

THE PROGRAM

by David Hoose

Johann Sebastian Bach: Mass in B minor, BWV 232

Bach's Mass in B minor is scored for soprano I, soprano II, alto, tenor and bass solos; chorus variously in four, five, six and eight parts; an orchestra of two flutes, three oboes (the first two doubling on Oboe d'amore, and the third appearing only in the Sanctus), two bassoons (the second having an independent part only in the Quoniam), horn, three trumpets, timpani, keyboard, and violins I and II, viola, cello and bass.

History is rich with music that, upon first hearing, seems utterly impenetrable. If our response is not to dismiss it, but to return to it another day out of curiosity, with humility and patience, we may be rewarded, and we may even begin to puzzle over why we were so deaf to the music's wonders the first time we heard it. History is also replete with music that, seeming eager to please, makes a starry first impression. To that we may also return, but often with diminishing reward. Eventually, we tire of the music's predictability and, again, may begin to wonder why we were so deaf the first time.

Were there only these extremes—the obviously obscure and the merely obvious—we might not worry so about the role of classical music in our culture. A few people would crave a tough challenge for the sake of a tough challenge, and others would yearn for a balm to offer insulation from life. Each group would go its own way, blissfully unaware of each other.

But there is also a magnificent body of music that fills that gap between the extremes, music that grabs us the first time we hear it and then reveals more with each hearing. It is this music that links the extremes of the tough and the facile, and that lets us be both fascinated by Milton Babbitt and enchanted by Ottorino Respighi. Like the most appealing of facile music, this music invites us in, sparking our imagination, metabolism and emotions. And, like the best of gnarly music, it rewards the mind and heart with a journey that seems different and deeper when we return. Despite the music's immediate appeal, it reveals itself only when we give it time, concentration, openness and patience—qualities in increasingly short supply. It is the future of this music that should concern us.

Within all this music that reaches from the transparent and the opaque lies a remarkable group of works that, paradoxically, embrace both extremes. They come to us not just appealingly, but unfolded and undefended; and they reward our return with fathomless subtleties, infinite complexities, and boundless satisfaction.

Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, Schubert's *Die Winterreise*, Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*, Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*—these might be compositions with which we immediately connect and, then, whose depths prove immeasurable. Whether these are the most apt examples, Johann Sebastian Bach's *Mass in B minor* must stand near the pinnacle of this group. The first time we hear it, the *Mass* overwhelms us—it is neither impenetrable nor even baffling, and it seems to hide nothing. But then, every time we return to it, it never fails to overwhelm us even more. Increasingly, it is we who are laid open by this music.

That the *Mass in B minor* leads such a group could be surprising. Unlike the Beethoven *Ninth*, which projects a universal statement, the *Mass in B minor* stands as a bold testament of a particular theology, as a prayer directed toward God and for a specific audience. Even within the sphere of Christian expression, its power is unexpected, for this Catholic Mass was created by a Lutheran musical preacher. So, those unresponsive to Lutheranism, Catholicism, or some strain of Christianity, may expect to find the doors closed to them. But the *B minor Mass* reaches far beyond the specific religious tenets from which it arose. Of all of Bach's religious works (and, really, all of them are religious), the *B minor Mass* creates generous room for anyone, regardless of spiritual bearing. Though inspired by a specific theology, the *Mass* bares its heart of love, suffering and redemption to all—without preaching, without judgment, and without demanding adherence to a particular

set of beliefs.

The lack of a narrative, such as propels the Saint Matthew and Saint John passions, may make the *B minor Mass* available to so many people. Perhaps it is also the lack of narrative that also leads so many to be fascinated by the music's brilliant architecture. But certain aspects of the music's design itself make this mass an unexpected leader of this unique group of compositions. Mozart composed *Figaro* in a fury of inspiration, perhaps in fewer than ten weeks. Stravinsky invented the materials for his *Sacre*, tooling them and the whole ballet as if designing a delicate mechanism. And Beethoven pounded at the material for his *Choral Symphony* as if he were a sculptor, until its form began to emerge.

The creative energy behind the B minor Mass fit none of these models. Bach did not so much compose the Mass as assemble it, reworking movements from his cantatas and other music that could be made to fit the needs of the Mass. Only one movement in the Mass, the *Confiteor*, shows indisputable evidence of having been composed specifically for this enormous compendium of his life's work. It is amazing that such a piecemeal method produced such a unified shape.

On paper, we can *see* the academic rigor that fills the B minor Mass, as if Bach were demonstrating his skill in composing in the widest range of styles. In fact, he was, at least with the *Kyrie* and *Gloria*, since we know he presented them in July of 1733 to Friederich August II, the new Elector of Saxony, in an attempt to raise his position as the Leipzig Thomasschule Kantor. But intellectual rigor isn't what we *hear*.

Bach's reworking of his earlier music for the Mass invariably results in a sharper dramatic and musical impulse. One 'parody' movement, the *Crucifixus*, is particularly telling. For this movement, the spiritual heart of the Credo and of his religious thinking, Bach reworked music he had composed thirty years earlier, for the cantata "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen" (BWV 12). In this choral movement lay the basis for the *Crucifixus*: "Weeping, wailing, worry, fearing, anguish and need are the Christian's bread-of-tears that carry the marks of Jesus," stands as a spectral memory for the newer version. In order to keep the music tied to its tonal surroundings in the Mass, Bach lowered the key by a minor second, but the result was a change from a flat-dominated key (F minor), one that he associated with human sorrow, to E minor, whose one sharp, *Kreuz* in German, points to the Cross. To the cantata's plain orchestration, Bach added two lowly, otherworldly flutes that pulsate with the strings like pendulums. The four voice parts, in falling gestures, first enter in descending, sinking order—*soprano, alto, tenor, bass*, and then their entries describe the extremities of the cross—*tenor, soprano, bass, alto*.

In the cantata, the chromatic bass line moves in broad half notes; in the *Crucifixus*, the bass line throbs like a heartbeat, twice on each pitch. The unvarying four-measure unit—the centrality of the *Crucifixus* in Christianity—repeats thirteen times—Jesus and the twelve Disciples. With the last repeat, the music sinks into the shadow of the grave. Bach silences the flutes, violins and violas, leaving the voices to hover alone above the continuo group, and he alters the design of the bass line. The change is subtle, but it does violate the rule that a ground bass should be unvarying. But this violation of the rule is what makes the next movement possible; in the breaking of the rule lies the seed of Resurrection.

In creating the Mass, Bach gave attention not only to the expressive and dramatic details, but also to the vitality of the large design, especially critical in a composition made up of reworked borrowings. In assembling the *Credo*, he reconsidered an earlier shape in order to create a much more satisfying one. This change involved some surgery, removing the text "Et incarnatus est" from an earlier version of *Et in unum Deum*, recomposing this duet without these words, and then composing a new, separate movement that focuses on the text that had been excised. By doing all of this, Bach created a perfectly symmetrical design around the theological center, the *Crucifixus*.

Chorus: *Credo in unum Deum*

Chorus: *Patrem omnipotentem*
Aria: *Et in unum Dominum*
Chorus: *Et incarnatus est*
Chorus: *Crucifixus*
Chorus: *Et resurrexit*
Aria: *Et in Spiritum Sanctum*
Chorus: *Confiteor*
Chorus: *Et expecto resurrectionem*

From small detail to large design, Bach's creation never fails to sweep us up in the vividness of every event—the painful intensity of the first *Kyrie*, stern and impassioned, private and universal...the gracefully imploring *Christe* dancing on lithe feet...the gnarled second *Kyrie* unknitting into fine silk...the breathtaking transformation of the *Et in terra pax*, winged ecstasy raising humility into triumphant song...the flute tripping along without burden in the *Domine Deus* but suddenly finding itself forlornly wandering through the *Qui tollis*...the intimate and self-effacing dance of the *Qui sedes*...the regal bearing of the *Quoniam*...and the catapulting *Cum Sancto Spiritu*, whose delirious exultation cannot be contained.

Or a *Credo* that, for all its objectivity, cannot avoid a giddiness exceeding all propriety, and its exuberance spills over into a thoroughly modern, uninhibited joy. Or the most gentle and elegant *Et in unum Dominum* and, later, the *Et in spiritum*, in which the oboes d'amore endearingly wind around the heavenward-reaching baritone...the deeply layered, closely figured part-writing of the *Confiteor*, in which all the voice parts boldly vie for attention, but suddenly, in the face of the mystery of eternal life, cower in overwhelming doubt and fear. And then—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye—a glimpse of life beyond this world. And the *Sanctus*—the seraphim's grand six wings hover (the only time the chorus divides into six parts), the choirs of angels swing smilingly, all dance their *Hosanna* with refreshing simplicity, and the orchestra's wordless and aristocratic dance proudly trumping the chorus's own. The aching and arching *Benedictus* whose flute roulades recalling the angels' blinding light, light that now burns calmly. And, the *Agnus Dei* and *Dona Nobis Pacem* that stand together at the close, the private becomes universal, anguish gives way to grace, and doubt finally and forever releases into hope.

It is this meeting of naked emotion and limitless skill that draws us back again and again. Every time, we hear anew Bach's profound musical imagination. But every new observation exposes more questions. The more we hear and feel, the more we understand that there is more to hear and feel. The paradox is welcome.