

The Bach Mass in B Minor is generally considered to be one of the supreme compositions in the history of music. It is considered by many to be a work not only of profound expressivity, but also of structural integrity. It is remarkably balanced in its key relationships and stylistic contrasts and consistently sensitive to the demands of the text. This balance and consistency is quite exceptional particularly given the fact that the work was written over a period of twenty-four years and was made up of works taken and revised from other of Bach's works as well as music composed specifically for this mass.

The process of composition began in 1733 when Bach submitted the "Kyrie" and "Gloria," which he had composed in that year, to the elector of Saxony for the purpose of securing the title of court composer in Dresden – a designation he did not receive until 1736. During that period it was common for the Lutheran church to include settings of the "Kyrie" and "Gloria" of the Latin mass in its worship service. Accordingly Bach wrote some four settings of the "Lutheran Mass" during his lifetime. The first of these, the one written in 1733, Bach used as the first two movements of the Mass in B Minor.

The "Sanctus" of Bach's Mass was actually written for a Christmas service in 1724 and was subsequently appropriated by the composer for the work under discussion. The remaining sections of the Mass were assembled during the years 1745 – 1748. Bach re-worked movements from his earlier cantatas by changing the texts and altering many of the musical elements. Whether or not Bach intended for the completed work to be performed as a whole, and scholars differ on this, the Mass in B Minor was never given in toto during the composer's lifetime. In fact, the first performance of the Mass in its entirety had to wait until 1835. Bach's Mass is a veritable compendium of compositional techniques of the late Baroque. The melodic invention and expressive content of his arias are equal to or surpass those of the leading opera composers of the day, and his writing for the chorus is unparalleled. He ranges from the "old style" which is patterned on 16th century counterpoint as in the "Second Kyrie," "Gratias," "Confiteor," and "Dona nobis pacem" movements, to the most advanced and virtuosic writing in the "Cum Sancto Spiritu" and "Et resurrexit."

To say that Bach was the master of vocal counterpoint is to state the obvious. He summed up and exceeded anything that had been done before him, and created a model of choral writing to be emulated by composers from that time forward. Witness, for example, the fugues in the Mozart Requiem and the late Haydn masses, the final sections of the "Gloria" and "Credo" of the Beethoven Missa Solemnis, the "Sanctus" of the Verdi Requiem, the great fugues in the Brahms Ein Deutsches Requiem, or the "Quam olim Abrahae" sections in the works of Cherubini and Dvorak.

In addition to this fugal writing one should mention Bach's rather extensive use of the ostinato. Note the repeated figure in the violins in the "Et incarnatus," the "walking bass" in the "Credo," and the passacaglia based on a chromatically descending bass line in the "Crucifixus." This latter device, known as "basso lamento," is one typical of the Baroque, that is the equating of chromaticism with intense emotion. This bit of text painting is but one example of Bach's attentiveness both to the general, as well as to the specific meaning of the text. The more buoyant, uplifting texts, those with overt praise are usually in major keys, move at a brisk tempo, and are replete with passages of sixteenth notes. The more sedate, contemplative, or tragic texts elicit minor keys, slow tempi, and, as mentioned above, repeated chromatically descending bass lines. Bach follows tradition in writing rapid ascending lines and high tessitura (range) to portray "resurrexit" ("he rose"), and inversely slow descending lines and low tessitura for "et sepultus est" ("he was buried"). Additionally, there are often instances where Bach uses a particular melodic interval, appoggiatura or an intense chord (e.g., diminished seventh) to illustrate a poignant or highly emotional word or phrase.

It is a testimony to Bach's extraordinary musical powers that he could write arias, ensembles and choruses of consummate power and expression over a period of decades, re-work compositions from previous cantatas, assemble them all, and come up with a unified work of magisterial authority. His command of compositional technique and his deep religious commitment have combined in the Mass in B Minor to present to us a musical model for the ages.

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