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Bach's Mass in B-minor

Bach’s Mass in B-minor was composed in 1733 as part of an application to become the court composer to the King of Saxe-Gotha (who was a Roman Catholic). Bach was not granted the title at this time (he did later receive it), but he chose to complete his b-minor Mass anyway—though over an extended period of time. The Credo (Necum tetragrammaton) and the Sanctus/Benedictus/Osanna were written between 1734 and 1736 when Bach was in his early fifties. The Agnus Dei is the closing section of the Mass, and it is a re-working of an earlier composed cantata. Bach subdivided each of the six sections of the traditional mass format, so that there are actually twenty-four defined numbers in the work. Several of them are re-arrangements from cantatas. The Gratuas Agnos and Deo Noster Padre (both having the same biblical text) are from the opening chorus of Cantata 29, Wir danken dir. The fast section of the Credo et expecto resurrectionem is from Cantata 120, Jesu, the erenzten Stimmen. The Credo in the Credo is originally part of Cantata 12, written in 1714.

It is curious that Bach wrote a Latin mass at all. The b-minor Mass is not appropriate for the Roman Catholic service because Bach altered some of the canonical text. It is equally inappropriate for Lutherns since the piece goes so far beyond the Kyrie/Gloria Missa. Also, the work is very long — not really practical to use liturgically. A possible explanation for his composing the entire mass (beyond what was intended for the courtly title) was Bach’s dedication to his craft. Writing to a text so exacting and explicit in its meaning, while possessing a limitless imagination, must have posed an intriguing challenge to his abilities. Whatever his reasons, coupled with his sincere devotion to God, Bach produced a work so vast and beautiful, that it transcends church denominational differences and rises as a universal statement of faith.

Joseph Machlis, a twentieth century musicologist, says of Bach’s b-minor Mass, “While excerpts may serve as an introduction to the work, only a hearing of it in its entirety will reveal the vast terrain that has here been subjected to the creative will.”
Mass in b-minor
BWV 232
Johann Sebastian Bach

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III. CREDO

I believe in one God, the Almighty Father, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, born of the Father before time began, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in substance with the Father, and through Him all things were made; for us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven.

And was incarnate of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, and was made man. And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried. And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven, where He is seated on the right hand of God the Father, and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end. And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, Who proceeds from the Father and the Son, together with the Father and the Son He is adored and glorified. He is the one who spoke through the prophets. And I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church.

I profess one baptism for the remission of sins, and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

IV. SANCTUS


V. AGNUS DEI

Lamb of God, Who taketh away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us. Grant us peace.

12 Crede in unum Deum.
13 Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium.
14 Et in unum Dominum, Jesum Christum, filium Dei unigenitum, et ex patre natum ante omnia saecula, Deum de Deo, Lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero, genitum, non factum, sustantias talem patri, per quem omnia facta sunt, qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem descendit de coelo.
15 Et incarnatus est de spiritu sancto ex Maria virgine, et homin factus est.
16 Crucifixus est pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, passus et sepultus est.
17 Et resurrexit tertia die secundum scripturas, et ascendit in coelum, sedet ad dextram Dei patris, et iterum venturus est cum gloria judicare vivos et mortuos, cuius regni non est finis.
18 Et in spiritum sanctum, dominum et vivificantem, qui ex patre filioque procedit, qui cum patre et filio simul adoratur et coglorificatur, qui locutus est per prophetas. Et unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicae ecclesiam.

I. KYRIE

1 Kyrie eleison.
2 Christe eleison.
3 Kyrie eleison.
4 Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.
5 Laudamus te, benedictum te, adoramus te, glorificamus te.
6 Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriarn tuam.
7 Domine Deus, rex coelestis, Deus pater omnipotens, domine filii unigeniti, Jesu Christe altissime, domine Deus, agnus dei, filius patris.
8 Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis, suscipe deprecationem nostram.
9 Qui sedes ad dextram patris, miserere nobis.
10 Quoniam tu solus sanctus, tu solus dominus, tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe.
11Cum sancto spiritu in gloria Dei patris. Amen.

II. GLORIA

Glory be to God on high and peace on earth to men of good will. We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we adore Thee, we glorify Thee. We give Thee thanks for Thy great glory. Lord God, heavenly King, almighty Father, the only begotten Son, Lord Jesus Christ, most High, Lord our God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father. Thou Who art seated at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us. Thou Who art seated at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us. For Thou alone art holy, Thou alone art the Lord, Thou alone art the most high, Jesus Christ. With the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

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STANLEY RITCHIE, DANIEL STEPNER, LAURA JEPSON, ELISABETH WRIGHT
Friday, December 20, 1985

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Friday, March 21, 1986
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Friday, April 11, 1986

EXTRA EVENT
KONRAD JUNGHÄNEL
Saturday, September 28, 1985

SEQUENTIA
Friday, February 14, 1986

Gloria of the B minor Mass, end of the bass part in Bach's handwriting.
III. CREDO

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13. Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium.
14. Et in unum Dominum, Jesum Christum, filium Dei unigenitum, et ex patre natum ante omnia saecula, Deum de Deo, Lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero, genitum, non factum, consubstantalem Patri, per quem omnia facta sunt, qui propter nos homines et propter nosam salutem descendit de coelo.
15. Et incarnatus est de spiritu sancto ex Maria virginis, et homo factus est.
16. Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, passus et sepultus est.
17. Et resurrexit tertia die secundum scripturas, et ascendit in coelum, sedet ad dexteram Dei patris, et iterum venturas est cum gloria judicare vivos et mortuos, cujus regni non est finis.
18. Et in spiritum sanctum, dominum et vivificantem, qui ex patre filioque procedit, qui cum patre et filio simul adoratur et coeternaliter, qui locutus est per prophetas. Et unam sanctam catholica et apostolicam ecclesiam.

IV. SANCTUS

22. Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini.

V. AGNUS DEI

23. Angus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
24. Dona nobis pacem.

I believe in one God, The Almighty Father, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, born of the Father before time began, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in substance with the Father, and through him all things were made; for us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven.

And was incarnate of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, and was made man. And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried. And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven, where he is seated on the right hand of the Father, and will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. And I believe in the Holy spirit the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, together with the Father and the Son he is adored and glorified; he is the truth who spoke through the prophets. And I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church.

I profess one baptism for the remission of sins, and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth! Heaven and earth are full of his glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us. Grant us peace.

Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.

1. Kyrie eleison.
2. Christe eleison.

1. Lord have mercy upon us.
2. Christ have mercy upon us.
3. Lord have mercy upon us.

II. GLORIA

Glory be to God on high and peace on earth to men of good will.

We praise thee, we bless thee, we adore thee, we glorify thee.

We give thee thanks for thy great glory.

Lord God, heavenly king, almighty Father, the only begotten son, Lord Jesus Christ most high, Lord our God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father.

Thou who art seated at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us.

Thou who art seated at the hand of the Father, have mercy on us.

For thou alone art holy, thou alone art the Lord, thou alone art the most high, Jesus Christ.

With the holy spirit in the glory of the Father. Amen.

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Bach's Mass in b-minor
Program notes by Kay Verdius

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Returning to the "dangerous statement" above, the description is true in two ways. Bach's fugues and inventions have become compulsory for those concerned with mastering the theory of music, and his art of linear writing (counterpoint) is so perfect it is a model for every musician. His harmonic vocabulary is so great that it prepared the way for two centuries of music. Secondly, Bach's work is challenging and a reward to the self when performed well. His works are often deep in emotion and passion, but there are no printed directions to indicate this. It has been up to performers to discover and bring out these qualities in Bach's music.

The liturgy of the mass, or Eucharist service, of the Christian church was settled by the Middle Ages. Though the introtitus, prayers and offertory varied according to the church calendar, the Ordinarium remained the same: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei. Therefore, those were the sections destined to be set to music. The word mass, as used by musicians, refers to these unalterable portions of the liturgy. The more famous surviving masses are like high peaks of accomplishment in musical composition — they represent all the new ideas and musical experimentation of their time.

The sixteenth century polyphonic period reached a glorious height with unaccompanied choral writing. Among the outstanding composers were Palestrina, Byrd and Victoria. These masses were followed in time by works that experimented with adding instruments to the chorus and exploiting the solo voice. Harmony, for its own sake, was developed. By the mid-eighteenth century many, many elements of contrast and expression had been introduced into music for the Church, and Bach gathered together all these new elements (along with his personal formal development of counterpoint) and composed his Mass in b-minor. His mass stands alone on its own peak and is not overshadowed by anything, before or since.

The Refomations brought many sweeping changes to the religious practices of most of Germany, including the elimination of the Latin liturgy. The Lutheran church did away with the Eucharist, or communion office, as the principal service for Sundays and festivals, but retained only the Kyrie and Gloria sections of the Ordinarium. The Luthernans called these two sections "Missae", it is, in fact, only these two sections of Bach's b-minor Mass that were titled Missa. Bach wrote the b-minor Mass in four distinct sections, each with its own title page — there was no general title page for the whole work. The title "Missa Solemnis" was affixed after Bach's death by one of his sons.

The Kyrie and Gloria (Mass) were composed in 1733 as part of an application to become the court composer to the King of Saxony (who was a Roman Catholic). Bach was not granted the title at this time (he did later receive it), but he chose to complete his b-minor Mass anyway — though over an extended period of time. The Credo (Necum crede) and the Sanctus/Benedictus/ Agnus Dei were written between 1724 and 1725 when Bach was in his early fifties. The Agnus Dei is the closing section of the Mass, and it is a re-working of an earlier composed cantata. Bach subdivided each of the six sections of the traditional mass format, so that there are actually twenty-four defined numbers in the work. Several of them are re-arrangements from cantatas. The Gratias Agnus and Domino Nisi fecit (both having the same of the canonical text) are from the opening chorus of Cantata 29, Wir danken dir. The fast section of the Credo et expecto reversionis is from Cantata 120, Jesus, the Searcher. The Credo in the Credo is originally part of Cantata 12, written in 1714.

It is curious that Bach wrote a Latin mass at all. The b-minor Mass is not appropriate for the Roman Catholic service because Bach altered some of the canonical text. It is equally inappropriate for Luthernans since the piece goes so far beyond the Kyrie/Gloria Missa. Also, the work is very long — not really practical to use liturgically. A possible explanation for his composing the entire mass (beyond what was intended for the courtly title) was Bach's dedication to his craft. Writing to a text so exacting and explicit in its meaning, while possessing a limitless imagination, must have posed an intriguing challenge. Whatever his reasons, coupled with his sincere devotion to God, Bach produced a work so vast and beautiful, that it transcends church denominational differences and rises as a universal statement of faith.

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