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## PARODY TECHNIQUE IN BACH'S MASS IN B MINOR

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On first hearing the musical term “parody”, twenty-first century listeners are likely to assume a less than flattering connotation. However, parody in classical music is a common compositional technique in which a composer adapts existing material, either his own or another composer's, into a new work. Having written hundreds of cantatas in Leipzig (and previously in Weimar and Cöthen), Johann Sebastian Bach had a generous supply of existing material available to him when he set out to compile his Mass in B Minor. In fact, it is likely that more than half of the movements in the piece you will hear tonight are originally from previously written cantatas.

What might have inspired Bach to select particular movements for inclusion into the Mass in B Minor? Composers of the Baroque period widely embraced a theory of musical aesthetics known as the Doctrine of Affections, a proposition that music could evoke in the listener a particular sentiment. Just as a gifted orator could employ rhetorical devices to stir passion in the public, so could a master composer utilize certain musical figures (e.g. a particular melodic interval, tonality, or rhythmic pattern) to produce an involuntary emotion, or *affekt*, in the listener. In Bach's reworking of pre-existent material when creating a parody setting, both new and old versions often emphasize the same *affekt*.

Aside from homing in on the right emotional color for the desired movement, Bach also faced the complicated process of resetting each piece to Latin text and revising the music to fit comfortably into the scheme of the Mass as a whole. The retooling process required for parody technique was significant, especially in light of the dense polyphonic texture of many of Bach's original works. Several layers of revision were often required. Bach would make relatively straightforward alterations, such as changing the key or meter to better suit the Mass in terms of its overall key structure or its text. However, he would also embark on the decidedly more intricate task of adding or changing instrumental or vocal lines. An investigation into the modifications made from the original cantata movement to its Mass in B Minor complement provides a fascinating glimpse into the compositional process of Bach's masterpiece.

The first chorus of Cantata no. 29, “Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir” (“We thank You, God, we thank You”) taken from verse 1 of Psalm 75, was originally written in 1731 to celebrate the change of town council in Leipzig. This piece is the source material for the “Gratias agimus tibi” (“Thanks we give to Thee”) of the Mass in B Minor. It is easy to see why Bach chose this chorus as his model: both texts display a similar *affekt* of gratitude, thanking the Lord for His magnificence. The “Gratias” maintains the musical material from the original cantata almost exactly. The form for both works mimics a Renaissance motet, utilizing a polyphonic vocal texture with elided cadences and staggered entrances. Bach



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makes a few changes that highlight the Renaissance characteristics of the movement. The most obvious is the change of meter: the original cantata is written with two half notes to the measure (“cut time”) while the “Gratias” is written with two whole notes (*alla breve*) to the measure. With fewer downbeats for each phrase, the change seems to create expansiveness, with the “Gratias” having a greater sense of musical “sweep.” Bach elongates the second theme in the “Gratias” by extending the moving eighth notes on the word “gloriam”, creating a more flowing line that lifts the text to greater heights of musical worship.



Cantata no. 29 “Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir”



“Gratias agimus tibi”

Bach’s use of the parody technique can also be observed in the “Qui tollis peccata mundi” (“Thou Who takest away the sins of the world”) and its predecessor, Cantata no. 46, “Schauet doch und sehet, ob irgendein Schmerz sei” (“Behold and see if there is any grief like my grief”). Again, Bach’s desire to capture the appropriate musical *affekt* is obvious, with the Latin text bearing a strong connection to the original verse (Lamentations 1:12). While both movements capture the sorrow of the text, Bach’s alterations to the “Qui tollis” highlight this *affekt* of anguish. The main theme of the “Qui tollis” includes a rising minor sixth, an interval used to represent suffering. This leads to a prominent harmonic suspension, which further heightens the emotional content of the movement. Bach also makes several changes in the orchestration in this movement from the cantata to the Mass. He replaces recorders with flutes, omits the oboes and trumpet, and adds an independent cello line. He also changes the key from the original D minor to B minor.

Perhaps Bach’s greatest achievement in the Mass in B Minor is his ability to draw from a multitude of styles and create a work that satisfies the audience both in its individual movements and its greater architectural whole. Bach’s consummate use of parody allows him to compose a mass that synthesizes this incredible diversity of musical forms into a cohesive unit that is quite arguably the finest work in the canon of choral music.