

## CD Program Notes

### Bach: Missae breves BWV 233-236

Ever since Luther's publication of a *Deutsche Messe* in 1526 the Mass has assumed a place in the German Protestant service. By tradition the "Short Mass" – the *Credo*, the Catholic creed being omitted – was merely chanted in unison for the regular Sunday service at Bach's church. But on special occasions Bach set the text to music as a work for soloists, choir and orchestra. In total, Bach produced five of these short – in the sense of truncated – "Lutheran" masses, where the text of just the *Kyrie* and the *Gloria* was set, each work ending with the words *Cum Sancto Spiritu. Amen*. The five masses appear to date from the early 1730's – around the time when Bach was concerned with recycling various other of his works in order to preserve them in a more permanent form. Apart from the masses, most notably three of the celebratory cantatas that Bach had previously written for one-time occasions, such as royal birthdays, were re-used to form what we know today as the *Christmas Oratorio* (BWV 248), which was completed and performed over six days at the end of 1734.

In precisely the same way, Bach mined the various treasures contained in his "well-regulated church music": basically five complete cycles of cantatas to be performed throughout the church year (the surviving two-thirds or so of this legacy is preserved as BWV 1-199). It may even be that Bach wished to add one "reformed" mass setting as a complement for each of his five years of liturgical cantatas. The technique of re-using music and adapting it to a new text – known as "parody", a word which modern usage has reduced to mean "caricature", was as familiar to any composer of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as general thriftiness was integral to an age where resources were scarce, materials were precious and labour-intensive objects (including music) were unlikely to be lightly discarded after little use. Of the five masses that have come down to us (BWV 232-236), the first, and most elaborate, in B minor/D major was extended into a full Catholic mass towards the end of Bach's life (the so called *B Minor Mass*, BWV 232). It initially served as part of Bach's application for a largely honorary position: that of Royal Electoral Court Composer to the Polish King, Augustus III, with which Bach, by that time dissatisfied with the attitude of his employers in Leipzig, hoped to acquire some degree of protection against his critics in 1733.

The remaining four works form a highly integrated set, and illustrate Bach's well-known practice of compiling his music into orderly collections. Their basic structure is almost identical. The only departures from the usual pattern are found in the A major mass, which appears to be a special case (see Alfred Mann's article below). Each *missa* consists of six distinct movements and the set of four *missae*, like all of Bach's mature works, represents a compendium of the various styles of writing that were available to a cosmopolitan composer in the 1730s. In each of the "short" masses (BWV 233-236), the ancient Greek text of the *Kyrie* is set in the "old" style – with instruments basically doubling the voices, while the various parts of the *Gloria* (normally two choral movements framing a set of three arias) utilize the fashionable "concerted manner",

mixing elements of the various national styles, principally Italian and French, with which Bach and all informed composers were familiar.

The Lutheran masses are all scored for a similar sized ensemble, SATB choir, four part strings and paired wind instruments: oboes in BWV 235 and 236 (G minor and G major), flutes in BWV 233 (A major), and horns added to oboes and strings in BWV 233 (F major). As in all Bach's settings of Latin Church music, there is no recitative connecting the movements, since the mass text, unlike those of the cantatas and passions, does not form any sort of narrative. The four masses are framed by three choral movements each: the *Kyrie* (composed in the contrapuntal *stile antico* in three out of four cases), *Gloria in excelsis deo* (in the newer Italian concertante style) and *Cum sancto spiritu* (also in the new style). These are complemented by various solo arias, distributed among all four voice types. The accompaniments for these arias range from the most intimate: a single solo instrument with continuo, two flutes with violas playing the bass, to full ensemble.

In the *Kyrie* of the F major mass, the only movement that is a reworking of an earlier piece with the same text (BWV 233a, composed in Weimar around 1715), Bach introduces as a *cantus firmus* the German *Agnus dei: Christ, du Lamm Gottes*, with the horns and oboes replacing the original soprano *cantus* of the earlier (Weimar) version. The piece is divided into three sections, with the thematic material of the first (*Kyrie eleison*) inverted in the second (*Christe eleison*); while both subject and inversion are combined in the third (*Kyrie eleison*). The resulting piece is among Bach's most impressive compositions. The origin of the opening movement of the *Gloria* is unknown. Presumably it was derived from a cantata, perhaps secular, given the presence of the horns and the festive compound rhythm. Similarly, no model has survived for the bass aria, *Domine Deus*, which appears to be a truncated arrangement of a *da capo* aria. As sources for the other movements, Bach used two cantatas: for the arias BWV 102 (*Herr, deine Augen sehen nach dem Glauben*) and, for the final *Cum sancto spiritu*, the opening chorus of the Christmas cantata, BWV 40 (*Dazu ist erschienen der Sohn Gottes*).

No model survives for the *galant* style *Kyrie-Christe-Kyrie* triptych of the A major mass, with its French dotted rhythms and a pair of pastoral sounding flutes. With the *Christe eleison*, set for a quartet of voices, Bach comes closest in style to an accompanied recitative, with its sustained "halo" of strings and flutes, and dramatic harmonic shifts. The *Gloria in excelsis Deo* is a direct transcription of a spectacular sequence from the exceptionally fine cantata for the second Sunday of Easter, *Halt im Gedächtnis Jesum Christ*, BWV 67, with a *vox Christi* interrupting the brilliant string motifs four times in an *arioso* with the words: Friede sei mit dir (Peace be with you). Once again, for the bass aria, *Domine Deus*, with its rich solo violin accompaniment, no model has come down to us. The original sources for the remaining movements are found in BWV 179 (*Siehe du, daß deine Gottesfurcht nicht Heuchelei sei*), BWV 79 (*Gott der Herr ist Sonn und Schild*) and BWV 136 (*Erforsche mich, Gott, und erfahre*).

The G minor mass (BWV 235) is in many ways the most modern, yet perhaps the least compromising and most severe in overall affect of the four *missae breves*. The opening chorus, lifted directly and untransposed from the opening chorus of BWV 102, is

composed in the modern concerted style, complete with extended opening and closing *ritornelli*, with much elaborate fugal writing in between, while the *Gloria in excelsis Deo* is transposed from its original A minor (as first chorus in BWV 72, *Alles nur nach Gottes Willen*) down a tone, providing a virtual continuation of the sombre mood and affect of the opening *Kyrie*. The sustained, almost relentless energy of these movements bears a resemblance to the opening chorus, *Herr, unser Herrscher*, from the St. John Passion (BWV 245), incidentally composed in the same key. The remaining movements all derive from BWV 187, *Es wartet alles auf dich*, and only one of them (*Gratias agimus*), is transposed (from G minor to D minor).

The beautiful mass in G major (BWV 236) shares the same scoring as BWV 235 (oboes and strings), but contrasts with its companion work in virtually every other way. The opening *Kyrie*, a re-working of the opening chorus of BWV 179, *Siehe du, daß deine Gottesfurcht nicht Heuchelei sei* is a perfect adaptation of the music to suit its new text. The original words (Jesus Sirach 1, 34) concern the pitfalls of serving God with a false heart, expressed musically by a pervasive falling chromaticism. The *Gloria* begins with a spectacular paraphrase of the opening of the Reformation cantata, *Gott der Herr ist Sonn und Schild*, BWV 79, the horn parts (minus the timpani) of the original work being given in this case to the two upper voice parts. The bass aria, *Gratias agimas tibi* is a conservative re-working of the bass aria from BWV 138, *Warum betrübst du dich, mein Herz*, while *Domine Deus* and *Quoniam* (from BWV 79 and 179 respectively) are considerably altered from their models. The *Quoniam* is the most radically changed of all, its transformation underlined with a new tempo indication: *adagio*, that transports this music far from the sentiments of the original aria, a tempestuous movement whose text rails vehemently against “false hypocrites”. The concluding *Cum sancto spiritu* is an arrangement of the opening movement of the splendid 1726 cantata, *Wer dank opfert, der preiset mich*, BWV 17. The original A major piece is here shorn of its extensive string *ritornello*, transposed down a tone and considerably energised through the frequent interjections of the words: *In Gloria Dei Patris*.

Perhaps we may adopt a more enlightened perspective on the *missae* than those of the principal Bach biographers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Philipp Spitta and Albert Schweitzer, both of whom were strangely dismissive of these pieces, though not of the *B minor Mass* or *Christmas Oratorio*, their obvious companion works. Today we need have no hesitation in fully appreciating these four magnificent, and hardly short, masses as prime examples of Bach at the height of his powers. Far from being “perfunctory” or “occasionally quite nonsensical” arrangements, the various movements that make up the four *missae* actually represent Bach at his most polished, cosmopolitan and inventive. By 1734 or so, the composer, though clearly disappointed in his Leipzig appointment, was passionately concerned with consolidating and refining his musical legacy. The *missae breves* are clearly important fruits of this process. In any case, let the listener be the final judge. It will be clear to anyone with the ears to hear that the four *missae breves* belong at the very pinnacle of Bach’s remarkable output.

-- Peter Watchorn