

# **Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B Minor: The Greatest Artwork of All Times and All People**

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## I.

When we go to the movies or watch television, the first things we encounter are— commercials. No place in our life is uncontaminated by sentences like "Buy me—I'm the best you can get," or "You will be most satisfied with this item." Commercials surround us—except in the sphere of high art, of classical music, the place of purity. But we all know that this is not entirely true. The title of this article proves the contrary: "Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B Minor: The Greatest Artwork of All Times and All People." That sounds just like the slogan from a commercial. Replace "artwork" by "shampoo" and you could use the sentence on television.

The title, however, was not my idea. The Swiss composer and publisher Hans Georg Nägeli (1773-1836)<sup>1</sup> used it first, in 1818, in an advertisement. Nägeli had bought the original manuscript of the B Minor Mass from the heir of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, and intended to edit the first edition of the work.<sup>2</sup> He was unsuccessful. In 1832 the German publisher Simrock printed a piano reduction of the work, and in 1833 the first half of the score was published by Nägeli. He advertised the second half for 1834, but when he died two years later it had not yet been printed. Finally in 1845 the whole score was published.<sup>3</sup>

Two other nineteenth century editors also failed when planning to publish the Mass, or at least parts of it. In 1816 the English composer Samuel Wesley (1766-1837), a forerunner in the rediscovery of Bach on the British islands,<sup>4</sup> made an attempt to publish the CREDO of the Mass, but was unsuccessful.<sup>5</sup> And in 1818, only a month later than Nägeli, Georg Johann Daniel Poelchau (1773-1836), a member of the Berlin Singakademie and an important collector of Bach's manuscripts,<sup>6</sup> considered printing the score of the work—a plan that was never put into effect.<sup>7</sup>

The reason for the lack of success was that in 1818 only composers and music historians were interested in Bach's music, and the entire Mass had never been performed. Although his music was never completely forgotten, Bach was a composer for specialists, a model for composers; his works were rarely performed in public.<sup>8</sup> The few pieces by Bach published during the first third of the nineteenth century served primarily as examples for polyphonic composition, or were understood as cornerstones of music history,<sup>9</sup> but were not to be played in public.<sup>10</sup>

This situation changed when Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847) performed Bach's St. Matthew Passion in Berlin in 1829, introducing Bach to the concert hall.<sup>11</sup> Even then, however, it was long before Bach's large-scale works were an integral part of the concert repertoire, and even longer until as complicated a piece as the B Minor Mass was performed in a public concert. Although several movements had been performed in

the first half of the century, the first performance of the entire B Minor Mass was no earlier than 1859.<sup>12</sup>

Nägeli's unsuccessful campaign was not the first time that the B Minor Mass was the subject of advertising. Bach himself created the first parts of the Mass, the Kyrie and Gloria, in order to apply for the position as court composer in Dresden in 1733. He was dissatisfied with his position as cantor at St. Thomas in Leipzig,<sup>13</sup> and since the old Elector of Saxony, Friedrich August I (the Strong, 1670-1733), had died that year, and his son, Friedrich August II (1696-1763), had just been enthroned, Bach offered his services to the new ruler and sent him the following letter:

To Your Royal Highness I submit in deepest devotion the present small work of the science which I have achieved in musique, with the most wholly submissive prayer that Your Highness will look upon it with Most Gracious Eyes, according to Your Highness's World-Famous Clemency and not according to the poor composition; and thus deign to take me under Your Most Mighty Protection.<sup>14</sup>

The music Bach mentions in the letter, and that he sent to the Duke of Saxony, was the first half of the B Minor Mass, the Kyrie and the Gloria. Although the pieces were not entirely new (some movements were taken from earlier cantatas; see the table at the end of this essay), the Mass was a showpiece for Bach's compositional skills.

But Bach did more than just present some of his most demanding pieces. It is obvious that he knew the style of Mass composition that was popular in Dresden at his time, and that he tried to compose in a similar idiom. He used, for example, a five part choir, which is unusual in his own compositions but rather frequent in Dresden masses; he composed several movements in the old *stile antico*, a polyphonic style that was rooted in the music of the sixteenth century and was also popular in some of the masses at the court in Dresden; finally, the division of the Mass into several independent movements alluded to Dresden models as well.

The letter and the Kyrie-Gloria Mass formed an advertisement, saying, "Take me as your new court composer." But, like Nägeli's eighty-five years later, Bach's advertising campaign was not successful, and only in 1736 did Bach received the title "court composer."<sup>15</sup>

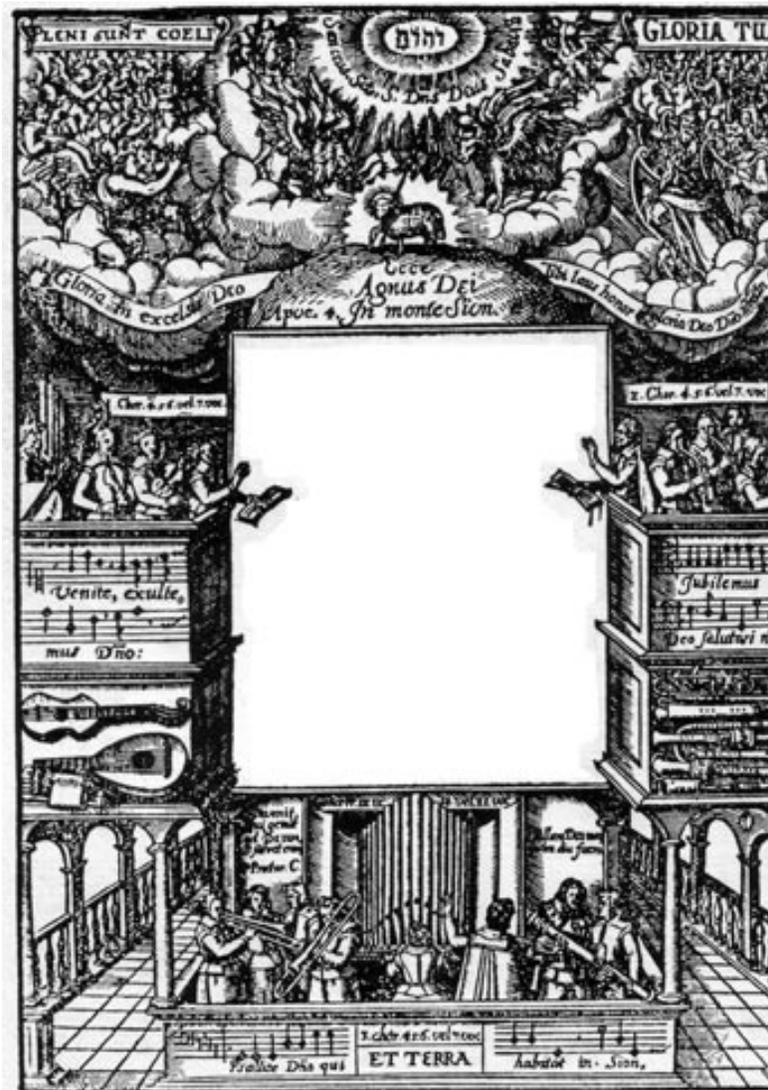
The B Minor Mass was in its first centuries an unsuccessful piece. But something in the music made Hans Georg Nägeli believe that it was worthy to be published, and that something has inspired generations of choirs since the second half of the nineteenth century to perform it again and again. The slogan "The Greatest Artwork of All Times and All People" might have been written to sell something, but it must contain a grain of truth. The following view of the Mass, of its genesis and peculiarities, will show how Bach built this artwork, and will try to reveal the unique character of the composition.

## II.

The music and architecture of the baroque period shared the same ideas. One of the basic principles of baroque architecture is the symmetric ground plan. The palace of Versailles in France served as a model for many other buildings. Its centerpiece is the

main building, which is itself axial-symmetric; this is framed by two huge wings. Norbert Elias has noted in his study *The Court Society* to what extent the architecture of Versailles reflected (and shaped) society, and how the European nobility, by imitating the architecture of the palace, took over the sociological paradigms of the French court.<sup>16</sup> Thus the palace served not only as an architectural paradigm but was an emanation of the sociological structure of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In Germany several residences were built, or re-built, according to this model, although in a much smaller size, but with the symmetric outline preserved. We know that Bach was familiar with this type of architecture since the palace of Friedrichsthal in Gotha, close to Weimar, was constructed about 1710 according to the model.<sup>17</sup>

Even apart from architecture, symmetry was seen in the baroque world as a sign of perfection, mirroring the beauty and perfection of the divine creation. An example is the title page of Michael Praetorius's *Musae Sioniae*, one of the most successful music collections of the seventeenth century, of which the first part was published in 1605.



In the upper register we see God Father represented by the divine name in Hebrew letters, and underneath is the lamb, Jesus Christ. God is framed by the evangelists, two on either side, and he and Christ are surrounded by the heavenly choirs. The music-making on earth is a reflection of this heavenly scenario, with a choir on a balcony on either side, and in the middle the great organ. The symmetry on earth mirrors the symmetric perfection of heaven.<sup>18</sup> The purpose of art at this time—in architecture, the visual arts, and music—was not to create something entirely new, but to reflect this divine perfection, and in this way to praise God. We find such a symmetric outline in many pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach,<sup>19</sup> but only in a few cases is this outline as consequent as in the B Minor Mass.

*Kyrie*  
*Christe*  
*Kyrie*

The first example is the KYRIE. Its middle section, the ***Christe eleison*** (Christ, have mercy), is framed by two huge movements for choir and orchestra, each presenting the phrase “Kyrie eleison” (God, have mercy) in a polyphonic fabric. But there is a significant difference between these two movements. The first ***Kyrie*** is composed as a modern fugue with an instrumental theme and—at least at the beginning—independent instrumental voices. When the “Kyrie eleison” is repeated after the “Christe eleison,” the texture is again polyphonic, but in quite a different way. While the first ***Kyrie*** had an instrumental character, the second is influenced by the polyphonic vocal style of the early modern period; this is known as “Palestrina style” after the famous Roman sixteenth century composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594), or *stile antico*.<sup>20</sup> The instruments in the second ***Kyrie*** basically follow the vocal parts, and the whole piece could easily be performed without the instruments.

Bach had several reasons for using this compositional technique. One is his interest in different musical styles, and his desire to improve his own style during his lifetime. He was always looking for compositional challenges, and to compose a movement in this elaborate vocal style was a challenge. His other motivation follows from the purpose of the Mass as a “job-application” for the court in Dresden: Bach knew the musical style the court in Dresden preferred. Because the *stile antico*, or Palestrina style, was very frequently used by composers in Dresden at this time,<sup>21</sup> Bach likely used it to improve his chances of getting the position he wanted. In other words, writing some movements of the Mass in Palestrina style was a part of his advertising strategy.

The first music example shows the beginning of the second *Kyrie*. The bass begins with a long *soggetto*, sharpened by chromaticisms and supported by the bassoon. The tenor enters with the same *soggetto* and is accompanied by the viola. The different timbres of the reed instrument and the string instrument make the polyphonic fabric even more transparent. The same is true when eventually the alto (with the oboe) and the soprano (with oboe and flute) enter. The instrumentation, characteristic of the German seventeenth century ideal of *Spaltklang*, underscores the polyphonic texture of the setting (see Example 1).

ex 1

A., Ob. da. VI II

T., Vla

B., Bk.

B.c.

Ky - ri -

Ky - ri - e e - lei - son e - le - i - son e -

♯ 4 1 6 3 1 6 7 1 2 1 3 1 4

A., Ob. da. VI II

T., Vla

B., Bk.

B.c.

e - lei - son e - le - i - son e -

e - lei - son Ky - ri - e e - lei -

1 2 1 2 4 7 7 6 1 2 4 6 1 2 1

A., Ob. da. VI II

T., Vla

B., Bk.

B.c.

Ky - ri - e e -

e - le - i - son e - le - i - son e -

1 1 6 3 1 2 1 1 1 2 1 1

Several other aspects of this *Kyrie* refer to models in the Saxon capitol. One is the slow introduction opening the whole piece. We find similar introductions in other masses in Dresden; one, composed by Johann Hugo von Wilderer (1670/71–1724), is so much the same that it likely served as a model for Bach. Even the theme of the first fugue in Bach's Mass is similar to Wilderer's *Kyrie*-fugue (see Example 2).<sup>22</sup>

Example 2

Wilderer  
Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, e - lei - son.

Bach  
Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, e - lei - son.

Bach copied the mass by Wilderer around 1730 so that we are sure that he knew it.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Bach did not just imitate the model, but composed a much more complex setting. While Wilderer's introduction is a straightforward accordic piece, Bach's introduction also starts with a dense accordic texture, but enriches the setting with syncopations and sharp chromaticisms.

*Kyrie I* and *Kyrie II* represent the two side wings of our "palace." The central section of the building, the *Christe eleison*, is composed as a contrast. It is set for two soprano voices and violins. The character is quite intimate. Again, models from Dresden have shaped the movement, but in this case not only sacred compositions but secular pieces as well. Dresden was at this time a center for the Italian opera in Germany. Although Bach never composed an opera himself, he possessed a deep knowledge of this genre.<sup>24</sup> In the case of the *Christe*, the love-duet of Neapolitan opera might have served as a model. We find several characteristics of this duet style in the *Christe*: "parallel thirds and sixths (emphasized here through sustained notes), diatonic melodic lines, a *galant* mixture of duple and triple figures, straightforward harmonies, expressive appoggiaturas, and weak-beat phrase endings that resolve downward as 'sighs'."<sup>25</sup> Bach used this style in several duets in his cantatas to depict the love between two persons, or between God and humanity, so that we can be sure that he was aware of possible connotations, and used these stylistic devices on purpose.<sup>26</sup>

The relationship between this type of duet and love becomes clear when we compare a section from the secular cantata *Lasst uns sorgen, lasst uns weichen* (BWV 213), composed in September 1733, with the duet in the Mass. The cantata was written for the birthday of Prince Friedrich Christian of Saxony (1722-1763). The text of the duet is "I am yours and you are mine; I kiss you, kiss me" (see Example 3).



Example 4

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Violin III (VI III), Soprano III (S. III), and Bassoon (B.c.). The music is in 4/4 time and G major. The vocal line (S. III) has lyrics: "Chri - ste. Chri - ste e - lei - son. e - lei -". The instrumental parts (VI III and B.c.) provide accompaniment.

Returning to our comparison of Bach's music with a baroque building, we see another similarity: the central position of this duet, expressing the concept of humanity's relationship to God, corresponds with a central theological idea of this time.

*Gloria in excelsis*

*Et in terra pax*

*Laudamus te*

*Gratias agimus*

*Domine Deus*

*Qui tollis*

*Qui sedes*

*Quoniam tu solus*

*Cum Sancto Spiritu*

The GLORIA consists of nine movements. Again, this section of the Mass is framed by two huge movements for choir and orchestra which in this case are stylistically equivalent. Both are inspired by instrumental concertos of the eighteenth century.<sup>28</sup> The first movement, ***Gloria in excelsis Deo***, even starts as an instrumental concerto, with the orchestra presenting the musical material before the voices develop this motivic material in a dense dialogue with the instruments. The jubilation of the angels is expressed by the use of trumpets and drums.

The last movement of the GLORIA, the ***Cum Sancto Spiritu***, has the same character, again a concerto, and again the sound is shaped by the use of trumpets and drums. These two side wings frame the rest of the GLORIA, which, as we will see, again revolves around a central piece.

The second movement is the ***Et in terra pax*** (And peace on earth). Since the text talks about people on earth, the human element, the voice, is emphasized by Bach. While in the ***Gloria in excelsis*** the music was shaped by musical material presented and developed by instruments in the long instrumental introduction, now the voices start in a quiet four-part setting without the instruments. Those only enter one measure later, using the motivic material of the vocal choir (see Example 5).



Interestingly, Bach not only parodies an older movement—something he does in many other pieces<sup>32</sup>—but the older cantata movement has nearly the same text as the movement in the Mass. “Gratias agimus tibi” and “Wir danken dir Gott” both mean “We thank you.”

Although we have no sources, very likely the music of the *Domine Deus* was taken from an earlier composition as well, perhaps from the now lost cantata *Ihr Häuser des Himmels* (BWV 193a) from 1727 (see Example 6).<sup>33</sup> It is a movement for a solo instrument, this time the flute, which begins a concerto-like dialogue with the orchestra, until soprano and tenor enter to engage with the instrumental soloist and the orchestra. With its many parallel thirds and sixths, the movement has again the character of a “love-duet,” like the *Christe eleison*; in both movements the text speaks directly to Jesus Christ. *Domine Deus* is similar to the *Christe* in another way: in both cases the love-duet is the central movement of a larger work.

Example 6

The image displays a musical score for Example 6, consisting of two systems of staves. The first system includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Violin I (VI. I), Violin II (VI. II), Viola (Vn.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (Ba.). The second system includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Violin I (VI. I), Violin II (VI. II), Viola (Vn.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (Ba.). The lyrics are: "Do - mi - ne Fi - li u - ni - ge - ni - te Do - mi - ne De - us Rex coe - le - stis." The score features various musical notations, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *pizz.* and *con sordino*.

The instrumentation of this movement is theologically very subtle. One might expect that the text “Domine Deus, Rex coelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens” would be set with a scoring that involves the trumpets, drums, and the whole choir, to express the power of God, Father and Son. The movement begins with a single flute, however, accompanied only by the basso continuo, and when the string instruments enter one measure later, they have to play *con sordino* (with the mute).

The soft sound does not fit the first part of the movement, “Domine Deus, Rex coelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens,” as much as its end, “Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.” The musical expression of this movement is thus developed with respect to the *theologia crucis* at the end of the text. In other words, the omnipotent God is understood as the very God who reveals himself on the cross. The Lutheran *theologia crucis* is expressed by means of the music. Martin Luther wrote in his "Heidelberg Disputation" of 1518:

He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross...Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross...A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.<sup>34</sup>

According to Luther, we only understand God when we see him revealed in the crucified Jesus Christ. In the seventeenth century the theological interpretation of the passion of Jesus Christ underwent a re-interpretation. The *theologia crucis* was still an integral part, but the love of God expressed in the passion was emphasized even more.<sup>35</sup> Thus the German theologian Heinrich Müller (1631-1675), one of the most influential preachers at that time, wrote in a sermon published in 1679:

The Apostle Paul admonishes his Timothy that he should always keep in mind Jesus, the crucified one....By this we recognize his love, that he gave his life for us when we were still his enemies. Thus it is proper that we repay his love with love. It is the character of love to keep always in mind what is loved. Whether walking or standing, love sees the beloved in thought. We who love the Lord Jesus should keep him in remembrance. The crucified Jesus is the only comfort for our souls.<sup>36</sup>

The cross is the sign for God's love for humanity, and our appropriate reaction is to answer this love with love.

The *Qui tollis*, a gloomy, harmonically rich movement that expresses the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ, is taken from the 1723 cantata *Schauet doch und sehet* (BWV 46). The cantata text stems from the Lamentations of Jeremiah 1:12: "Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me; herewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger." The text has thus a similar character of grief, and it was easy for Bach to adjust the music to the new text.<sup>37</sup>

This movement is followed by an intimate aria on the text Qui ***sedes ad dexteram Patris*** for alto, accompanied by solo oboe d'amore and strings. Most of the masses from the repertoire of the Dresden court, and Bach's own Kyrie-Gloria Masses (BWV 233-236), composed a short time before the B Minor Mass, treat the ***Qui tollis*** and the ***Qui sedes*** as one movement.<sup>38</sup> Here Bach splits up the text in order to give each its appropriate treatment. While the ***Qui tollis*** was mournful in tone, the ***Qui sedes*** has a dance-like character, celebrating the elevated Christ. It was Bach's biographer Philipp Spitta (1841-1894) who in 1870 interpreted this as resulting from theological reflection:

Here his theological learning...stood him in good stead. Doctrinal theology assigns to Christ a three-fold office—as Prophet, High Priest, and King.

The text offered no opening for treating the prophetic aspect—only the priestly and kingly. As, in considering Christ as a priest, there is again a distinction between Atonement and Mediation (*munus satisfactionis* and *intercessionis*), Bach has figured the former by the chorus *Qui tollis*, and the latter by the alto aria *Qui sedes*, but in close connection, for the key is the same in both.<sup>39</sup>

We may doubt that the dogma of the three-fold office formed the background of these two movements, since one of the offices is missing, and we have no evidence that Bach wanted to allude to this theological concept. But obviously Bach has built up a contrast between the suffering of Christ in the *Qui tollis*, and the elevated Christ, sitting next to his Father, in the following movement. Instead of the offices, the binary opposition of the two movements supports another thesis: here Bach is emphasizing the difference between the human nature of Christ, visible in his suffering, and the divine nature, expressed by his ascension and his sitting at the right hand of God the Father. This is of crucial importance in Martin Luther's theology. In his explanation of the second article of the Creed in his "Small Catechism," the reformer stated:

I believe that Jesus Christus, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity.<sup>40</sup>

I have already pointed out the importance of the *theologia crucis* for Luther's theological thinking, and how it might have shaped Bach's Mass. The dual nature of Christ is the precondition for humanity's salvation, and it is possible that Bach wanted to reflect this duality in his music, and in the structure of his Mass as well.

The GLORIA's second last movement is the ***Quoniam tu solus sanctus***, sung by the bass, and accompanied by the corno da caccia and two bassoons. This combination gives it a solemn character, corresponding with the text set in this section of the Mass, before the whole GLORIA ends with a concerto grosso-like movement, ***Cum Sancto Spiritu***, performed by the choir and full orchestra with trumpets, timpani, flutes, oboes, strings, bassoon, and basso continuo.

The architecture of this "building" is obvious: framed by the concerto-like side wings, and the other outer movements praising God, the central section speaks of the believer's relationship with God, which is—in the contemporary theology—a relationship of deepest love, rooted in Christ's suffering. And this love is expressed by a love duet.

With the ***Cum Sancto Spiritu***, the Mass Bach composed for the court in Dresden in 1733 ends. We do not know whether or not these pieces were ever performed in Dresden or in Leipzig.<sup>41</sup> It was nearly fifteen years before Bach began to complete his Mass cycle. When he returned to work on the Mass in the late 1740s, he again recycled several older cantata movements, and provided them with the Latin texts of the Mass.

***Credo in unum Deum  
 Patrem omnipotentem  
 Et in unum Dominum  
 Et incarnatus est  
 Crucifixus  
 Et resurrexit  
 Et in Spiritum Sanctum  
 Confiteor  
 Et expecto resurrectionem***

The introductory movement of the CREDO, ***Credo in unum Deum***, a polyphonic piece with a walking bass, was—according to recent research—composed about 1747/48, and might have served as a slow introduction to a Credo by another composer.<sup>42</sup> Only a short time later, however, Bach began to complete his Mass, and he used this movement in his own CREDO (see Example 7). The following ***Patrem omnipotentem*** is a parody of a movement composed in 1729, *Gott, wie dein Name, so ist auch dein Ruhm* (BWV 171).<sup>43</sup> To remodel this older piece was not difficult because the mood and the contents are similar: in both cases the power and might of God are praised.

Example 7

A.   
 T. Cre - do in u - num De - um in   
 B.   
 B.c. Cre - do in

A. Cre - do in u - num   
 T. u - num De - um in u - num De - um in u - num De - um in   
 B. do in u - num De - um in u - num De - um in   
 B.c.

Again, as in the KYRIE, Bach juxtaposes two musical styles, the *stile antico* in the introduction, and a modern, concerto-like texture in the ***Patrem omnipotentem***. This is a juxtaposition of old and new musical material as well: the *stile antico* movement is not only composed in an older musical technique, but Bach adopts an old Gregorian chant, a melody used in the Leipzig worship at Bach's time.

The beginning of this part of the Mass is mirrored at the end. The final movements are a piece in an old, motet style, with the text ***Confiteor unum baptisma***, and a modern, concerto-like movement, ***Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum***. Thus the CREDO starts with a couple of movements for choir in different styles, and it ends with the same combination of styles. But the connection between beginning and end is deeper. Both *stile antico* movements employ the same chant melody. This is obvious in the CREDO, since Bach uses it as the main musical idea in all the voices. In the ***Confiteor***, however, the melody of the Gregorian chant that was used in Leipzig for the words of the "Confiteor" is hidden in the lower voices and treated as a canon.<sup>44</sup>

These observations are still on a technical level. A third, theological connection exists between the beginning and the end of the CREDO. The two movements Bach composed in *stile antico* have a similar aspect: ***Credo***—I believe... ***Confiteor***—I confess. Both express the human reaction to the divine mystery: I believe and I confess.

These two side wings of the Credo-"palace" embrace seven single movements. Like the KYRIE and the GLORIA, the CREDO has a centerpiece as well, focused on a central theological idea. Here it is not a love-duet, but the text expresses the love between God and humanity in the most intense way: ***Crucifixus etiam pro nobis*** (Crucified for us). If we take into account that the *theologia crucis* was a cornerstone in Lutheran theology in the time of Bach, this choice is not surprising. The genesis of the CREDO makes clear how important this aspect was for Bach. In an earlier version he composed just eight movements, but when he reworked the piece he inserted a separate ***Et incarnatus est*** to make sure that the ***Crucifixus*** was indeed the middle of the whole CREDO.<sup>45</sup>

The ***Crucifixus*** is the oldest movement in the entire Mass. Bach composed it in 1714 in Weimar for the Cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* (BWV 12), and reworked it for his Mass. Some scholars have identified the repeated quarter notes in the bass of the ***Crucifixus*** as the hammering of the nails, and the flutes as drops of Christ's blood. But even without these metaphorical explanations, the movement, with a chromatic voice leading, dissonant harmonies, and a sigh-motive at the end of the word "crucifixus," reflects the text, telling the death and suffering of Jesus Christ, in an exemplary manner.

Although the centerpiece of the CREDO is not a love-duet, something similar is here as well. It is the third movement, ***Et in unum Dominum*** (And I believe in the one Lord, Jesus Christ). Again, devotion to Christ—and in contemporary theology that meant love—is expressed in a style close to a love-duet.

The centerpiece, ***Crucifixus***, is followed by the ***Resurrexit***, composed in the style of a concerto grosso. It musically "paints" the resurrection of Christ with ascending motifs. The adoration of the Holy Spirit (***Et in Spiritum Sanctum***) serves as a point of repose. It is a calm aria, sung by the bass and accompanied by two oboes d'amore, serving as a counterpart to the duet ***Et in unum Dominum***, and balancing the symmetric outline of the whole Creed: Choir-Choir — *Duet*— Choir-Choir-Choir — *Solo*— Choir-Choir

*Sanctus*  
*Osanna*  
*Benedictus*  
*Osanna*

While the **Sanctus** was already composed in 1724, the **Osanna**, **Benedictus**, and **Agnus Dei** were written at the same time as the CREDO in the late 1740s. The **Sanctus** employs a six-part choir, accompanied by trumpets, timpani, oboes, strings, and basso continuo. Thus the movement demands a slightly larger ensemble than the previous pieces, which used only up to five voices. One reason for this discrepancy is of course that Bach used a setting that already existed, but there might be a symbolic reason as well. The beginning of the liturgical "Sanctus" is taken from the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 6. It is the song of the celestial Seraphim which, according to this text, have six wings. The number of voices reflects this biblical number.

The following **Osanna** further expands the vocal forces. It is a polychoral concerto for two four-part choirs and instruments. It is quite certain that this movement is also based on an older model.

The **Benedictus** is an aria for a solo instrument, probably the flute, and tenor. Stylistically it is one of the most progressive parts in the Mass. The flexible rhythm of both voice and instrument, significantly different from the rather motoric and stereotypical rhythms of the other movements of the Mass, is influenced by the modern *Empfindsamer Stil* (sensitive style). It is as though Bach had wanted to prove his command of this style in the last aria of the Mass.

Bach completed this part of the Mass without having in mind the architectural plan that shaped the first parts of the composition. The symmetrical plan of the KYRIE, GLORIA, and CREDO, is absent here, and we have no love-duet. But Bach still tries to express the meaning and mood of the text in the music. The **Sanctus** and the **Osanna** are extroverted concerto movements, while the **Benedictus**—like similar movements in masses by Dresden composers—has a more intimate character.

*Agnus Dei*  
*Dona nobis pacem*

After a repetition of the **Osanna**, the **Agnus Dei** is performed by the alto, accompanied by violins. This movement, about the Lamb of God who died for the sins of the world, is a dialogue between voice and instruments that lacks the virtuoso character of earlier arias in this Mass. The death of Christ is a place for meditation, not for extroverted virtuosity. It is a parody of a now lost aria. Bach has taken the same aria as a model for his Ascension Oratorio (BWV 11), from 1735, where the text is "Ach bleibe doch, mein liebstes Leben" (Oh stay with me, my dearest life).<sup>46</sup> Both pieces have a lamenting tone and a pleading character, expressed by chromaticisms in the bass-line and leaps that expose dissonant intervals.

At the end of the whole Mass Bach repeats the *Gratias* from the GLORIA, now with the text *Dona nobis pacem*. He thus makes a connection between the older parts of the Mass and the newly composed ending.

### III.

The B Minor Mass is a showpiece in several respects. At least a third of the twenty-seven movements are taken from earlier compositions (see the table below), but Bach is very careful in the way he reuses the older pieces. He never takes two movements from one model, as he does in several cantatas, his Christmas Oratorio, and his smaller Kyrie-Gloria Masses. Furthermore, in several cases Bach parodies movements in the B Minor Mass that had nearly the same text in the original version as in Latin. He tries to keep the relationship between music and words as close as possible.

Another important point to note is how Bach combines the newer and older parts of the Mass. In the KYRIE, GLORIA, and CREDO he creates a symmetric architectural form that is framed by vocal-instrumental movements and has a Christological section as centerpiece. The movements of the Mass might have their own history, but the way Bach combines them is unique and new.

To know the history of the piece, the different steps of its genesis, is useful, but that does not describe the artwork as it is now. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. I started this essay with some remarks on commercials. Bach composed the first half of the Mass when applying for the title of court composer in Dresden. In order to support his application he employed several stylistic devices he knew from masses in Dresden. But he did not simply imitate them. He combined these devices with his own musical language, his Lutheran theology, and his own sense of musical architecture. He was not successful. Nägeli, despite his advertising campaign, was not successful when he tried to publish the piece at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Is Bach's Mass in B Minor the greatest artwork of all times and all people? A commercial would have to say, "Yes, it is." I'm not going to answer that question. Music is not about better, faster, louder. Listen to the piece yourself; try to hear how Bach builds his baroque palace, his musical Versailles.

## MODELS AND PARODIES IN BACH'S B-MINOR MASS

Models	Date	B-Minor Mass
	1733	1.1. Kyrie eleison
		1.2. Christe eleison
		1.3. Kyrie eleison
		1.4. Gloria
		1.5. Et in terra pax
		1.6. Laudamus te
29/2: Wir danken dir Gott, wir danken dir (1731)		1.7. Gratias agimus tibi
[193a/5: Ihr Häuser des Himmels, ihr scheinenden Lichter (1727)]		1.8. Domine Deus
46/1: Schauet doch und sehet, ob irgend ein Schmerz sei (1723)		1.9. Qui tollis
		1.10. Qui sedes
		1.11. Quoniam tu solus sanctus
		1.12. Cum Sancto Spiritu
[earlier version about 1747/48]	1748/1749	2.1. Credo
171/1: Gott, wie dein Name, so ist auch dein Ruhm (1729)		2.2. Patrem omnipotentem
		2.3. Et in unum Dominum
		2.4. Et incarnatus
12/2: Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen (1714)		2.5. Crucifixus
Anh. I 9/1: Entfernet euch ihr heitern Sterne (1727)		2.6. Et resurrexit
		2.7. Et in Spiritum sanctum
		2.8. Confiteor
120/2: Gott, man lobt dich in der Stille (1729)		2.9. Et expecto
	1725	3. Sanctus
Anh. I 11/1: Es lebe der König, der Vater im Lande (1732)	1748/1749	4.1. Osanna in excelsis
		4.2. Benedictus
		4.3. Osanna [=IV.1.]
Anh. I 196/3: Auf, süß entzückende Gewalt (1725)		4.4. Agnus Dei
		4.5. Dona nobis pacem [=1.7.]

## ENDNOTES

*The lecture was originally followed by a performance of Bach's B Minor Mass, given by the Yale Camerata and conducted by Marguerite Brooks. This published version of the talk maintains the lecture's introductory character. It appeared originally on the website of the Yale Institute for Sacred Music's "Colloquium Journal," and has been adapted for Flash presentation on this site by permission of the Author, Markus Rathey (copyright © 2003, Markus Rathey).*

1. A short survey on Nägeli and his commitment to Bach's music is given by Karen Lehmann: "Nägeli, Hans Georg," in *Das Bach-Lexikon: Bach-Handbuch 6*, ed. Michael Heinemann (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2000), 382-83.

2. George B. Stauffer, *Bach: The Mass in B Minor: The Great Catholic Mass* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 2003), IX.

3. See Walter Blankenburg, *Einführung in Bachs h-moll-Messe*, 5th ed. (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1996), 16-18.
4. Samuel J. Rogal, "For the Love of Bach: The Charles Burney-Samuel Wesley Correspondence." *Bach* 23 (1992): 31-37; and Michael Kassler, Philip Olleson, *Samuel Wesley (1766-1837): A Source Book* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).
5. See Stauffer, *Bach*, 190.
6. See Klaus Engler, *Georg Poelchau und seine Musikaliensammlung: Ein Beitrag zur Überlieferung Bachschen Musik in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Ph.D. diss., University of Tübingen, 1974.
7. See Stauffer, *Bach*, 190.
8. Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: Norton, 2000), 471.
9. This is true, for example, of an edition of Bach's smaller Masses in A major (BWV 234) from 1818 and G Major (BWV 236) from 1828, both edited by Poelchau; they were not intended as enrichments of the repertoire of liturgical music but as compositional models.
10. See Karen Lehmann, *Die Anfänge einer Bach-Gesamtausgabe: Editionen der Klavierwerke durch Hoffmeister und Kühnel (Bureau de Musique) und C.F. Peters in Leipzig 1801-1865: Ein Beitrag zur Wirkungsgeschichte J.S. Bachs*. Leipziger Beiträge zur Bach-Forschung 6 (Hildesheim: Olms, 2004), passim, and Markus Rathey, "Bach-Renaissance, Protestantismus und nationale Identität im deutschen Bürgertum des 19. Jahrhunderts," in *Protestantische Identität und Erinnerung: Von der Reformation bis zur Bürgerrechtsbewegung in der DDR. Formen der Erinnerung* 16, ed. Joachim Eibach and Marcus Sandl (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 177-90.
11. See Martin Geck, *Die Wiederentdeckung der Matthäuspassion im 19. Jahrhundert: Die zeitgenössischen Dokumente und ihre ideengeschichtliche Deutung. Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* 9 (Regensburg: Bosse, 1967).
12. The piece was performed by Karl Riedel and the Riedel-Verein, Leipzig; see Gerhard Herz, "The Performance History of Bach's B minor Mass." *Studies in Musicology* 73 (1985): 202.
13. In a letter of 1730 to his friend Georg Erdmann, who was at this time Imperial Russian Residence agent in Danzig, Bach complained about his situation in Leipzig, and asked if he could find him a decent position. The whole text is published in *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, ed. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, revised and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York: Norton, 1998), 151-52.
14. *The New Bach Reader*, 158.
15. Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, 371.

16. *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 41-45.
17. See Blankenburg, *Einführung* (note 3), 59.
18. Rolf Dammann, *Der Musikbegriff im deutschen Barock*, 2d ed. (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1984), 80-86.
19. See Nors S. Josephson. "Formale Symmetrie und freizyklische Gesamtstruktur in einigen Vokalkompositionen Johann Sebastian Bachs." *Jahrbuch des Staatlichen Instituts für Musikforschung* 2000: 150-74; and Werner Breig. "Bemerkungen zur zyklischen Symmetrie in Bachs Leipziger Kirchenmusik." *Musik und Kirche* 53 (1983): 173-79.
20. See Christoph Wolff, *Der stile antico in der Musik Johann Sebastian Bachs: Studien zu Bachs Spätwerk*. Archiv für Musikwissenschaft, Beihefte 6. (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1968).
21. Wolfgang Horn. *Die Dresdner Hofkirchenmusik 1720-1745: Studien zu ihren Voraussetzungen und ihrem Repertoire* (Kassel/Basel: Bärenreiter; Stuttgart: Carus, 1987), 97-99, 150-53.
22. Christoph Wolff has pointed out this similarity in his article "Origins of the Kyrie in the B Minor Mass," in *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 141-51.
23. Kirsten Beisswenger, *Johann Sebastian Bachs Notenbibliothek. Catalogus Musicus* 13 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1992), 322-23, and "Bachs Eingriffe in Werke fremder Komponisten. Beobachtungen an den Notenhandschriften aus seiner Bibliothek unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der lateinischen Kirchenmusik." *Bach Jahrbuch* 77 (1991): 127-58.
24. On Bach's knowledge of the opera see Wolfgang Osthoff. "Bach und die Oper," in *Festschrift Heinz Becker zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Jürgen Schläder and Reinhold Quandt (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1982), 38-55; and Georg von Dadelsen. "Wenn Bach Opern geschrieben hätte," in *Johann Sebastian Bachs Spätwerk und dessen Umfeld* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1988), 177-83.
25. Stauffer, *Bach* (note 2), 57.
26. Regarding Bach's use of duets in his sacred music see the overview by Mary J. Greer, *The Sacred Duets and Terzets of Johann Sebastian Bach: A Study of Genre and Musical Text Interpretation*. Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1996.
27. See the description of the piece in Greer, 298-302.
28. John Butt, *Bach: Mass in B Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 60-69. A more critical position on Bach's use of concerto-form in his vocal music was recently taken by Miriam K. Whaples in "Bach's Recapitulation Forms." *Journal of Musicology* 14 (1996): 475-513.

29. See Robert L. Marshall, "Bach the Progressive: Observations on His Later Works." *Musical Quarterly* 62 (1976): 341; and Stauffer, *Bach*, 72.
30. Quoted by Charles Burney in *A General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present* (London 1776-1789; reprint, ed. Frank Mercer, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935). 2:736-37.
31. See Alfred Dürr. *Die Kantaten von Johann Sebastian Bach*, 6th ed. (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1995), 808-11.
32. Regarding Bach's parody-technique see Hans-Joachim Schulze. "The Parody Process in Bach's Music: An Old Problem Reconsidered." *Bach* 20 (1989): 7-21.
33. Only the text of this cantata has come down to us, but Klaus Häfner has convincingly argued that the common structure of the texts of the Domine Deus and the duet Ich will/Du sollst rühmen points to a relationship between these two pieces. See Häfner, "Über die Herkunft von zwei Sätzen der h-moll-Messe." *Bach-Jahrbuch* 63 (1977): 56-64.
34. Martin Luther. "Heidelberg Disputation (1518)," in *Martin Luther: Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 43-44; see Jos E. Vercreyse, "Luther's Theology of the Cross at the time of the Heidelberg Disputation." *Gregorianum* 57 (1976): 523-48.
35. See Elke Axmacher, *Johann Arndt und Paul Gerhardt: Studien zur Theologie, Frömmigkeit und geistlichen Dichtung des 17. Jahrhunderts*. Mainzer hymnologische Studien 3 (Tübingen/Basel: Francke, 2001), 217-20.
36. "Der Apostel Paulus vermahnet seinen Thimotheum / dass er stets solle im Gedächtniss tragen Jesum / den Gecreutzigten. [...] Daran erkennen wir seine Liebe / dass er sein Leben hat für uns gelassen / uns zwar / da wir seine Feinde waren. So ists je billich / dass wir Liebe mit Liebe vergelten. Das ist aber der Liebe Art / dass sie das Geliebte stets trage im Gedächtniss. Wie sie gehet und stehet / da erbildet sich das Geliebte in ihren Gedancken. Die wir den HErrn Jesum lieben / sollen ihn auch stets im Gedächtniss tragen. Der gecreutzigte Jesus ist der einzige wahre Trost unserer Seelen" [translated by MR]. Heinrich Müller, "Der Leidende Jesus / Oder Das Leiden unsers Herrn und Heylandes Jesu Christi," in *Evangelischer Hertzens=Spiegel / In Öffentlicher Kirchen=Versammlung / bey Erklärung der Sonntäglichen und Fest=Evangelien / Nebst beygefügtten Passions=Predigten* (Frankfurt: Wust, 1679), 981, quoted by Renate Steiger, "Vom Sieg Singen - den Frieden austeilen. Die Kantate 'Halt im Gedächtnis Jesum Christ' BWV 67 auf den Sonntag nach Ostern." in *Gnadengegenwart. Johann Sebastian Bach im Kontext lutherischer Orthodoxie und Frömmigkeit. Doctrina et Pietas II/2* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2001), 6.
37. See Stauffer, *Bach* (note 2), 82-83 regarding the changes Bach made.
38. See Stauffer, *Bach*, 85.
39. Philipp Spitta. *Johann Sebastian Bach: His Music and Influence on the Music of Germany, 1685-1750*, trans. Clara Bell and J. A. Fuller-Maitland (London: Novello, 1889;

reprint, New York: Dover, 1979), 3:50.

40. Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism," in *Basic Theological Writings*, 480.

41. Regarding putative performances in Leipzig or Dresden see Stauffer, *Bach*, 34-37.

42. Peter Wollny, "Ein Quellenfund zur Entstehung der h-Moll-Messe." *Bach-Jahrbuch* 80 (1994): 163-69.

43. It is possible that the cantata was composed in the following years; see Dürr, *Die Kantaten* (note 31), 188.

44. See Blankenburg, *Einführung*, 85-87; and Stauffer, *Bach*, 131-35.

45. Eduard van Hengel and Kees van Houten have recently contradicted this assumption and proposed that the Et incarnatus was not added but was already a part of Bach's original version: "'Et incarnatus': An Afterthought? Against the 'Revisionist' View of Bach's B-Minor Mass." *Journal of Musicological Research* 23 (2004): 81-112.

46. Christoph Wolff, "The Agnus Dei of the B Minor Mass: Parody and New Composition Reconciled," in *Bach. Essays on his Life and Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 332-39.

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