

Programme notes

The creation of the Mass in B minor

One of the last compositional projects of Bach's life was to compile the work that we now know as the Mass in B minor.

Perhaps the earliest section to be composed specifically as part of the Mass liturgy was the Sanctus, which was written in Leipzig for Christmas 1724. Then, in 1733, Bach created an elaborate setting of the Kyrie and the Gloria, known as the *Missa*, for presentation to the Elector of Saxony in Dresden. Most of the movements of this *Missa* were re-workings of previously existing music.

Finally in 1748-9, towards the end of his life, Bach brought together the 1733 *Missa* and the 1724 Sanctus, and added settings of the rest of the Latin Mass Ordinary (the unchanging parts of the text of the Mass) to form a complete *Missa tota*. As with the earlier *Missa*, most of the music was taken from earlier works, although a few movements, such as the 'Et incarnatus est', were newly composed.

The structure of the Mass in B minor

Bach divided his autograph score of the complete Mass into four separate sections. This complete Mass is usually referred to as the *Missa tota*, whereas the first section, containing the Kyrie and the Gloria, is known as the *Missa*.

These sections do not all correspond exactly to the usual structure of the Latin Ordinary as we often see them in other Mass settings, so the following table sets out Bach's division of the score against this structure for comparison.

The divisions in Bach's autograph score	The Latin Ordinary	The individual movements
1. Missa	Kyrie	Kyrie eleison I; Christe eleison; Kyrie eleison II
	Gloria	Gloria— Et in terra pax; Laudamus te; Gratias agimus tibi; Domine Deus; Qui tollis; Qui sedes; Quoniam; Cum Sancto Spiritu
2. Symbolum Nicenum	Credo (Symbolum Nicenum)	Credo; Patrem omnipotentem; Et in unum; Et incarnatus est; Cruxifixus; Et resurrexit; Et in Spiritum sanctum; Confiteor – Et expecto
3. Sanctus	Sanctus	Sanctus
4. Osanna, Benedictus, Agnus Dei et Dona nobis Pacem		Osanna; Benedictus; Osanna
	Agnus Dei	Agnus Dei; Dona nobis pacem

1733 – a year of change

1733 was a significant year for the people of Saxony, and also for the Bach family. In February of that year, the Elector of Saxony, Augustus the Strong died. He had been a larger than life figure, and his feats of strength, in battle as well as in the bedroom (he supposedly fathered over 300 illegitimate children) were legendary. Augustus was succeeded by his only legitimate son.

For the Bach family, 1733 was also a year of change. Bach's oldest son Wilhelm Friedemann secured his first job as organist at the Sophienkirche in Dresden. He had more than a little help from his father though; researchers have shown that Bach senior not only wrote the letters of application on behalf of his son, but quite possibly composed a test piece for him as well.

In July of 1733, many of the Bach family travelled to Dresden to settle Wilhelm Friedemann into his new job. But J.S. Bach obviously had another reason in mind for the visit to Dresden. While the family were there they set about the task of copying a set of performance parts for a *Missa* – the settings of the Kyrie and Gloria that would later form part of the Mass in B minor - to be dedicated to the new Elector. The parts were copied by J.S. Bach himself, his wife Anna Magdalena, W.F. Bach, C.P.E. Bach and also one of the copyists from the Dresden court.

The parts of the *Missa* were presented to the Elector on 27th July, complete with a fulsome dedication and a petition for a post at court, but there is no strong evidence that it was ever performed at that time. It certainly did not find its way into the working repertoire of the court church, as it appears in none of the court music inventories of the time. Instead, it was held under lock and key as part of the royal collection, and was eventually consigned to a cupboard at the back of the court church.

It might be interesting to speculate for a moment what might have happened to the *Missa* if it had actually been adopted into the court's repertoire. Settings of just the Kyrie and Gloria were very common at this time; there are dozens of them in the court collection. But if the court required a complete Mass setting, with the other sections of the ordinary as well (the Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei), then the missing sections would be created either from plainchant (the Credo) or by reworking parts of the Kyrie and Gloria. The material of the Gloria would often lend itself well to being reworked as the Sanctus, and the three-part form of the Kyrie was a good model for the three-part Agnus Dei. If this had ever happened to Bach's *Missa*, then tonight's concert might have sounded very different.

The afterlife of the Mass

It is hard to believe that this work was never performed in its entirety during Bach's lifetime; it is even more surprising to learn that it didn't receive a full performance until 1859, more than 100 years after his death.

Some sections were performed separately. The Sanctus was originally composed for Christmas 1724, and remained in Bach's working repertoire in Leipzig. Sets of parts for the Sanctus were also lent out to other people to perform. In one case, they were lent to a certain Count Sporck from Bohemia who, much to Bach's dismay, failed to return them. Unbelievably, the reason for this is that the sheets of music were used by the Count's gardeners to wrap trees in.

After Bach's death, his son C.P.E. Bach inherited the score of the *Missa tota*. C.P.E. Bach was particularly drawn to the music of the *Symbolum Nicenum*, and performed this part of the *Missa tota* on a number of occasions. The first of these was in a concert in Hamburg in 1786, when the programme comprised an instrumental prelude by C.P.E. Bach, the *Symbolum Nicenum*, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' and the Hallelujah chorus from Handel's Messiah, and in the second half, a symphony and the Magnificat by C.P.E. Bach.

Performances of parts of the Mass continued throughout the 100 years or so following Bach's death. Like C.P.E. Bach, 19th century musicians favoured the *Symbolum*, and there was also a tendency to associate the work with another cornerstone of sacred choral music, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. Both seemed to speak to the Romantic ideals of large forces in heroic and triumphant struggle. The first complete performance of Bach's *Missa tota* was not until 1859, and was given by Karl Riedel and the *Riedelverein* in Leipzig.

The 'B minor madrigal'

The suggestion, made by the musicologist Joshua Rifkin, that the B minor Mass would originally have been performed with just once voice per part, was greeted at first with shock and outrage. Long regarded as an ideal vehicle for a large choral society, many could not come to terms with the original, far more intimate nature of the Mass as Bach might have expected it to be performed.

So every group that performs this work must at some point address the issue of how far they wish to take their pursuit of 'authenticity'. Are we justified in performing with a group of singers so much larger than the one that Bach originally had in mind?

Fortunately, we know that the baroque age was one of great pragmatism. Composers did not hold the view, really only becoming prevalent in the 19th century, that the composer's intentions were sacrosanct. A piece of music was composed and sent on its way, and it was perfectly acceptable, if not actually expected, that other musicians would adapt it as necessary to suit their own performing forces and circumstances.

But whereas baroque composers were generally fairly relaxed about the exact disposition of forces that should perform their music, the unalterable core of a piece music, the thing that gave it its identity, was the *Affekt*. This is a difficult word to translate, but roughly it means the emotional flavour associated with the music (driven above all by the text in vocal music), coupled with all the stylistic and cultural baggage that would have accompanied such an association. Even if our performing forces are not the same as those Bach would have known, we can at least strive to retain the *Affekt* as Bach might have understood it.