



## PROGRAM NOTES

### BACH MASS IN B MINOR | BY DR. ERIC STARK

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Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B Minor sits at the very pinnacle of the achievements of humankind, shoulder to shoulder with such magnificent and breathtakingly inspirational works as the Sistine Chapel, the Pyramids of Giza, the plays of Shakespeare and the works of the Ballets Russes. Its musical majesty, virtuosic writing and spiritual breadth have endeared it to generations of performers and audiences alike. In the words of Swiss composer and publisher Hans Georg Nägeli (who admittedly was trying to generate subscription sales for his publication of the score of the work), it is "the greatest artwork of all times and all people."

Yet the Mass in B Minor wasn't always viewed that way. As with many of Bach's compositions, there is little evidence of much notice accorded his music beyond the churches in which it was performed. This may have had something to do with Bach's musical reputation at the time; though he was widely praised in his day as a virtuoso organist, his compositions garnered less recognition. In fact, it is likely that the composer himself never heard the work in its entirety.

Scholars now believe that the construction of the Mass in B Minor was one of the final musical projects of Bach's life—possibly the very last. Throughout his life, music for the church had played a primary role. Having created already a body of hundreds of sacred cantatas, numerous motets and multiple settings of the Passions, it is fitting that his career should be crowned by this most sweeping and comprehensive of religious works.

Tracing the composition of the Mass in B Minor is a bit of a scavenger hunt. The movements comprising the Kyrie and Gloria texts (movements 1 through 12 in tonight's performance) were composed in 1733 and submitted to Friedrich Augustus, the newly appointed Saxon Elector, along with the composer's written request for a court title. Bach felt stymied by his situation in Leipzig, the town he had served as Cantor since 1723, and such an appointment would be an attractive addition to his regular duties.

The reason behind Bach's decision to craft an entire setting of the Catholic mass ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Benedictus) eludes us. Of particular note is the fact that Bach had no obvious outlet for music of this sort; though his Leipzig churches (primarily Saint Thomas and Saint Nicholas) were in the habit of hearing settings of the Kyrie and Gloria in worship, the remainder of the Lutheran liturgy was always presented in the vernacular German. What motivation Bach might have had to create such a traditionally Catholic mass setting in these circumstances is yet to be discovered.

For the additional movements of the Mass, Bach turned to earlier compositions, recasting music he had previously set to non-liturgical texts to a new purpose. This process of "parody" composition (see the essay "Parody Technique in Bach's Mass in B Minor" later in this program book) was a common technique among composers of the Baroque era, and does not imply any "shortcut" or reduction in compositional quality. Some of these borrowings required only minor alterations for adoption into the new Mass setting: for example, changing the 1724 Sanctus from the original voicing of three soprano parts and one alto to two of each. Others required more tinkering, including revoicing choral parts to accommodate the five-part texture and rhythmic changes to fit the new text.

Despite the quilt-like origins of Bach's mass setting—one movement reworked from here, another from there—the profound musical unity and spiritual mandate of the work are gripping. And they reveal the many facets of Bach "the composer."

Take, for example, Bach "the painter." Representing textual or programmatic ideas in music was a favorite compositional device used to enhance the meaning of a given work, and one that Bach used frequently. The descending, "earth-bound" melody of "Et incarnatus est" ("And was made man") followed by the exuberantly rising line of "Et resurrexit" ("And was raised up") are but two of the more overt uses of this technique.

There is also Bach "the architect." His keen awareness of structure, both within a movement and across larger, multi-movement forms, shapes the trajectory of the Mass in B Minor and propels its drama. An example of this is found in the Credo. As a statement of faith, the Credo text affirms the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Bach casts this text in nine movements in a symmetrical arch. The first two movements of the Credo ("Credo in unum deum" and "Patrem Omnipotentem") are both for chorus, and are balanced by the final two Credo movements ("Confiteor" and "Et expecto"). Further, at the very middle of the nine movements of the Credo we find the "Crucifixus" ("And was crucified under Pontius Pilate"). The religious centrality of this text is underscored by its significant structural position. It is the central musical "beam" of Bach's composition, just as it is the fundamental lesson of the Christian faith.

Finally, there is Bach "the man of faith." By the late 1740s, only a few years from his demise, he was a blind man struggling to put down on manuscript paper his only complete mass—the scratchy handwriting in the autograph score reflects the effort required of him. He was creating a composition he would never hear in its entirety. Moreover, it was an unlikely work that defied the Lutheran liturgical customs. We who are the lucky recipients of his inspired industry are left to wonder at the motivations that led to its creation. For whom was Bach writing: himself? his God? posterity? It is difficult to study this work, perform it, or hear it in concert or recordings and not be cowed by its perfection...its deep meaning... its divine beauty. Left to draw our own conclusions at these many imponderables, we may yet find the greatest display of Bach's gifts—meaning beyond the words, the fervor of faith, musical glory for all the ages.