

**THE VOCAL MUSIC OF J.S. BACH<sup>1</sup>****CLASS 9 Nov 16 B-MINOR MASS**Bach in Leipzig

In 1729, age 44, Bach took over the Collegium Musicum, an amalgam of professional and high-level amateur singers and instrumentalists that played to large audiences. While still directing the music at Leipzig's main churches, he throttled back on church compositions, giving him time to turn back to instrumental works during the 1730s, including the English Suites, Keyboard Partitas, Well-tempered Clavier Book II, and more orchestral suites. In the 1740s, the last decade of his life, Bach turned his attention to his great encyclopedic works: the Goldberg Variations, The B-minor Mass, and the Art of Fugue.

History and purpose of the B-minor Mass

Bach dedicated the first two major sections of what later became the B-minor Mass (Kyrie and Gloria, known together as the Missa) to the new Elector of Saxony in Dresden in 1733. After nine years in Leipzig, Bach was feeling mistreated and underpaid, and apparently looking for a new job, or at least the title of Court Composer in Dresden. Fifteen years later, in the last two years of his life, he returned to what he knew would be his final great sacred work. Drawing on decades of earlier compositions including the Missa, and adding three large sections, including much new material, he produced a unified composition displaying his deepest spiritual convictions on the grandest scale.

The Mass was not performed complete in Bach's lifetime. He died in 1750, less than a year after completing the score. His choral works immediately disappeared from public hearing, and were not revived until Mendelssohn's pivotal performance of the St. Matthew Passion in 1829. The Mass was finally published in 1845, 95 years after Bach's death. The first complete performance occurred in 1854, with others following quickly. As the composer Robert Schumann, one of the central figures in the Bach revival, noted, "We are never at an end with Bach. He seems to grow more profound the more often he is heard."

Why did Bach, a devout Lutheran, write a Catholic mass? Lutherans use only the Kyrie and Gloria sections in their services, so they would have had no use for the Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. And the work is far too long for use in an actual Catholic service. Some have speculated that Bach did not intend the work for public performance. But why would Bach, the most practical of composers, spend 15 years on a work not intended to be heard? The new Elector of Saxony, to whom Bach had dedicated the Kyrie and Gloria, was Catholic, so Bach might have written these sections as an audition piece for a new job as Court Composer.

Structure

The B-minor Mass is composed of five main sections, each further divided into subsections.

1. Kyrie
2. Gloria
3. Credo
4. Sanctus
5. Agnus Dei

1. Kyrie

- 1a. Kyrie eleison (I) Chorus (5 voices), flutes, oboi d'amore, strings, continuo

---

<sup>1</sup> © 2020 Ray Squitieri

Kyrie eleison. Lord have mercy upon us.

Bach opens his last masterpiece with an imposing 10-minute treatment of the two-word text. Following the opening choral cry for mercy is an extended orchestral introduction that prepares the way for a mighty five-part choral fugue, full of dissonance and chromaticism. The full chorus begins, followed by the tenors with sparse accompaniment. An orchestral interlude is followed by a restatement and development by the chorus beginning with the basses. A restatement of the theme, beginning in the sopranos, closes the movement.



1b. Christe eleison  
Soprano I and II, violins I and II, continuo

Christe eleison. Christ have mercy upon us.

The mood immediately changes to peace and acceptance in this soprano-alto duet, reflected in the instrumental duet between violins and the continuo.

1c. Kyrie eleison (II)

Going back to the solemn mood of the opening Kyrie, this is another complex fugue, including a stretto with tightly overlapping entrances.

2. Gloria

2a. Gloria in excelsis

Chorus (5 voices), flutes, oboes, trumpets, timpani, strings, continuo  
Gloria in excelsis Deo Glory to God in the highest

The brilliant exuberant Gloria in excelsis stands in contrast to the introspective pleading of the Kyrie part III. Bach unveils his full orchestra: flutes, oboes, bassoons, trumpets, timpani, strings, and continuo. He



combines two Baroque dance forms, the gigue and passepied, using this rhythm.

2b. Et in terra pax  
Chorus (5 voices), flutes, oboes, trumpets, timpani, strings, continuo

et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. and on earth peace, good will toward men.

After the sparkling Gloria in excelsis, this section offers quieter choral polyphony as a contrast

2c. Laudamus te  
Soprano II, solo violin, strings, continuo

Laudamus te. Adoramus te. Benedicimus te. We praise thee. We adore thee. We bless thee.  
Glorificamus te. We glorify thee.

Here we have separate yet intertwined melodies for soprano and violin, including rich ornamentation, alternating with choral sections.

2d Gratias agimus tibi  
Chorus (4 voices), flutes, oboes, trumpets, timpani, strings, continuo  
Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam We give thanks to thee on account of thy  
tuam. great glory.

The music here is serious, majestic, and upbeat all at the same time. Bach originally composed this music as part of his Cantata 29, "Wir danken dir, wir danken dir" (We thank thee, we thank thee), for the installation of the new Leipzig City Council in 1731. He then incorporated it into the Missa of 1733, and uses the music for the Dona nobis Pacem that closes the B-minor Mass to a satisfying close.

2e. Domine Deus

Soprano I, tenor, solo flute, strings(muted), continuo

Domine Deus, rex coelestis, Deus Pater Lord God, king of heaven, God the omnipotent  
omnipotens. Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Father. Lord the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ,  
Christe altissime. Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius the most high. Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the  
Patris: Father:

A charming soprano-tenor duet with flute obbligato.

2f. Qui tollis

Chorus (4 voices), 2 flutes obbligato, strings, continuo

Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Qui tollis Who takest away the sins of the world, have  
peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram. mercy upon us. Who takest away the sins of the  
world, hear our prayer.

The mournful chorus depicts Jesus in the real world of human sin and frailty, a striking shift from the lighthearted movement immediately before.

2g. Qui sedes ad dextram Patris

Bach loved the oboe as an obbligato addition to the vocal line, this time the alto or countertenor.

2h. Quoniam tu solus sanctus  
Bass, solo horn, 2 bassoons obbligato, continuo

Quoniam tu solus sanctus, tu solus Dominus, tu For thou alone art holy, thou alone art God, thou  
solus altissimus: Jesu Christe alone art most high: Jesus Christ

This movement stands apart from its neighbors because of its unusual scoring: bass soloist plus hunting horn for a royal effect, along with two bassoons. To open the movement, the horn plays a “perfect melody,” one that sounds the same forwards or backwards.

### 2i. Cum Sancto Spiritu

Chorus (5 voices), flutes, oboes, trumpets, timpani, strings, continuo

cum Sancto Spiritu, in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

with the Holy Ghost, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Another brilliant up-tempo movement, “Cum sancto spiritu” calls for the full orchestra and a five-part chorus singing a fast virtuosic fugue. Bach marks this movement *Vivace* (lively). The other movement so marked is the closing episode of the Credo, “et expecto resurrectionem,”

### 3. Credo

This section contains the central story of Bach’s faith: God descends from heaven to the young Mary. She gives birth to Jesus, who suffers, is crucified and buried, then resurrected. The Credo section opens with a fugal chorus, but this time in antique style, based on plainchant, in contrast to the late-Baroque fugue in *Cum Sancto Spiritu* immediately preceding. The graceful soprano-alto duet *Et in unum Dominum* is accompanied by oboe and strings. The chorus *Et incarnatus est* expresses awe that God could appear in human form.

#### 3a. Credo in unum deum

#### 3b. Patrem omnipotentem

#### 3c. Et in unum Dominum

#### 3d. Et incarnatus est

#### 3e. Crucifixus

Chorus (5 voices), flutes, strings, continuo

Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, passus, et sepultus est.

And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried.

This powerful lament appears with different text in Bach’s 1714 cantata number 12, “Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” (Weeping, lamentation, worry, despair) written while Bach at Weimar. The music is a *chaconne* (*passacaglia*), with a repeated four-bar descending bass line.

From deepest despair, we vault to the exuberant *Et resurrexit*, followed by the flowing bass solo of *Et in Spiritum Sanctum*. The key word here is *vivificantem* (giver of life). *Confiteor unum Baptisma* is a canon in antique style, linked to the final section by a strange haunting choral passage.

#### 3f. Et resurrexit

#### 3g. Et in Spiritum Sanctum

#### 3h. Confiteor unum baptisma

#### 3i. Et expecto resurrectionem

Chorus (5 voices), flutes, oboes, trumpets, timpani, strings, continuo

Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum. Et vitam ventura saeculi. Amen.

and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

In case we were wondering how the story will turn out, Bach brings out the full orchestra and chorus for the confident brilliant finale that closes out the Credo section. This movement originated with the 1729 Cantata number 120.

### 4. Sanctus

4.1 Sanctus

Chorus (6 voices), oboes (3), trumpets, timpani, strings, continuo

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth. Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria eius. Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts. Heaven and earth are full of his glory.

This radiant six-part chorus, which brings to mind banners waving triumphantly, was originally composed for Christmas Day 1724, during Bach's first year in Leipzig. It opens with five vocal and instrumental choirs calling out to one another: high voices, low voices, high strings, three oboes, and trumpets. God's



In this touching aria we hear an intimate statement of the meaning of faith, based on Cantata 11, in which Christ appears to his disciples for the final time before ascending to heaven. The emotions here are love for the savior, and loss as he leaves the earth.

Bach conveys loss and rootlessness with the chromatic bass line, moving continually without a satisfying resolution. Scoring suggests loneliness: solo voice, unison violins, simple rhythm. Bach keeps the atmosphere dark by maintaining the minor key throughout. The violins' sighing motif at the beginning harks back to the opening Kyrie of the mass.

## 5.2 Dona nobis pacem

Chorus (4 voices), flutes, oboes, trumpets, timpani, strings, continuo

Dona nobis pacem.

Grant us peace.

At the end, we return to the music heard earlier in Gratias agimus tibi, originally composed for the Missa of 1733. The basses begin the movement, leading out from the doubt and darkness of the Agnus Dei into light and thankfulness. Near the end of his life, his strength ebbing and eyesight failing, Bach gives thanks

Do - na no - bis pa - cem, pa - cem.

*9*

pa - cem do - - - - - na no - bis,

for his life and his life's work.

### Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*,  
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*,

Classical Notes, "Mass in B-minor." Good summary of the work's origins and history, with a description of the outstanding recordings from the last 70 years. <http://www.classicalnotes.net/classics4/bachmass.html>

John Maclay, "Mass in B-minor—User guide prepared for The Choral Society of Grace Church," 2013, at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52154231e4b0af0a3133f7b4/t/55b81a79e4b0f8cc35e7b5d7/1438128761309/Bach+Mass+in+B+Minor+Guide.pdf>