti mass shows variants which could have originated only in Dresden.⁵

The surviving Dresden repertory contains many mass settings from eastern Europe and Italy. The genre of the 'number' mass, in which the text of the longer sections is divided into discrete choruses and arias, is common to all schools. The repertory which seems to have been specifically important to Bach – not least on account of the sheer scale of the writing – is that of the Neapolitan school: A. Scarlatti, Mancini, Sarri and Durante. Much of this had been collected by Heinichen and Zelenka during the 1720s, so Bach could have been exposed to the most developed and 'modern' mass forms well before he compiled the *Missa* in 1733.⁶

Composers of the Classical era continued to produce liturgical masses along the Neapolitan pattern. Since the majority of these composers – like so many since 1600 – were more immediately concerned with opera, their exercises in church music provided the grounding for a fluent com-

positional technique in opera. Indeed many portions of concerted masses were probably prototypes for operatic material (e.g. the Agnus Dei of Mozart's *Coronation Mass*). While Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* followed many ancient conventions in mass composition and was at least intended for a liturgical occasion, its obvious overstretching of that context coincides historically with the essential division between music for church and the more bourgeois requirement of religious music for the concert hall. At last the mass was released from its serfdom as a mere component of established worship; throughout the nineteenth century it could be taken as a cultural symbol of what was purportedly a 'universal' humanity.

Despite its debt to tradition, its use of Neapolitan-Dresden models and its later impact, Bach's Mass in B Minor sits somewhat awkwardly in any historical overview. First, its reception by later generations was delayed for many years, and only portions of the work had been performed by the time of Beethoven's great mass. Despite his requests to two publishers, Beethoven apparently failed to acquire a copy (see p. 27). Secondly, Bach's work did not originate in the mainstream of mass composition, the Roman Catholic church, but in the Lutheran tradition. Furthermore, while most mass settings were composed for practical use in specific institutions and for specific occasions, Bach's Mass, in its completed form, seems to have been written with no discernible purpose in mind. Indeed its scale would surely preclude its use as a whole in any liturgy. On the other hand most of its components could have been used within Lutheran worship and much of its music is parodied from sacred and secular works which Bach certainly performed.

Luther's Reformation at the beginning of the sixteenth century is often mistakenly considered to have opposed the liturgy of the Roman church. In fact, Luther was far more concerned with reforming doctrine; he by no means decreed that the Latin liturgy should cease in places where it would readily be understood. The main concern of the Lutherans was that vernacular alternatives should be available wherever the level of education in the congregation should demand it; foremost in Luther's liturgical reforms is his concern for adaptability. Thus the *Formula missae* of 1523 retains the five portions of the Latin Ordinary – Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus (with Osanna and Benedictus) and Agnus Dei – while the *Deutsche Messe* of 1526 provides an alternative, German vernacular mass.⁷ Here the Gloria, Benedictus and Osanna disappear completely and the remaining sections of the Ordinary are sung as German hymns (paraphrased and

troped with other texts), ‘choraliter’ (in unison without accompaniment). Only the Kyrie remains in Greek.

Manuscript sources of the Lutheran repertory during the lifetime of the reformer are strikingly similar to those of Catholic provenance, despite the influx of music by Protestant composers, congregational settings and doctrinally reformed texts.⁸ A printer such as Georg Rhau, one of the most important disseminators of Lutheran literature in general, was apparently unimpeded in his publication of no less than four collections of Latin mass music between 1538 and 1545.⁹

A glance at song-books and service directives for the late seventeenth-century liturgy at Leipzig shows that Luther’s ideal of liturgical adaptability was still evident. The principal sources, such as the *Leipziger Kirchen-Andachten* (1694) and *Leipziger Kirchen-Staat* (1710), still allow for the choice between Latin and German settings of parts of the Ordinary. The Kyrie and Gloria could be performed polyphonically, and, during the periods of the year when a cantata was not performed, the Credo could be chanted in Latin by the choir, in addition to the congregational Credo hymn ‘Wir glauben all’ an einen Gott’.¹⁰ According to the *Neu Leipzig Gesangbuch* of Gottfried Vopelius (1682), the Sanctus was either sung monophonically, complete with Osanna and Benedictus, or polyphonically without the latter two texts. During Bach’s time the polyphonic Sanctus – without Benedictus and Osanna – seems to have been sung only on festival days. A Latin chanted Agnus Dei and the German chorale version (‘O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig’) were sung on certain occasions when there were many communicants, according to the *Leipzig Agenda: Das ist, Kirchen-Ordnung* printed in several editions between 1647 and 1771.¹¹

An examination of Bach’s concerted settings of mass movements reveals some of the Leipzig practices during his tenure. Two of the four short masses (consisting of the Kyrie and Gloria) BWV 233–6 date from the late 1730s, and Bach performed two anonymous settings of the same texts in the early 1740s. These, and the fact that Bach performed the Kyrie and Gloria of Palestrina’s *Missa sine nomine* around 1742, show that the shortened mass was sung polyphonically on special occasions.¹² The Sanctus too could be performed in a concerted manner, but apparently not in conjunction with the polyphonic Kyrie and Gloria, since it is never found together with them in the same performing material. Of Bach’s five Sanctus settings, BWV 238–40 were performed in the late 1730s/early 1740s, BWV 237 dates from 1723 and the Sanctus of the Mass in B Minor

was first performed on Christmas Day 1724. An arrangement of a Sanctus by Kerll was performed in the late 1740s.¹³

Thus although the Kyrie, Gloria and Sanctus of the Mass in B Minor seem compatible with the corpus of Bach's compositions for the Leipzig liturgy, only the Sanctus sources show conclusive evidence of actual performance therein. No regular repertory complements the remaining texts: Credo, Osanna, Benedictus and Agnus Dei. Indeed the curious division between the Sanctus and Osanna in Bach's manuscript of the Mass points towards the independent, practical origin of the Sanctus, following the truncated polyphonic model of Vopelius. The only evidence for Bach's interest in a polyphonic setting of the Credo – outside the Mass in B Minor – is in the copy (partly autograph) of Giovanni Battista Bassani's *Acroama Missale* dating from around 1735–42.¹⁴ These six short *missa brevis* settings (published in 1709) are copied complete, with the exception of the Benedictus and Agnus Dei. This could point to a specific use at Leipzig in the late 1730s which did not require the later movements, or it could equally reflect the source from which Bach's copyist worked. One feature which may point towards the performance of the Credo sections in particular is Bach's insertion of the first line of the text, 'Credo in unum Deum', into the opening of the vocal parts in each Bassani mass; clearly a solo intonation was not customary. Moreover in the fifth mass, where the musical setting does not allow room for the new underlay, Bach actually composed a new intonation sometime between 1747 and 1748.¹⁵ This was, significantly, the period immediately before Bach's compilation of the later parts of the Mass in B Minor.

Thus Bach's Leipzig music reflects an adaptable liturgy, perhaps one that allowed him experimentation in the mass genre in his later years, when he had exhausted the field of cantata composition. Although there is no evidence for a performance of a complete mass (*missa tota*) – let alone one on the scale of the Mass in B minor – during Bach's Leipzig tenure, it is quite significant that his immediate successor, Gottlob Harrer, performed Fux's *Missa canonica*, apparently complete, in 1751.¹⁶

Such is the traditional nature of the mass text that Protestant composers even wrote and provided music for Catholic patrons. Besides compiling the Kyrie and Gloria (*Missa*) for presentation to the Catholic Elector of Saxony in 1733, Bach himself lent a set of parts for the Sanctus (which he later incorporated into the Mass in B Minor) to the Bohemian Catholic Graf Sporck between 1725 and 1726.¹⁷ Johann David Heinichen, a Protestant composer at the Saxon court, also wrote Catholic music, as did Harrer,

who had been a private Kapellmeister in Dresden before succeeding Bach at Leipzig in 1750.¹⁸

It has become increasingly evident that the focus on the Kyrie–Gloria pair was not peculiar to the Lutheran tradition. Many Dresden sources of Italian origin point to a curtailment of the sung Ordinary, and the Neapolitan settings in particular (on account of their scale) often contain these two sections alone.¹⁹ Although both Heinichen and Zelenka usually extended these works to cover the entire Ordinary – clearly this was the practice in Dresden at the time – Bach must have been aware that most of the larger Italian mass settings in this repertory were of the Kyrie–Gloria format. While the length of Bach’s *Missa* is eminently compatible with the Neapolitan works at Dresden, the complete Mass in B Minor far exceeds the length of the extended works prepared by Heinichen and Zelenka.²⁰ It is therefore unlikely that it would have been sung complete in a single Catholic service.

In all, the interplay between the Catholic and Lutheran church music was greater than the differences in dogma and political allegiance would imply; moreover orthodox Lutherans cherished traditions stretching back to the prehistory of their church. All of the movements in Bach’s Mass are compatible with Luther’s view of the liturgy and most – at least up to the Sanctus – could have been accommodated within the apparently flexible practices of Bach’s age. There is, however, no evidence of a complete performance of the Mass, nor of an occasion when one was possible.