

Assembly of the Mass

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The first hint of what we now call the "Mass in B Minor" came in 1733. February of that year saw the death of Augustus "the Strong," King of Poland and Elector of Saxony. Augustus was Bach's fellow Saxon, and Lutheran, who had become Catholic in order to assume the throne of Poland.

Upon the King's death, a period of mourning followed, during which no music was allowed. Bach stopped composing his weekly cantatas to begin work on a Latin *Missa Brevis*, or "short mass," consisting of a KYRIE in three movements and GLORIA in nine (lime green, right). The KYRIE may have been written to lament the King's death, and the GLORIA to celebrate the accession of his son.

The son, Augustus III, would maintain equilibrium between Catholic Poland and Lutheran Saxony. The center of this peace was Dresden, where a creative atmosphere was cultivated between musicians of both faiths. Bach's *Missa Brevis* was liturgically appropriate in both, and in July of 1733 he set off for Dresden to present the new King with a copy.

While there, the work was freshly copied on Dresden paper by Johann Sebastian, Anna Magdalena, and two of their sons, Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel. This copy, now known as the "Dresden Parts," benchmarks the beginning of the Mass in B Minor.

The dark orchid (right) identifies subsequent additions. We don't know when Bach conceived the idea of expanding the *Missa Brevis* to include a CREDO, SANCTUS, and AGNUS DEI. But we do know that the actual assembly occurred late in his life, probably after 1746. As in the short mass, the additions included

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borrowed movements from earlier works that had been composed without any thought of incorporation into a *Missa Tota*.

It has been observed that Latin settings of the KYRIE and GLORIA (the movements in green) were acceptable to both Lutherans and Catholics. But a similar setting of the remainder was "ordinary" only in the Roman rite. This is why Carl Philipp Emanuel called his father's work "the Great Catholic Mass." While the decision to complement the *Missa Brevis* of 1733 may have been ecumenical, it also represents the summation of Bach's choral repertoire in accord with compositional tradition.

Bach's composition, adaptation, and assembly of the Mass over the span of more than three decades has led some to conclude that he did not envision its performance as a whole. This may be true. It is nonetheless true that the process, *however* evolved, produced a work that is supremely coherent and satisfying in the whole.

Often taken for granted in this discussion is the very idea of a mass on such a grand scale, now understood to be the product of Bach's fertile imagination alone. The Mass in B Minor is not just his only complete setting of the mass ordinary, it is one that out scales every mass before it, setting a high standard for the great works of the nineteenth century and beyond.