

Bach *B Minor Mass* (Novello edition ed. N. Jenkins)*A TALK GIVEN AT THE PREMIERE OF THIS EDITION***ON THE ORIGIN OF THE MASS**

Bach's *B Minor Mass* seems to have been written with no discernible purpose in mind. It springs from a Lutheran rather than a Catholic tradition, and can never have been intended for performance in Bach's home territory of Leipzig.

Bach knew of large Italian-style masses being written for the Catholic Court Chapel in Dresden, by composers like Zelenka. In these the Italian style of Lotti, Durante and Scarlatti was brought north to Germany. They were written in sections, and divided up amongst soloists and chorus. Far from sounding like the old church composers such as Palestrina, these were modern works with a lot of affinity with the newly fashionable opera.

Bach couldn't have written a complete Mass like this for his Lutheran congregation in Leipzig; so how did he come to write part of it in 1733?

SANCTUS

Well, a portion of tonight's work had been written as early as 1724, when Bach first arrived in Leipzig. This was the *Sanctus*, which was first performed on Christmas Day 1724. This portion of the Latin Mass could be performed on Feast Days. Bach was keen to make a good impression in his first years as Cantor of St Thomas' Church, and wrote this noble movement, with its threefold choir mirroring the original Isaiah text, and with its impressive orchestration of 3 oboes, 3 trumpets, timpani and strings.

Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.

Another section of the Mass which was retained in Luther's German Liturgy of 1526 was the *Kyrie and Gloria*. Bach composed 4 of these short German Mass settings, numbered BWV 233-6, in the decade between 1737 and 1747, during which he must have been formulating his ideas on how to complete a full Latin Mass.

It was this section, the *Kyrie and Gloria* in Latin, which was Bach's next stage along the long road to completing the *B Minor Mass*. It is generally well-known that Bach dedicated it to the Catholic Elector of Saxony. But it was unlikely to have been composed for his own usage in Leipzig, for various reasons which I will now outline. Indeed, all the

pointers lead to the conclusion that he specifically wrote it for the forces available at the Court Chapel at Dresden.

KYRIE & GLORIA

The length of the work - the first half of tonight's concert - at over 50 minutes is one reason that this could never have been performed liturgically in St. Thomas', Leipzig. But more importantly the forces required were different from what Bach had available to him there.

He writes for a 5 part chorus, with 2 soprano lines - something he rarely did in his Cantatas. In fact, the early *Magnificat* (dating from the same time as the *Sanctus*) is the only other major work with this line-up.

There are no da capo arias, as in his usual Cantatas and Passions.

There is a virtuoso Horn part - Dresden had a famous horn-player that the Court composers always wrote for: Bach had no regular horn-player in Leipzig.

The elaborately decorated aria *Laudamus te* was almost certainly written for Faustina Bordoni, a virtuoso court singer who Bach had recently heard in an opera in Dresden (*Cleofide*) by her husband, the court Kapellmeister, Johann Hasse.

WHY WAS IT COMPOSED?

There were definite signs that, early in the 1730's Bach was not happy in his post at Leipzig. There is, extant, at least one document in which he tries to get a new job. His unhappiness was caused, principally,

by a faction on the town council, led by Jakob Born, who wanted a more conventional Cantor. With Bach they had got rather more than they bargained for. And some councillors wanted a schoolteacher in the Cantor's post, who could both be a proper schoolmaster and, additionally, produce uncomplicated music for the Sunday service.

by the poor state into which the school had declined under its aged Headmaster (or Rector) Johann Heinrich Ernesti

by the consequent poor quality of boy choristers; since out of the 40 that he was supposed to use in the town's 4 principal churches, less than half could sing more than a chorale.

As a result Bach

wrote a famous memorandum to the Town Council outlining the problems in preparing the music for the 4 churches he was in charge of (in addition to St Thomas), and indicating the minimum forces required.

wrote letters applying for other jobs, including one to Georg Erdmann in Danzig.

submitted the Kyrie and Gloria to the Elector in 1733, along with a request to be considered for a post as Court Composer.

This job application, with its famous contents, failed to achieve anything. The Elector shelved the work, where it remained undisturbed in his library for nearly 100 years. Bach was given an honorary title as Court Composer some 3 years later on 19 November 1736, but no actual post was offered to him. So this was not quite the result he had anticipated. Instead of a prestigious appointment he merely came away with the contemporary equivalent of an O.B.E.

Unfortunately the Elector was well-provided with composers. Zelenka looked after the church music, and Hasse was principally employed in writing the operas that gave the Elector great personal pleasure. Opera was something that Bach had no knowledge of - he never wrote an opera at all. So it was very unlikely that there would have been a position for him at court anyway.

Bach and his family were in Dresden in July 1733, so the submission may have seemed like a good idea at the time. Their eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann had just been appointed organist of the Sophienkirche, and they were all there to help him settle in. The presentation manuscript and parts were neatly written out in their various hands during their time in Dresden. (We know this by the unique type of paper on which they are written). The fact that there are errors in this material shows that they were working at speed, and more importantly, that the parts were never used, and - therefore - never corrected.

At the end of Bach's dedication he fulsomely offers to provide the Elector with further compositions of music for the Court Chapel. This is important, as it may go some way to explaining why Bach eventually completed the work: he may have felt under an obligation to fulfil this promise, by turning the portion which had already been presented into a complete setting of the Latin Mass.

RE-USE OF THE MATERIAL

But for the moment we find Bach still stuck in Leipzig - he never did get another position elsewhere. Still having to provide new music for the town's churches it is not surprising to find him reusing some of the *Gloria's* musical content a decade later, around 1743, in a new Christmas Cantata. This cantata, BWV 191, is unusual in that it is set to a Latin text *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. It is Bach's only cantata with a Latin text, and the substitution of the new text is managed very adroitly.

An intriguing theory has recently been put forward by a Bach scholar looking for a convincing reason for Bach to have completed his Latin Mass.

On Christmas Day 1745 a special service was held in Leipzig to celebrate the Peace of Dresden, which marked the end of the 2nd Silesian War. It appears that Bach's magnificent *Sanctus* was performed once again - (you will remember that it was

originally composed for Christmas Day 1724) - in a service that also included this new Latin cantata.

Hearing these 2 works side by side (our scholar hypotheses) Bach suddenly realised that he could complete a Latin Mass by simply composing a *Credo, Benedictus and Agnus Dei*. Moreover, he wouldn't need to do much composing if he could adapt these movements out of existing compositions, as he had done with the Latin cantata.

COMPLETION OF THE MASS

And this is how it happened, in the years between Christmas 1745 and 1749, (the latest date by which time we know that it was complete).

It has recently emerged that the composition - or rather the compilation - of the remaining movements of what we now know as the B Minor Mass were probably the last project of Bach's compositional career. Perhaps the *Benedictus*, which I shall be singing myself tonight, was his very last original composition. Of all the movements of this last section of the work, it seems to be the only one which is not based on a previous model.

A comparison of Bach's handwriting throughout the composition process is very revealing.

[SHOW DOCUMENTS]

After the clear, well-drawn, notation of 1733 we find the frenzied, messy handwriting of an old man with bad eyesight, desperate to get the notes down on paper while he still could. On the page from the *Confiteor* (being passed around) he changed his mind so much, at the foot of the page, that no scholar can quite disentangle what he wrote. We can only but be thankful that his second son, C.P.E. Bach, has indicated, in a footnote, what he thinks the notes were.

We know for certain that the manuscript was complete by 1749, by which time his eyesight was so poor that he had to be operated on by an English oculist - John Taylor. Also in 1749 C.P.E. Bach came to Leipzig for a performance of his own new *Magnificat*. In this there is a very obvious musical quote from the unperformed *Credo* of his father's last work. C.P.E.'s *Magnificat* is an obvious tribute to his father, and strongly modelled on J.S.'s own setting of the same text. Some would have it that the son was trying to put in a claim to succeed his father in the job at Leipzig. It didn't work. When J.S. died in July 1750 C.P.E. inherited not his job but his father's compositions.

LATER HISTORY

And so the *m/s* passed into C.P.E. Bach's hands. If he ever intended getting it published he certainly failed. By this time J.S. Bach was regarded as old fashioned. His other publications were not selling well. By 1756 C.P.E. reported that only 30 copies of the *Art of Fugue* had ever been sold. Music had moved into the Classical era - Mozart was born in 1756 - and Bach's composer sons (particularly J.C.) were at the forefront of this movement. Bach and his high baroque compositions entered their twilight years. Only the

Credo portion of the B Minor Mass was ever performed during the rest of the 18th century. C.P.E. mounted a performance from the *m/s* he had inherited in 1786 (which must have been when he added that footnote to the page of the *Confiteor*). A reviewer wrote at the time "... one had herewith the opportunity to admire the 5-part *Credo* of the immortal Johann Sebastian Bach, which is one of the most splendid musical works that has ever been heard.... Our brave singers showed their renowned skill in ensemble and performance of the most difficult parts...."

A few copies were made, by hand, and passed around scholars. The work was more known about than seen, but was not heard again. Haydn obtained a copy. Beethoven knew of it and searched the music publishers for a copy, but never found one. In the inventory of C.P.E.'s belongings, at his death in 1788, the Mass was referred to as "*die grosse Catholische Messe*". It didn't acquire its better-known German title as the "*Hohe Messe*" until the complete work appeared in print in 1845.

The *m/s* can next be traced to the year 1805 when it was purchased at auction by the Zurich collector Hans Georg Nägeli. He intended publishing it, and advertised it in the press as "the greatest musical artwork of all time and all peoples". It took a long time - 40 years - for him to bring it out. Meanwhile the copies that C.P.E. had allowed to be made were circulating in the Berlin area and exciting interest among amateur singers there. The Berlin Singakademie rehearsed it in the years after 1811, without feeling qualified to perform it in public. In 1828 there were, finally, 2 performances - one in Frankfurt and one in Berlin. One of the young singers had been particularly impressed. His name was Felix Mendelssohn, and he went on to hunt for more of Bach's hidden compositions. He unearthed the *St Matthew Passion* and performed it, in honour of its centenary, in 1829. He also found the presentation copy of the *Kyrie and Gloria* that the Elector of Saxony had hidden away in his library in 1733. This section was published, at last, by Nägeli in the same year.

In 1843 a monument was dedicated to Bach in Leipzig. It is good to know that the *Sanctus* was performed on that occasion, even though its publication was still 2 years off. It finally emerged in 1845 in the section containing all the music from the *Credo* onwards: but by then Nägeli himself was dead.

ESTABLISHMENT AS A CLASSIC

The 19th century was a fertile period in which the B Minor Mass could be rediscovered. By this time there was an audience for large-scale religious works intended for use in the concert-hall. Handel had prepared the ground in 18th century London, and Haydn had taken up the challenge with his *Creation* and *Seasons* at the turn of the new century. Mendelssohn's own oratorios *St Paul* and *Elijah* developed the genre further just as the *B Minor Mass* was getting into print. Finally this speculative work, for which there could have been no possible purpose when it was written, found its ideal niche.

In the concert hall it mattered not whether it was a Catholic work or a Lutheran one; whether it was written for a boy's choir (as at Leipzig) or one with female opera singers

(as at Dresden); or whether it was too long for the liturgy, or textually inappropriate; or whether it was too operatic, or not operatic enough.

It could be appreciated as what Bach may simply have intended - the summation and perfection of his entire life's work, written purely for his own satisfaction.

THE FIRST AUTHORITATIVE EDITION

Today we are the inheritors of the Bach movement that started with Mendelssohn and his German colleagues and contemporaries in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1850 the *Bach Gesellschaft* was set up to celebrate the centenary of Bach's death, with a pledge to produce accurate editions of all of his works. The first one that they wanted to produce was a definitive edition of the *B Minor Mass*. It wasn't easy to gain access to all the material, and it was 7 years before it came out. After publication the work's reputation began to travel outside Germany; and so it came to be first heard complete in England, under the direction of Otto Goldschmidt, in 1876. Goldschmidt founded a choir especially to perform it : the Bach Choir of London - and so it is highly appropriate that we welcome Sir David Willcocks, the conductor of the same Bach Choir from 1960 - 1998, to be tonight's conductor.

A NEW EDITION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

The 20th century saw a new definitive edition arrive from the Neuen Bach-Ausgabe - the NBA. But time moves on, and further research has proved that both the *Bach Gesellschaft* edition and the NBA had things wrong with them. At the end of the century Novello were engaged in bringing their Bach editions right up-to-date in a scholarly sense, and I was the man entrusted with the job. Their existing edition of the Mass had been prepared and edited by Sir Arthur Sullivan at the end of the nineteenth century. Clearly a new edition was necessary, in the light of all the new Bach research from the intervening years, and in view of the fact that nowadays we know so much more about Bach's own musicians, their instruments, and their performing practice. Since 1950 (approximately) the development of "early music" has led to a much better understanding of the period in which Bach lived and composed.

So my new edition incorporates all these new ideas, these re-discoveries, in such a practical way that it can be used by conventional forces or by "period-aware" performers. The notes, are, after, the same in both cases!

One feature of tonight's performance that may strike you as different is that there are 5 soloists on the platform. One for each line of music. It is clear from the *mss* that Bach intended there to be 5. Some scholars have recently suggested that the whole work could have been sung by single voices. Joshua Rifkin performed it like this at the Proms. Andrew Parrott, for whom I have sung it many times, including at the Proms, has shown convincingly how solo voices can be employed in the chorusses at those moments when the accompaniment goes down to just a single bass-line. This is how it is being performed tonight. Naturally it is a bit of a compromise - there are some 180 in the main choir.

Although Bach never knew a choir of this size, it is not unlike the large forces that gathered in Westminster Abbey at the end of the 18th century to celebrate the works of Handel. And would Bach have objected?

Not, I suggest, if his work still came across clearly and articulately. If the size of the performers didn't weigh the music down and make it leaden. If the speeds were still rhythmic and dance-like, and if the articulation was spry and the dynamics sensitive.

I am sure that the composer, who never heard more of this work performed in public than the *Sanctus*, would have been delighted to have heard it on this scale, giving pleasure to performers and listeners alike. He would have been more than satisfied to find it established as the pinnacle of any choir's achievement; and to have discovered it at the top of so many music-lovers' Desert Island Discs.

Yes. This work contains the quintessence of all of Bach's styles: his mastery of *Fugue*, his understanding of the *Stile Antico*, his complete awareness of the new music coming into Germany from Italy and France; even the very beginnings of the *Classical* style that would come to fruition after his death. They are all there. In the memorable words that Elgar used about his "Dream of Gerontius" Bach too might well have said:"this is the best of me."

Tonight, in another new edition, especially prepared for the 21st century, we are here to celebrate this "*masterwork of all peoples and all times.*"

Neil Jenkins

Hove, November 2003