

## **Parody Principles in the Lutheran Masses**

### **as shown at the example of the G Minor Mass**

**By Thomas Folan**

The four Lutheran Masses, assembled by Bach sometime in the year 1736, pose interesting questions concerning use of parody. Various authors have from time to time, questioned the merits of these masses and thus the somewhat contentious attitude toward them requires more thoughtful consideration.

The Masses display a multiplicity of parody techniques, ranging from an almost complete reworking of some movements, to changes in instrumentation, transposition, reharmonization and rhythmic alteration. Only one movement of the set is newly composed, the rest of the movements having been assembled from pre-existing cantatas.

The choral movements of the Lutheran Mass in G Minor come from three cantatas, all dating from 1726. The Kyrie is from Cantata No. 102, "Herr, deine Augen sehen nach dem Glauben"; the choral section of the Gloria from cantata No. 72, "Alles nur nach Gottes Willen", and the "Cum sancto spiritu" from Cantata No. 187, "Es wartet alles auf dich".

The G Minor Mass has borne a particularly disparaging commentary from Albert Schweitzer. "The adaptations are perfunctory and occasionally quite nonsensical. In the G Minor Mass, for example, Bach adds the text of the Gloria to the gloomy music of the first chorus of the cantata 'Alles nur nach Gottes Willen,' No. 72." Schweitzer seems to indicate a hasty or perhaps even poor choice of music, which he feels does not fit the spirit of the text. Such a judgment may itself be hasty, especially when the music undergoes further examination. The alterations and borrowings from these diverse cantatas contain characteristics that at once set them apart, but show a unity of style and content. It is precisely the choices and changes Bach makes to these choral movements that demonstrate a unique process and awareness of musical and textual possibilities. In the 19th century, this parody procedure went against the *Zeitgeist*, which glorified the individuality of each creative work. However, in Bach's lifetime the process of transcribing not only one's own works but the works of other composers as well was a common practice.

This life-long process of revising, re-composing, and re-using music reflected the composer's practical approach to a mastery of his craft. In the case of Bach, this process was an attempt to attain the highest state of perfection of his art. Christoff Wolff, in his book "Bach -- Essays on His Life and Music", deals with this aspect of Bach's creative genius. Bach sought constantly to perfect his art, not so much through the process of composing one work more perfectly than the previous, but rather to improve upon existing works as well as to compose new ones. The striving for perfection lay in the

adherence and development of his craft in accordance with nature. This meant a relentless revision of music he composed throughout his life, all ultimately to be as rich in harmony and imbued with a beauty as was reflected in the natural world.

The reasons for Bach's use of parody do not indicate a desire to economize or compromise his working procedure. The number and variety of parody techniques he uses bear out this point. A closer examination of each individual choral movement of the Mass in G Minor reveals the care and thought that Bach gave to the assembly of these short works and how the careful choice of the right music creates an entirely new and effective composition.

The Kyrie has the characteristics of *Stile galant*, a style that was sometimes applied to Francois Couperin and other composers of French rococo music in the early part of the 18th century. The style later gained more popularity with composers, (Bach's sons being among them), of the latter third of the 18th century. This music distinguishes itself through free homophonic writing as opposed to the strict contrapuntal style of the *stile antico*. The overall texture is generally light, refined and joyous. There are frequent cadences, short phrases, and a free treatment of dissonance. In this Kyrie, however, Bach adds some foreign elements. These can be best explained when one compares the score of the Mass with that of the parodied cantata. The text of the opening chorus of Cantata No. 102, "Herr, deine Augen sehen nach dem Glauben", is from Jeremiah 5: 3. "O Lord, do not thy eyes look for truth? Thou hast smitten them, but they felt no anguish; thou hast consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to repent." The stern nature of the text is clearly reflected in the music through choice of key (G Minor), instrumentation (strings, oboes, and continuo), and repetition (of individual notes and figurations). Specific words are singled out for special treatment. For example, the word "schlagen" (to hit) is set to two short eighth notes followed by a rest. This figure is the motive for a canonic section that is further punctuated by offbeat eighth notes in the oboes. The opening textual phrase "Herr deine Augen sehen nach dem Glauben", is difficult to sing. The text portrays (in true Old Testament fashion), a God that is to be feared and a people that fail to obey his wishes. Bach's inclusion of a fugue whose subject is quite angular, ascends, and contains an upward leap of a tritone further underscores the text "Sie haben ein härter Angesicht denn ein Fels und wollen sich nicht bekehren."

The tripartite form of the movement in the Mass in G Minor serves the text "Kyrie eleison", (Lord have mercy), "Christe eleison", (Christ have mercy) well. These sections, which, in the cantata, portrayed specific lines of text, now serve the purpose of setting off the three statements of the Mass text. With the exception of small rhythmic and pitch changes in the final fugue and the lack of some articulations in the Mass score, both the cantata movement and the Mass Kyrie are identical. The use of strict counterpoint of the *stile antico* within the basic structure of a *stile moderno* movement shows Bach's willingness to integrate forms in order to arrive at something that may defy categorization but is completely natural.

The Gloria of the Mass in G Minor is also a *stile moderno* movement. The orchestra plays a distinctly independent role throughout, and never shares any thematic material with the choir. As was the case with the Kyrie, the cantata movement upon which this parody is based is essentially identical, with the exception of one dramatic opening gesture. An orchestral ritornello of considerable length, present in the cantata, is left out of the Gloria. The omission is significant. Bach creates tension between the end of the Kyrie and the opening (attacca) of the Gloria by leaving out the Gloria's orchestral introduction and dividing it into three distinct sections as had been done in the Kyrie. Thus the return, in the dominant key, of material from the beginning of the Gloria adds a new dramatic element to the movement. Other changes in the movement such as the rhythmic alteration needed to accommodate the word "Gloria" are slight. The complete text of the opening movement of Cantata No. 72, "Alles nur nach Gottes Willen" consists of free verse and translates as follows: "Everything according to God's will, in joy and sadness, also in good times and in bad times. God's will calms me in tempest as well as in sunshine. Everything according to God's will. This will my salvation be". The translation of the opening section of the Gloria is "Glory to God in the highest. And on earth peace to men of good will. We praise you, we worship you, we glorify you." The most poignant text painting appropriate for both texts comes with the words "Gottes Wille soll mich stillen" in the cantata and "Et in terra pax hominibus"(and on earth peace to humankind) in the Mass. The gentle rocking eighth notes and long sustained notes on "stillen" and "pax" set against an orchestra playing quarter notes on the first and second beats is breathtaking. But the serenity is broken with the return of the rapid tempest-like figurations. This is the "gloomy" music that Schweitzer mentions. Although the music is clearly more suited to the mood of the cantata text than the Mass text, it is nevertheless convincing in its rhythmic energy, which depicts the cries of adoration from a people mired in confusion and fear, to an Old Testament God.

Bach remains consistent in his treatment of the final movement of the Mass. As with the Gloria, he omits an extended orchestral introduction. The entire movement is a mix of *stile moderno* with imitative counterpoint reminiscent of the technique he used in permutation fugues in some of the earlier cantatas. In the case of the Mass parody, however, the orchestra does not just play *colle parte* with the choir, but incorporates material that fills in the gaps between choral entries. The "cum sancto spiritu" movement is taken from Cantata No. 187, "Es wartet alles auf dich". The complete text is from Psalm 104: 27- 28. "These all look to thee, to give them their food in due season. When thou givest to them, they gather it up; when thou openest thy hand, they are filled with good things." The key is a transposed dorian mode which shifts between major and minor. Also noteworthy is a lengthy orchestral interlude that combines fugal texture in the strings with free material in the oboes. Another prominent aspect of the movement is the very active bass line with its consistent eighth note motion. As if to add another level and sum up the entire work, Bach introduces another somewhat stricter fugue-like section, but interrupts it as well. This alternation of imitative counterpoint and free material continues until the end of the movement.

The unity that Bach achieves within a given movement is easily seen, but is there cohesiveness to the G Minor Mass as a whole? The demonstration of compositional

technique and mastery of form in the Kyrie, Gloria, and Cum sancto Spiritu choruses of the Lutheran Mass in G Minor already exists in their original conception as cantata movements. When considering them for assembly in the Mass, Bach decided that the music expressed his creative ideas almost as it stood, without his having to make any dramatic changes. The unity in the Mass is achieved then, through simple alterations in the length of orchestral passages at the beginning of the Gloria and Cum sancto spiritu, the transposition of key in the Cum sancto spiritu, and with small rhythmic and pitch alterations in order to accommodate the Mass text. Despite these few changes, the Mass in G Minor presents itself as a work with a fresh perspective. Bach was evidently not concerned with the fact that the music had already served a liturgical function and had been heard by his congregation in Leipzig. These “new” works were most likely intended for a different congregation, perhaps at the Catholic court in Dresden. Why and how did Bach come to choose entire movements from so many diverse works which have led to some of the criticism leveled at them by scholars such as Schweitzer? As with any task he undertook, Bach must have been curious about the various possibilities of expressing the unalterable text of the Mass Ordinary. Unlike most of his cantatas, whose music was written with a specific text already in hand, he must have been curious as to how he could express the Mass text not only with music that was originally conceived for a different text, but how different types of music might effect the Mass setting. The result of these parodies is a group of masses within which there exists a great deal of variety achieved through a wide range of *stile antico* and *stile moderno* movements. These combinations yield a different result each time, but ultimately define the essence of Bach and his indefatigable creative energy.