

The Mass in B Minor as a Musical Icon

A Viewpoint for Performers and Listeners

by Tim Smith¹

digitalbach.com/cuepoints

Introduction

Johann Sebastian Bach loved God with all of his heart, soul, and mind. This commitment guided him through times of disappointment and disagreement with his employers. It also sustained him through many seasons of suffering, the likes of which you and I should hope never to know. Both of his parents died when he was ten. In his mid thirties, his wife and mother of seven children died (three having already passed). Only six of the thirteen children of his second marriage would live to adulthood. Through all of this, he remained a man of few words and said practically nothing about himself or his feelings. Yet, through his musical voice he expresses thoughts and emotions on a scale that very nearly speaks for all mankind. In his music, he can express simple sadness or profound pathos. But more often we hear a great joy, humor, and zest for life. We also hear the heartbeat of one possessed of profound reverence and devotion. In his Mass in B Minor, we hear all of these feelings and emotions and more, yet it is his reverence and his devotion to God that binds his artistic testament together.

The first glimpse that the world would see of this Mass was in 1733 when Bach dedicated the KYRIE and GLORIA to Friedrich August II, Elector of Saxony, a man who had converted to the Roman faith so that he might assume the throne of Poland. Over the next fifteen years Bach expanded this *Missa Brevis*, borrowing musical excerpts mostly from his German cantatas and adapting them to fit the Latin text of the mass, resulting in a complete setting of the mass Ordinary. Bach did this knowing that the work would never see performance

¹ This lecture was delivered at Ball State University in conjunction with a performance of the B-Minor Mass by the University Singers in 1995. It is presented here with slight revision: copyright © 1995, 2011, Timothy A. Smith.

during his lifetime. So, in terms of its origin, the B-Minor Mass is an enigma--a Latin work by a Protestant that is impracticable in both the Roman and Lutheran liturgies.

What can one say in a short essay that might contribute in some small way to a meaningful performance of the Mass in B Minor? Here, I approach Bach's Mass as an icon. While the B-Minor Mass is certainly a great work of art, I believe that Bach's architecture for it and his compositional approach to it require that we approach it not merely as art, but as an icon--a religious object crafted for the purpose of divine worship and instruction. In the words of Christoph Wolff, the composer himself saw his Mass as "the supreme opportunity to unite his creed as a Christian with his creed as a musician in a single statement."²

By icon I do not mean that twaddling sense in which the word has come to be used of late. I use the word, rather, in its historical sense, especially as it is represented in one of the richest and most varied traditions in art history, that of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. We have all seen these icons, with their wide eyes, tilted heads, halos, vivid colors, and piously folded hands. I am talking about a type of art expressive of a people capable of devotion so profound as to be nearly incomprehensible to the western mind today. Of course the icon is art, as is the Mass in B Minor. But the icon is *liturgical art*, which means that it exists to enact a particular community's view of reality and its commitment to the same.³ So let us be very clear about the difference between art that is iconographic and that which is not.

The British writer, C. S. Lewis, wrote: "We read to know that we are not alone." This, I think, is a very good starting place for why we do any art. We agonize through Schindler's List and laugh through Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, we contemplate Rodin's Thinker, admire the youthful strength and idealism of Michelangelo's David, marvel before Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise,

² From the liner notes to the John Eliot Gardiner recording of the B-Minor Mass (Archiv).

³ Frank Senn (*Christian Liturgy*, 1997) outlines the essential elements of the liturgy as the public enactment of a particular community's values and commitment. The Greek root emphasizes the public nature, meaning the actions of a community and not the individual.

and experience reverence when gazing up to Leonardo's Last Supper, to know that we are not alone. We revel in the ecstatic sensuality of Renoir's Diana, and dawdle with Debussy's faun through the first warm afternoon in spring, to know that we are not alone. We shrink in horror as we approach the lower regions of Dante's *Inferno* and hear the shriek of Penderecki's *Threnody* to know that we are not alone. This is what art is and this is why we do it, and this is certainly reason enough to perform the Mass in B Minor.

The Icon is Incarnational

But if the purpose of art is to know that we are not alone, the purpose of the icon is to assure us that God is with us--for the icon is first and foremost, incarnational. This word, "incarnation," refers to the Christian belief that the Son of God, who was conceived in the womb of Mary and was crucified by the Roman Procurator, Pontius Pilate, in the first century AD, is both true God and true man. The icon exists to proclaim the presence of Emmanuel, which means "God with us." St. John of Damascus affirms the purpose of the icon:

God who has no body, nor form or limits could not, in the past, be represented. But now that He has come in the flesh and has dwelt among men, you can paint on wood and present for contemplation Him who desired to be visible.

C. S. Lewis's purpose for art--to know that we are not alone--and St. John of Damascus's purpose for icons--to know that God is with us--both stand in stark contrast to the existentialist philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre and others of our own time who portray mankind as very much alone and adrift in a meaningless universe, without God, but with a terrifying freedom to choose. The purpose of the icon, in particular, has been to say exactly the opposite, that the Creator did not leave creation alone, to its own devices, but that the Creator is active, involved, concerned, and full of love for his people. The incarnation of God is, therefore, the central belief of Christendom, where it is seen not only as the most

important event in history but also as a great mystery beyond human ability to explain, or even to comprehend. In the ***Et incarnatus est***, Bach expresses this mystery in a series of falling triads that represent the Holy Spirit of God descending upon Mary, highly favored among women, Mother of God in the flesh.

The doctrine of the incarnation had important ramifications for early Christian artists, especially in the Orthodox tradition. First it affirmed the goodness of all creation. Contrary to the teachings of Greek philosophers who saw the physical world as a corruption of the spiritual, Christians reasoned that if God, who is a spirit, would reveal himself, perfectly, in physical form, the physical world must be capable of expressing basic spiritual truths.

The Creed produced at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD is the source of the third part of the mass, the CREDO. Coincidentally, in 787 the Church Fathers convened again at Nicea, now allowing that artists could represent God in ways that were symbolic. This led the church, particularly the Byzantines, to produce a type of art that emphasized spiritual expression rather than naturalism. Visual artists were compelled to walk a fine line between artistic realism and the breaking of the second commandment, which prohibits the making of images.

Whereas in the western tradition the elements of art--line, shape, color, movement, form--were calculated to be beautiful (a Madonna might be, for example, a literal representation of the artist's mistress), in the eastern icon, these elements were intended to invoke the presence of God. Shapes, hand positions, facial expressions, materials, and forms all meant something. Not only did they mean something, they came to be seen as physical manifestations of the presence of God in his people and in creation. As such, the icon was not merely an art object, but a spiritual artifact, a relic, worthy of profound respect and veneration.

The incarnational view of art in eastern orthodoxy finds a natural ally, musically, in the eighteenth-century doctrine of the affections. According to this doctrine, music is not about joy, sadness, love, etc., it is the physical embodiment

of the same. Nicolaus Harnoncourt describes, for example how instrumentation was governed by proportion theory.⁴ Those instruments capable of playing only the natural tones of the harmonic series--trumpets, horns, etc.--were accorded a special place as physical manifestations of God or the highest royal personages. This belief, that the work of art is not merely *about* spiritual truth, but *embodies* that truth in physical form, is illustrated in Bach's Mass by his use of the natural horn to set the words, "Quoniam tu solus Sanctus" (Thou alone, O Jesus Christ, art God, the most high).

While the ***Quoniam*** uses the horn to signify the divinity of Jesus, in the second ***Kyrie, Et incarnatus***, and ***Crucifixus***, Bach employs a changing-tone motif to represent Christ and his cross. A study of this melody could easily occupy a complete essay; suffice it to say that Bach sometimes used it in his cantatas and passion music in conjunction with the word *Kreuz* (cross) or *Christus* (Christ). Not only does he use this motif, but also he often substitutes the Greek letter *chi* (χ) an early Christian symbol for Christ or the cross--for those same words. In this site, Helmuth Rilling calls the motif a "lying cross," and by superimposing the motif upon key words and phrases of the mass, Bach's preaching interest is plain. Immediately recognizable as the melodic shape of the cross, the first four pitches of the ***Kyrie II*** imply that the Lord granting mercy in the third movement is the same Lord suspended from the cross of the ***Crucifixus***.

The Icon is Mystical

Earlier I mentioned the doctrine of the incarnation of God as one that Christians believe but cannot explain, rationally. It is a mystery, and as such represents a belief that the ways and the being of God are transcendent; the Creator cannot be limited by that which he created. The one who made space and time is not limited by space and time; the one who made the laws governing

⁴ Harnoncourt, *Baroque Today: Music As Speech* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1982) p. 62.

the cosmos is not limited by those laws. If God is transcendent then there are spiritual realities, not apparent to the senses, which, though they are real and relevant, are unintelligible using ordinary rationalistic means. The means of perception is faith, a type of knowing that is perhaps best expressed by the words: "Lord, I believe; help Thou my unbelief."

Transcendence manifests itself, iconographically, in a type of art that is full of allusions to spiritual realities that exceed one's immediate comprehension of the artwork itself. The icon makes these allusions, but the eye does not perceive them or their significance without profound contemplation. The second *Kyrie* of Bach's Mass contains such an allusion. In an apparent reference to himself, Bach's single statement of the subject in B Minor contains fourteen pitches and the sum of those pitches is forty-one (the numbers 14 and 41 being the sums of B+A+C+H and J+S+B+A+C+H respectively). Likewise possibly referring to himself, Bach follows the cross motive of the *Crucifixus* (variation 10) with the musical equivalent of his own name, inverted. These self-references can be likened to the custom of eighteenth-century religious artists of painting themselves into the picture as mystical expressions of their own appropriation of spiritual realities being represented.⁵ When Bach does this, it is always a gesture of humility, not pride.

One of the more mystical expressions of Bach's Mass is found in the *Patrem Omnipotentem* of the CREDO. In the *Patrem*, Bach restates the phrase "Credo in unum Deum," which he had already set in the *Credo*. The apparent reason was to produce a total of 14 words and 84 letters in this particular movement.

⁵ When Lucas Cranach the Elder constructed his altarpiece for the Stadtkirche in Weimar, the city of Bach's first and third appointments, his crucifixion exceeded the pro forma representations of his day by its inclusion of three figures. To one side John the Baptist points to Christ. The second figure is Martin Luther, who points in his Bible to I John 1:7, "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." The third figure is the artist himself, who, in Robin Leaver's words, "is depicted as personally receiving the benefits of the cross by the thin stream of blood that arcs across the painting from the Savior's side onto Cranach's head" [Leaver, *Bach as Preacher* p. 26].

*Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem,
factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium.*

I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker
of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

We've considered the significance of 14, but what about 84, a number that, incidentally, Bach wrote beneath the last measure. Well, there are 84 measures in the movement--but was the composer merely counting measures? The eminent Bach scholar, Friedrich Smend, says no, the number 84 has mystical significance as it relates to the creation ("factorem") of heaven and earth ("coeli et terrae").

Smend proposed that this text had special significance for Bach, a "maker of music," in that it refers to God as "Maker of all things." As one who had studied the Greek language himself, Bach was surely aware, like Marthaler, that, "The Greek term used in the Nicene Creed for 'Maker' is *poiēten*--a cognate of our word 'poet,' but closer in meaning to the English word 'artist'."⁶ Bach's mystical intent here may have been to imply that he as an artist has shaped, formed, and brought into being, sounds illustrative of the very processes that God used to form the cosmos--processes involving the imposition of design and the giving of order to that which was chaotic and formless.

The Icon is Didactic

A third characteristic of the icon is that it is didactic; its purpose is to teach the faithful what God is like. While the mass text itself is exceedingly didactic, Bach does some powerful things, musically, to reinforce these in ways that words alone cannot. In the *Et in unum Dominum* of the CREDO, for example, the alto's line is continuously generated, in canonic imitation, from that of the soprano. This canon "teaches" not just the Creed's words, "genitum non factum" (begotten, not created), but also the words of Jesus: "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the

⁶ Marthaler, *The Creed* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1970) pp. 55-56.

Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19). Underlying this movement is the doctrine of the dual nature of Christ, one with God, yet fully human. As a sign of this duality, Bach does not allow the canonic follower to engage in unthinking mimicry, but gives it some independence. Yet, in its continuously mutating time and pitch intervals, the canon follower (Christ) is audibly generated by the leader (the Father), and always doing the Father's will.

Four of the five parts to the Mass Ordinary--KYRIE, GLORIA, CREDO, and AGNUS DEI--are structured in three sections: the first section addressed to God the Father, the second to God the Son, and the third to God the Holy Spirit. The first five lines of the GLORIA, for example, glorify the Father; the next few lines glorify the Son, while the last line glorifies the Holy Spirit. The first demarcation--that is, between the first and second persons of the Trinity--comes in the middle of Bach's duet for soprano and tenor: **Domine Deus**. The first sentence addresses God the Father, while the second sentence addresses God the Son.

Later composers would often separate these ideas into two movements. But not Bach. He not only combines them, but also causes the soprano to sing to one person of the Trinity while the tenor *simultaneously* sings to the other. The two sentences are continuously intermingled to exemplify the indivisibility of the Holy Trinity. Such intermixture of lines of text was frowned upon during the last year of the General Council of Trent (1545-1563), and would later be prohibited by Papal decree. The reasoning of the Church was that it renders text unintelligible, therefore inappropriate for liturgical use. With Bach, however, the mixture is a didactic elaboration of Jesus' words: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

The Icon is Dramatic

In its statuary, Stations of the Cross, frescoed ceilings, and stained glass windows, the iconographic art of the church tells the story of its Savior, apostles, prophets, martyrs, and saints. This brings us to the last, and most important, function of the icon--namely, to lead people into the presence of Almighty God. The **Sanctus** of Bach's Mass leads us into the presence of God in a

preponderance of sixes (meter signature, choral parts, etc.). These sixes remind us of the prophet Isaiah's encounter with God in chapter six of his prophecy:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

These seraphs must have been awesome creatures, for Isaiah continues:

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe is me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

The message of Isaiah's encounter is that before one can come into the presence of God, one's sins must have been forgiven. This is the starting point for the drama of Bach's Mass, as the suppliant pleads "Lord, have mercy" in the opening *Kyrie*. Fittingly, these are the oldest words of the Christian liturgy--and the only part to survive from the original Greek.

But for there to be mercy there must be atonement--someone must pay the price. The words of the mass identify this one as God's own son: the "Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi" (Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world). Jesus' crucifixion becomes, then, the center of this drama, and Bach shows this, musically, by placing the *Crucifixus* squarely between the only two movements where musical material is repeated: the *Gratias* (we give thanks to thee for thy great glory) and the *Dona Nobis Pacem* (grant us thy peace). Do not think for a moment that Bach ran out of ideas here. He repeats the music of the *Gratias* in order to dramatize the centrality of the cross in the Christian gospel. This type of

emphasis, known in eighteenth-century rhetoric as *chiasmus*, is another symbol of the cross. Bach uses it here to focus attention upon what falls precisely between the analogous sections--what Friedrich Smend called the *Herzstück*. The *Herzstück* of Bach's Mass in B Minor, and the center of this drama, is his setting of the ***Crucifixus***.

Conclusion

I conclude with rumination on the problem of iconographic art in our secular society, especially in its public universities. I doubt if there is one of us here who does not feel at least somewhat uncomfortable with the discussion of liturgical art in the context we find ourselves. This discomfort traces perhaps to a desire not to offend, not to use public resources to endorse religious beliefs, or even a desire not to be confronted with the iconographic claims of the artwork itself.

These legitimate concerns often manifest themselves in the tearing down of the icon, representation of the artwork phenomenologically to the exclusion of its iconographic function. The Mass in B Minor is most often studied, for example, in the following ways: **formalistically**--how does Bach use melody, harmony, counterpoint, form, timbre?; **affectively**--what feelings, moods or emotions are produced in the listener?; **genetically**--what were the circumstances of its creation?; or **generically**--how does Bach's Mass compare with other masses? While these questions are certainly important, their answers represent, at best, a superficial encounter when compared with questions like, "What does this icon say about us, our hopes, our despairs, our joys, aspirations, and failings--what does this icon have to say about the purpose and meaning of life?" What does the icon have to say about God?

Certain Byzantines of the eighth and ninth centuries preached that art is powerless to say anything about God--that artistic representations of God, the apostles, prophets, saints, and martyrs, are dangerous because they lead people into idolatry--the breaking of the second commandment. These people ranged throughout Asia Minor tearing down icons, and it is from them that we get our

word "iconoclast," meaning one who attacks and seeks to overthrow traditional or popular ideas or institutions.

Is it possible that the discomfort to which I have alluded is the result of Byzantine tendencies like those of the iconoclasts? I am simply asking a question. Are we seeing today, in the upturned nativity scenes and menorahs of our public schools, parks and courthouses, a species of iconoclasm not unlike that perpetrated in Asia Minor one thousand years ago? Instead of the Church, is it now the State that destroys icons for fear of breaking it's own commandment: "Thou shalt separate the church from the state."

I hope that, as artists, we can agree that to deny the essentially spiritual essence of much of western art does violence to that art, and to the human spirit. American poet laureate, Robert Frost, wrote: "Every time a poem is written, it is written not by cunning, but by belief." Frost's observation makes me wonder, when we as educators and art consumers allow art to be shorn of belief, does not this leave us with mere cunning. And while cunning does certainly energize the intellect, does it not leave the spirit cold? While the B-Minor Mass contains exquisitely beautiful melodies, wonderful fugues, choruses in the stile antico, and brilliant concerted music--i.e. cunning--is this not somehow missing the point?

The French impressionist painter and sculptor, Pierre Auguste Renoir, wrote that, "painting done for a community was possible when painters and community shared the same vision of the world." I suspect that the iconoclasm of the latter 20th century is producing a society that shares no vision--does nothing together except pay its income taxes by April 15. Such iconoclasm, when applied to the arts, would have us see in Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" nothing more than two male figures, one robed and the other not. But the icon would have us see God, his eyes intensely focused upon Adam, full of energy, reaching out to his creation, active, involved, interested--while Adam, in a daze, with his back toward God, reaches out with limp wrists and half-turned head, barely aware of what is happening to him. The iconoclast would have us hear in Bach's Mass in B Minor

only beautiful sounds, but the icon would have us hear the voice of God, himself, saying: "Be not afraid, for lo, I am with you always."