J.S. BACH: B MINOR MASS

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Liturgical background to the mass

Whether the Mass in B minor illuminates Bach’s genius is definitely debatable. It is either a synthesis or some mixture hybrid from influences. As a composition in whole, Bach was especially interested in the works of Palestrina and Monteverdi. Monteverdi has described two compositional styles as *prima prattica* which is a music dominating text as well as *secunda prattica* which is a text dominating music. The first of which is the old style of Palestrina as well as being in the Renaissance era and the second describes the need to write in opera form which turns out to be a new attitude to being very expressive through music. Bach has used both styles of Palestrina and Monteverdi through this work. The *Mass in B minor* is made up of four main sections, very opposite of the Roman Catholic mass which consists of *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus* and *Angus Dei*. In 1733, Bach composed the Kyrie and Gloria of the *Mass in B minor*. He presented the manuscript to the King of Poland, Grand Duke of Lithuania and Elector of Saxony, August III in an eventually successful bid to persuade the monarch to appoint him as Royal Court Composer. He later extended this work into a full Mass, by adding a Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei, the music for which was almost wholly taken from his own cantatas. Bach's appointment as court composer was part of his long-term struggle to achieve greater bargaining power with the Leipzig Council. Although the complete mass was probably never performed during the composer's lifetime, it is considered to be among the greatest choral works of all time.¹ The mass is too big to have a liturgical function in either the Lutheran or Roman Catholic church and is much more associated with the grandeur of Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*, the influence of which was responsible in no small part for the continued success of the Bach mass.

As stated before, the first glimpse that the world would see of this Mass was in 1733 when Bach dedicated its *Kyrie* and *Crucifixus* to Friedrich August II, Elector of Saxony, a man who had converted to the Roman faith who also decided to abandon his wife because she wouldn’t convert with him so that he may become eligible to assume the throne of Poland. For the next fifteen or so years, Bach decided to expand the *Missa Brevis* by borrowing from his own German cantatas and adapting them into Latin to then produce a complete setting of the Mass ordinary. As stated before as well as later, the mass is a Latin work by a protestant that is impracticable in both the Roman and Lutheran liturgies.

**History and Performances of the mass**

The mass itself has very little to do with what Bach had desired to accomplish. If it wasn’t for the cultural outlook that the mass had placed upon itself during it’s time, it wouldn’t nearly be what it is today. Music of this time wasn’t fashionable in concert halls nor were amateurs involved in choral societies until this point as a religious work.² It has always been of interest to figure out why these pieces weren’t so frequently performed in such an array of halls where all could enjoy Bach’s work. It runs with the same token as what current day pop music may be for separate generations. All thought Bach’s mass was magnificent and extraordinary; it may have been just a touch over the top for some generations of his time. Fortunately for Bach, his B minor mass was only kept alive through word of mouth with patrons, churches and amateur musicians trying to make a living performing different works. If it wasn’t for the ability to print as well as duplicate manuscripts of literature and music form, this piece wouldn’t be available for performances or research set aside from what one is currently reading about. The history of this piece dates back to when it was written by Bach himself in 1749. This musical literature survived

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through two separate circles. One circle being known through Kirnberger and the other circle being known through Bach himself. These surviving copies have been understood as use solely for aristocratic purposes including for performances in front of Princess Anna Amalia of Berlin. Throughout manuscripts being passed down from Kirnberger, he makes a mark within the score labeling the entire mass as ‘missa.’ For the ‘missa,’ only one performance has ever been noted from a portion of the mass, throughout the entire 18th century. Bach conducted the Sanctus, in its first version, at the 1724 Christmas service in Leipzig, and re-used it in Christmas services in the mid-1740s. Arnold Schering, in 1936, asserted that it was performed in Leipzig on April 26, 1733, when Augustus III of Poland visited the town, but modern scholars reject his argument for several reasons: 1) the proposed date fell during an official period of mourning "when concerted music was forbidden in Saxon churches"; 2) the extant parts (on which Schering based his hypothesis) are written on a paper found only in documents in Dresden, so were probably copied in Dresden when Bach went there in July; and 3) the copyists were not Bach's usual ones, but Bach and immediate family members (who traveled with him to Dresden) his wife Anna Magdalena, sons Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel and a Dresden copyist, plus a Dresden-based copyist. On 1 April 1786, the Hamburger Correspondent created over four reports of charity performances under the direction of C.P.E. Bach. These charity concerts were to assist in several medical institutions that cared for the poor. Believe it or not, the program is still alive to this date. Ongoing with performances of the ‘missa,’ there were many striking effects that composers of this time could barely understand and one that Bach was able to convey to his patrons was the vocal virtuosity throughout his work. Not only is it gorgeous with graceful and magnificent wind and string parts, it also resounds with beautiful melismatic vocal lines.

Quarter of a century later, on 25 October 1811 some of the very first full mass rehearsals began which then took several years to complete through rehearsal making the piece prepared for performance. The first jaw dropping performance of the mass was in 1828 in Frankfurt, Berlin. Scholars differ, however, on whether the Missa was performed in July in Dresden. Christoph Wolff argues that on July 26, 1733 at the Sophienkirche in Dresden, where W. F. Bach had been organist since June, it was definitely performed as evidenced by the extant Dresden performing parts and by the inscription on the title wrapper given to the king the next day, Hans-Joachim Schulze made this case by pointing to the use of the past tense in that inscription: "To his royal majesty was shown with the enclosed Missa...the humble devotion of the author J. S. Bach." However, Joshua Rikfin rejects the argument, pointing out that the past-tense wording was typical of formal address often not related to performance. Peter Williams notes that "there is no record of performers being assembled for such an event, and in August 1731 Friedemann reported that the Sophienkirche organ was badly out of tune." Researchers agree that no other public performances took place in Bach's lifetime, although Butt raises the possibility that there may have been a private performance or read-through of the Symbolum Nicenum late in Bach's life. It is also reported that Johann Nepomuk Schelble employed well over ninety six singers and sixty eight players all from the opera to perform small sections of the mass. Throughout 1831, Schelble continued expressing great interest in the marks of Bach by performing consistently with pieces of the mass including the Kyrie, Gloria and Credo. Over several years following these performances, August Wilhelm Bach, Friedrich Conrad Griepenkerl and Mendelssohn all had time conducting ensembles for the mass. There are many speculations as to why the mass

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haden’t been performed prior to these times with such numbers for performers. One speculation leads back to the scale of difficulty for the musicians which made it nearly impossible at the time; the second being the duplication of the piece with parts in mind for the performers to use. One of the most valuable assets of the time when duplicating all parts according to Butt is the duplication as well as proper transcription of the main mass manuscript. As recounted by George Stauffer, the next documented performance in the nineteenth century was when Carl Friedrich Zelter, a key figure in the 19th-century Bach revival, led the Berlin Singakademie in read-throughs of the "Great Mass" in 1811, covering the Kyrie. In 1813 he led read-throughs of the entire work. The first public performance in the century of just the Credo section, took place in Frankfurt in March, 1828, with over 200 performers and many instrumental additions. In the same year in Berlin, Gaspare Spontini led the Credo section, adding 15 new choral parts and numerous instruments. A number of performances of sections of the Mass took place in the following decades throughout Europe, but the first attested public performance of the Mass in its entirety took place in 1859 in Leipzig, with Karl Riedel and the Riedel-Verein. Just barely prior to this time, the Bach-Gesellschaft chorus aimed to produce a complete edition of Bach’s surviving music.6 “The extraordinary polyphonic complexity of Bachs music, which constitutes it’s great difficulty, seems with this wonderful composer to have been really the natural means of [true, aesthetic] expression.”7

Much more advances are made throughout the years into the 20th century. One advance comes with Donald Francs Tovey’s study of the mass in 1937. Tovey brings such detail to the table which includes a new term described as the ritornello. One area in Tovey’s analysis of the

score brings him to realize that “the ‘ideal’ ritornello can lie behind a movement and the
generations of its events without actually being present to the patron.” Not many researchers or
analysts have the same view of a work of music as others do. A handbook written by Walter
Blankenburg makes this apparent with mentioning different aspects of the mass in an esoterically
and analytical way which, to most researchers, is the complete opposite direction that one would
think of the mass.

Structure of the mass with outline

I. Kyrie ("Missa")

Kyrie eleison is a 5-part chorus fugue consisting of Soprano I, II, Alto, Tenor and Bass in
the key of B minor, with a tempo marking as Adagio. This is all for the choral ritornello. Then
the tempo of Largo comes in with common time throughout the main section. This section
appears to be in c minor. Christe eleison is a operatic love duet in ritornello form consisting of
Soprano I and II in the key of D major with obbligato violins. Unfortunately there aren’t any
autograph tempo markings except for in several scores which read it around the tempo of quarter
note equals 60 beats per minute. As the Kyrie eleison comes around for a second time; it is
evidently in a 4-part fugal chorus consisting of Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass. The piece is in F-
sharp minor with tempo markings of "alla breve.” Autograph meter of this piece is in common
time or 4/4 time. Stauffer points out that "the four-part vocal writing... points to a model
conceived outside the context of a five-voice Mass." Something to note is the 9 (trinitarian, 3 x
3) movements with the largely symmetrical structure.

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II. The Gloria in Excelsis Deo

_Gloria in excelsis_ is a 5-part chorus in ritornello form consisting of Soprano I, II, Alto, Tenor and Bass in the key of D major, marked as Vivace tempo as eighth note equals 160 beats per minute. In the mid-1740s, Bach reused this as the opening chorus of his cantata _Gloria in excelsis Deo, BWV 191_.

_Grattias agimus_ is a 4-part fugal chorus with Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass voices with a motet-like texture in D major, marked with the tempo of alla breve and allegro moderato. The piece is in common time. The music is a reworking of the second movement of Bach's 1731 Ratswechsel cantata *Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir, BWV 29*, in which the meter is the number 2 with a slash through it. Stauffer adds that both may have an earlier common source. _Domine Deus_ is classified as a duet between Soprano I and Tenor in the key of G major with flute obbligato and muted strings. The tempo marking throughout the entire piece is andante at quarter note equals sixty beats per minute. The music appears as a duet in BWV 191. In the 1733 parts, Bach indicates a "Lombard rhythm" in the slurred two-note figures in the flute part; he does not indicate it in the final score or in BWV 191. Stauffer points out that this rhythm was popular in Dresden in 1733; it is possible that Bach added in the 1733 parts to appeal to tastes at the Dresden court and that he no longer wanted it used in the 1740s, or that he still preferred it but no longer notated it.

_Qui tollis_ is a 4-part chorus including Soprano II, Alto, Tenor and Bass voices in the key of B minor. The piece is marked lento and is in strict canon. The chorus is a reworking of the first half of the opening movement of the 1723 cantata *Schauet doch und sehet, ob irgend ein Schmerz sei, BWV 46*. In the autograph sources no double bar

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separates it from the previous movement.\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Qui sedes ad dexteram} is an aria for an alto singer in B minor with oboe d'amore obbligato. The tempo markings read around ninety six beats per minute with the eighth note getting the beat in 6/8 time. This movement is in a gigue style as well as being in ritornello form. \textit{Quoniam tu solus sanctus} is yet another Aria but this time for the male bass voice in D major with corno da caccia obbligato. The main tempo for the piece is around sixty six beats per minute in 3/4 time. \textit{Cum Sancto Spiritu} is a 5-part chorus pertaining to Soprano I, II, Alto, Tenor and Bass voice in D major, marked Vivace and in 3/4 time.

\textbf{III. Credo ("Symbolum Nicenum")}

Note the 9 movements with the symmetrical structure, and the crucifixion at the center. 

\textit{Credo in unum Deum} is a 5-part chorus including the Soprano I, II, Alto, Tenor and Bass voice in A mixolydian mode, with a tempo marking of moderato as well as a walking bass continuo.

Stauffer identifies an earlier Credo in unum Deum chorus in G major, but late mentions it could possibly be from 1748–49. \textit{Patrem omnipotentem} is a 4-part fugal chorus consisting of Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass in D major with the tempo reading as allegro. There happened to be some form of metrical markings of 2 with a slash through them in the manuscript. \textit{Et in unum Dominum} is an operatic love duet between Soprano I and Alto in G major marked as andante. \textit{Et incarnatus est} is a 5-part chorus consisting of Soprano I, II, Alto, Tenor and Bass voices in B minor with a main focus around the German augmented sixth. The tempo marking for this movement is andante maestro and is in 3/4 time. \textit{Crucifixus} is a grave yet very chromatic 4-part chorus with Soprano II, Alto, Tenor and Bass based with text painting. The movement is in E minor as well as 3/2 time. The music is a reworking of the first section of the first chorus of the

1714 cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen, BWV 12.* Et resurrexit is a 5-part chorus in ritornello form with Soprano I, II, Alto, Tenor and Bass as main voices. The movement is in D major with the tempo marking as allegro and is in 3/4 time. *Et in Spiritum Sanctum* is a beautiful Aria for male Bass in A major with oboi d'amore obbligati at a tempo of andantino which is around dotted quarter note equals fifty beats per minute. *Confiteor* is a 5-part chorus in F-sharp minor with the tempo marking being moderato, until the transitional music in bar 121, which is marked "adagio". John Butt notes that "the only positive evidence of Bach actually composing afresh within the entire score of the mass is in the 'Confiteor' section," by which he means, "composing the music directly into the autograph. Even the most unpracticed eye can see the difference between this and surrounding movements"; one part of the final transitional music is "still illegible...and necessitates the conjectures of a judicious editor."  

### IV. Sanctus/Benedictus

The *Sanctus* is a 6-part fugal chorus consisting of Soprano I, II, Alto I, II, Tenor and Bass voices in D major as a largo tempo marking. Derived from an earlier 3 soprano, 1 alto work written in 1724; in that 1724 *Sanctus* the first section was marked in C, perhaps suggesting a tempo faster than what Bach conceived of when he finally re-used it in the Mass. Osanna is a double chorus in D major at a tempo of allegro in 3/8 time.

The *Benedictus* is an aria for tenor with obbligato in B minor at around andante tempo marking in 3/4 time. The obbligato instrument is not specified in the manuscript. Most modern

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editions use a flute, while earlier editions sometimes used a violin. Stauffer suggests this may have been influenced by Beethoven's use of the violin in his *Missa solemnis*.

**V. Agnus Dei and Dona Nobis Pacem**

The *Agnus Dei* is an aria for alto voice in G minor with violin obbligato at quarter note equals fifty six in common time. The unison violins is similar to *Christe eleison*. This happens to be a parody of an aria, "Enfernet euch, ihr kalten Herzen" ("Withdraw, you cold heart"), from a lost wedding serenade (1725). Bach also re-used the wedding aria for the alto aria, "Ach, bleibe doch," of his 1735 Ascension Oratorio Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen, BWV 11. Finally, the *Dona nobis pacem* is a 4-part chorus in D major which is sung at a tempo of moderato in common time and ends with a double fugue. The music is almost identical to "Gratias agimus tibi" from the *Gloria*.

**Fugal Form in Relation**

The fugue is a rather large form which must employ at least two or more voices into a contrapuntal figure. A fugue is built on many different facets but the main being on a subject. This subject may be a one measure phrase that has a significant motive throughout. In the case of the *Kyrie eleison* this is evident with the opening statement from the Bass voice accompanied by the Fagotti on top of a basso continuo. The fugue always builds on top of itself leaving the first voices to speak almost buried. The way this is possible is through an imitative form of counterpoint which allows multiple voices to enter and exit without disturbing the main subject of the piece. With every subject, there is an answer. This answer is evident starting on beat three of measure three of the *Kyrie eleison* when the Tenor voice enters with the exact same three and a half bar motive. This same motive is repeated throughout the entire movement. While the

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motive is being passed around, there aren’t just these two voices bouncing the subject back and forth, all five voices are singing the subject at one point or another within the movement. As an example of the subject, answer and counter subject, measure 35 beat three starts the motive from f sharp to g natural and then back down to e sharp. That beginning of the line is the start to the motive for the subject; following the subject is the answer in the Tenor voices on beat one of measure 36 with the same figure from c sharp to d natural back down to b sharp. This continues through the rest of the piece. While the answer is being stated, the voice in which the subject was previously heard continues with new material. If this new material is reused in later statements of the subject, it is called a countersubject; if this accompanying material is only heard once, it is simply referred to as free counterpoint. This is one of many examples of a fugue throughout the mass.
Bibliography


