

## ***The B Minor Mass: Bach's Crowning Achievement***

My teacher and friend, Helmuth Rilling, was the first person in the world to have recorded all of the choral music of J. S. Bach. Amazingly, he has committed the entire Bach oeuvre to memory and conducts it all from memory and has taught many – most (?) – of the world's leading conductors of Bach. In his writings on Bach he notes:

Johann Sebastian Bach's *B Minor Mass* occupies a special place in his life's work. It belongs to the group of works that he sorted through, revised and assembled into collections in the final year of his life. Whereas at that time he merely corrected those works already completed [...] Bach formulated his *Mass* from the ground up. Though he was able to make use of the Kyrie and Gloria of 1733 and the Sanctus of 1724, the remaining sections of the Mass had to be newly conceived.

For some of the new movements Bach needed, he availed himself of works from earlier creative periods and transformed them into *Mass* movements. Since, despite his consummate *parody* technique [musical "*parody*" is the transformation of an existing melody or composition into a new, similar one], he did not take all of the *Mass* movements from previously existing works, the newly composed portions assume a special significance: they are in all probability Bach's last compositions to sacred texts. [...]

Bach's *B Minor Mass* is the summation and culmination of his life's work. With the supreme command of vocal and instrumental compositional techniques that he had developed over his lifetime and the absence of the urgency of an impending performance, Bach was prepared to come face to face with the awesome task of dealing with the central tenets of the Christian faith.

It is remarkable that the overall shape of the *B Minor Mass* is in fact so coherent. Because Bach set out to construct a comprehensive, all-encompassing composition of monumental proportions, he chose to use every possible form and style of musical composition available to him. In the hands of a lesser composer, this abundance of styles and materials would have almost certainly led to disaster. In the hands of Bach, it has led to a work universally considered to be one of the most important achievements of Western Civilization.

Bach finds musical symbolism irresistible. Examples abound and may be found in the choice of large forms as well as individual phrases and melodies. For example, a creed is a statement of faith. When Bach set the Creed in the *Mass*, he used three distinct musical devices to emphatically show that, for him, the creed that he was setting was *the Creed* by which one should live his/her life. First of all he used the plainchant melody used in his home church in Leipzig to associate the creed with church. Second, he used a walking bass line throughout the opening movement. A "walking bass line" is one that moves by all steps (no leaps) and is understood to represent faith. Creeds are something that one believes in through "faith" not "proof," so Bach underpins his setting of the creed with "faith." Finally, he chose to begin by setting the text to an old style of music – the music of his musical forefathers. He then continued by transforming the music to the contemporary musical style of his day. His final point? The

creed is a statement that goes through time, passed on from our forbearers to us today and to our children. A similar pairings of movements can be found in the Kyrie.

Theological points are also found throughout the *Mass*. In the middle of the Creed, there is a moment when the creed states that God the Father and God the Son are the same. Here, Bach's exegesis of the text ("Et In Unum") would be the envy of many a fine preacher. Bach composed a melody for two oboes and two singers. Each melody has identical notes (the "two" are the same). However each of the two has markedly different articulations (one is *legato* or smooth and one is *staccato* or quite detached). Simply by using a few notes, Bach compellingly elucidates the theological point that the two members of the Godhead (God the Father and Jesus) are at once identical – yet different.

The *B Minor Mass* is fascinating from a numerical point of view. The "Crucifixus" is composed over an *ostinato* bass line (a line that repeats again and again). The *ostinato* may be heard exactly 13 times: thirteen is the number associated with suffering and death. Or consider the Sanctus. The text of Sanctus comes from Isaiah 6:3 which reads: "And one cried unto another, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory." To illustrate this in sound, Bach set the music in six parts – divided most typically into two groups of three. Each group "cries" to the other with ecstatic outbursts of sound. The music to the compound meter of 12/8 (four large beats with three smaller beats each), is full of leaps of an octave (the "perfect" interval which is associated with the perfect being, God) and swirling melodic passages in the accompanying voices – depicting the bowing and hovering of the many-winged heavenly creatures before God almighty. In short, the 'Sanctus' is at once magnificent music for a double choir and large orchestra while simultaneously being a *tour de force* of symbolism, both numerical and intervallic.

Like all of my colleagues, I would never want to forgo a single movement of note from the *B Minor Mass*. Still, for me, its concluding movement, a powerful prayer for peace, is arguably my favorite. Beginning with just one hushed voice, the movement builds with a mighty crescendo to a fervent cry to God pleading for peace for **all** of humankind. Trumpets and tympani join the five-part choir as the prayer ascends upward to heaven in a heart-felt cry that invariably moves me to tears. Similar to the paired movements discussed above, Bach composed this concluding movement using two compositional styles within the same movement. The first melody associated with the opening text "Dona Nobis Pacem" is smooth and moves by steps in all half notes. This is "old style" music, music of the past. The second melody, which follows immediately, is lighter and faster: it is the modern of Bach's time. Bach's final bars of music were composed in two styles: one of the past and one of the present/future. In that manner the final movement of the *B Minor Mass*, 'Dona Nobis Pacem,' becomes a prayer for peace for all mankind for all time. Bach's music is both universal and timeless. It is personal and it is for all humanity. It has lasted more than three centuries and – beyond a doubt – will continue to be fresh and relevant to all who are fortunate enough to hear it for generations to come. It represents the yearning of us all: "grant us peace." Amen.

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