



Bach: Mass in B Minor

Saturday 28 January 2017

St George's, Bristol

Listening notes

1. Missa (Kyrie and Gloria)

Kyrie eleison I – Christe eleison – Kyrie eleison II

In choosing to set the two *Kyrie* movements as fugues, with the central *Christe* movement as a lighter galant-style duet, Bach was following in the conventional style of Mass setting of his time. He was also making a doctrinal point: this stylistic distinction was often used to highlight the difference between references to the Old Testament of God the Father, and the New Testament of God the Son. Fugues were often understood to be a representation of the old law of the Old Testament, whereas the *Christe* duet has all the hallmarks of a baroque operatic aria.

Although both *Kyrie* movements are set as fugues, there is an important difference of style between them. The first is very much a 'modern' (for Bach's time) fugue, with its significant independent instrumental lines, and the angular nature of the fugue subject, whereas the second *Kyrie* looks back to the practice of the 16th century known as *stile antico*, with its old fashioned notation, the smoothly moving vocal lines, and instrumental parts that double the voices.

There is a neat structural device linking these three movements, in that each begins in the key of a successive note from the B minor triad; we move from B minor (*Kyrie I*) to D major (*Christe*) to F# minor (*Kyrie II*).

It is thought that none of these three movements was originally composed for the Mass, but that all were taken from pre-existing models. The only new writing is probably the dramatic opening gesture, which was added to align with the style expected at the Dresden court, to whom the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* of the Mass were first dedicated.

Kyrie eleison.

Lord, have mercy.

Christe eleison.

Christ, have mercy.

Kyrie eleison.

Lord, have mercy.

Gloria - Et in terra pax

Here the rejoicing really begins. Everything about this movement, from the festive use of trumpets and drums, to the exuberant dance-like triple metre would speak to a baroque congregation of celebration and joy. The pace changes for the gentle, lilting *Et in terra pax* section. Notice how the opening rocking gesture of this section becomes the beginning of the main fugue subject (sung by the sopranos), and the virtuosity of the counter subject (for example, as sung by the sopranos once the altos enter with the main subject).

Gloria in excelsis Deo,
et in terra pax hominibus
bonae voluntatis.

*Glory to God in the highest,
and peace on earth to men
of good will.*

Laudamus te

This show stopping aria is a competition in virtuosity for the soprano and the solo violin. Baroque performers were normally expected to add ornaments and 'graces' to their lines, but here Bach leaves nothing to chance, and writes out the expected elaborations in full.

Laudamus te, benedicimus te,
adoramus te, glorificamus te.

*We praise You, we bless You,
we worship You, we glorify You.*

Gratias agimus tibi

Another *stile antico* fugue where, strictly speaking, the instruments should just double the vocal lines. But towards the end, Bach breaks the rules, and adds independent trumpet parts that add a thrilling extra dimension to the closing bars.

Gratias agimus tibi propter
magnam gloriam tuam.

*We give You thanks
for Your great glory.*

Domine Deus

This lovely tenor and soprano duet is very interesting in the way it handles its text. During the first section of the aria, the two voices never sing the same text phrase at the same time. While one voice sings of God the Father (*Domine Deus, Rex coelestis*), the other sings of God the Son (*Domine Fili unigenite*). But after the central instrumental interlude, both voices combine in the third phrase of the text, *Domine Deus Angus Dei*.

Domine Deus, Rex coelestis,
Deus Pater omnipotens.
Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe.
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei,
Filius Patris.

*Lord God, King of Heaven,
God the Father Almighty.
Lord Jesus Christ, only-begotten Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God,
Son of the Father.*

Qui tollis peccata mundi

This follows on directly from the *Domine Deus*, and the surprise in this music is the haunting and lovely flute lines that weave around the vocal parts. Listen too for the way that the long notes in the vocal parts build up the harmonic tension and dissonance, which is especially effective when the word being held over the long notes is *peccata*, or sin.

Qui tollis peccata mundi,
Miserere nobis.
Qui tollis peccata mundi,
Suscipe deprecationem nostram.

*You who take away the sins of the world,
Have mercy on us.
You who take away the sins of the world,
Hear our prayer.*

Qui sedes ad dextram Patris

This alto aria is essentially a gigue, a dance in 6/8 metre. But as we might expect from Bach, it is not routine and regularly phrased, but a complex and asymmetrical dance. The accompanying instrument is the oboe d'amore, the oboe's deeper, softer toned cousin.

Qui sedes ad dextram Patris,
miserere nobis.

*You who sit at the right hand of the Father,
have mercy on us.*

Quoniam tu solus sanctus

Undoubtedly aimed at the skilled musicians of the Dresden court, this movement was probably also intended as homage to the Elector there, Augustus the Strong. As the horn used is a natural horn – that is, it has no valves to change the length of the tube – all the

notes are formed entirely by the player's lip. With the striking virtuosity of the horn part, it is easy to miss the extraordinary accompaniment for two bassoons that is being played underneath.

Quoniam tu solus sanctus,
tu solus Dominus,
Tu solus altissimus,
Jesu Christe.

*For You alone are holy,
You alone are Lord,
You alone are the Most High,
Jesus Christ.*

Cum Sancto Spiritu

This movement is a parody, a reworking of previously written music. In the original, there would almost certainly have been an opening instrumental introduction.

Cum Sancto Spiritu
in gloria Dei Patris, Amen.

*With the Holy Spirit
in the glory of God the Father, Amen.*

Throughout the *Gloria*, anyone who sings second soprano might have noticed that they often have a very meagre time of it, particularly in the fugal movements. They are usually the last voice to enter the fugue, and even then they often only have a few notes of the theme before being absorbed into the general texture. This is because the models from which most of these movements were taken were probably only in four parts, and so to preserve the five part vocal writing, Bach had to work in an extra part as best he could. But of course if this had ever been performed in Bach's lifetime, with just one voice to a part, the second soprano would have had a moment of real glory, as the virtuosic *Laudamus te* belongs to him (the part would have been sung by a boy or by an adult castrato).

2. Symbolum Nicenum (Credo)

Credo in unum Deum

Based throughout on the traditional chant that forms the intonation for the opening of the Creed, this movement is given a real sense of purpose by the unrelenting walking bass that accompanies it. The fugue subject is presented by each of the five vocal parts in turn, but to add to the complexity Bach then adds two more entries of the subject in the violins.

Credo in unum Deum.

I believe in one God.

Patrem omnipotentem

The vocal lines here are angular and leap quickly from top to bottom of each singer's range, perhaps intended to illustrate the 'heaven and earth' of the text. This movement is also a parody, but as Bach obviously wanted a seamless transition from the A major closing of the previous movement, he had to make some adjustments to allow this movement to start in A major before making its way to its own home key of D major.

Patrem omnipotentem,
factorem coeli et terrae,
visibilium omnium et invisibilium.

*The Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.*

Et in unum Dominum

The music of this duet had an interesting history. While Bach was composing a secular homage cantata for the Elector of Saxony in the 1730's, he obviously was considering this music because part of it is written – and then crossed out – on the back of one of the pages of the score of that cantata. Notice how the instrumental lines, when their notes are very close, are differentiated by different articulation.

<p>Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum, et ex patre natum ante omnia saecula; Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero. Genitum non factum, consubstantialem Patri; per quem omnia facta sunt. Qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem descendit de coelis.</p>	<p><i>And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father; God from God, light from light, True God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father; through Him all things were made. For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven.</i></p>
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Et incarnatus est

Bach originally intended this text to be included in the previous number, but at the last minute he composed this extra movement, one of the few originally composed movements in the whole Mass. There is a sense here of both tension and stillness, as dissonance and resolution in the harmony is built up over repeated bass notes. The pattern in the orchestra of repeated crotchets in the bass line with slurred paired quavers in the violins is broken right at the end of the movement, where the slurred quavers are also played by the bass.

<p>Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto, ex Maria virgine, et homo factus est.</p>	<p><i>He was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.</i></p>
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Crucifixus

This is both the emotional and the structural heart of the whole *Symbolum*. The fact that it was originally composed for an earlier cantata (*Weinen, kalgen, sorgen, zagen* or Weeping, wailing, lamenting, fearing), does not take away from its suitability for the *Crucifixus* text.

The structure of this short movement is extraordinary. It is built on 13 repetitions of a common ground bass known as the *passus duriusculus*, used countless times by baroque composers to symbolise sorrow and death. (The famous lament, 'When I am laid in earth' from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* is another well known example.) In the hands of a lesser composer, the repetition of the bass would also bring about the repetition of the supporting harmony, but not Bach. In this setting, every harmonic possibility of the bass notes is explored, and we barely notice the repetitions. Only in the final two bars is the sequence broken, when the harmony takes an unexpected turn to the relative major key, as Christ is laid gently to rest.

<p>Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, passus et sepultus est.</p>	<p><i>For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered death and was buried.</i></p>
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Et resurrexit

Inevitably, the resurrection is accompanied by trumpets and drums in bright D major. This movement contains a moment of pure glory for our basses, as they sing the long line on *et iterum venturus est*.

<p>Et resurrexit tertia die secundum Scripturas, et ascendit in coelum, sedet ad dexteram Patris; et iterum venturus est cum gloria, iudicare vivos et mortuos, cujus regni non erit finis.</p>	<p><i>On the third day He rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; He ascended to heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father; He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.</i></p>
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Et in Spiritum Sanctum

This is one of a family of gentle, pastoral style settings for bass, often accompanied by oboes d'amore – think of *Mache dich mein Herze rein* from the St Matthew Passion, for example, or the solo cantata *Schlummert ein*. There is a beautiful simplicity in the orchestral scoring here, for just the two oboes d'amore and the continuo group.

Et in Spiritum Sanctum Dominum,
et vivificantem, qui ex Patre
Filioque procedit,
qui cum Patre et Filio
simul adoratur et conglorificatur,
qui locutus est per Prophetas.
Et unam sanctam catholicam
et apostolicam Ecclesiam;

And I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of Life, who
proceeds from the Father and the Son;
with the Father and the Son He is
worshipped and glorified.
He has spoken through the prophets.
I believe in one holy catholic
and apostolic Church;

Confiteor – et expecto

The *Confiteor* movement is remarkable in many ways. The opening theme is modelled on the plainchant that was used for this part of the Mass text. Having worked this theme out, Bach then presents a second theme for the text *in remissionem peccatorum*. Then, as we should probably expect from Bach, both of these are brought together as a double fugue. As if that were not enough, the plainchant itself is then reintroduced, now in direct quotation, first sung by the basses and the altos, and then in augmentation by the tenors.

Once the tenor quotation of the chant is complete, Bach begins a section of surprising harmonic complexity. We know this passage caused even him some trouble to write, because of the number of alterations and crossings out in the score. The text at this point is *et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (I expect the resurrection of the dead), but it is as if at first the expectation is not entirely sure. But faith, as it were, intervenes, and with a blaze of trumpets and D major, all doubt is removed. We also suddenly understand at this point why in the preceding *Confiteor* section the voices were accompanied only by the continuo group, as the sudden addition of the other instruments underlies the certainty of the resurrection.

Confiteor unum baptisma
in remissionem peccatorum,
et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum,
et vitam venturi saeculi. Amen.

*I acknowledge one baptism
or the forgiveness of sins;
I look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

3. Sanctus

This *Sanctus* was first composed by Bach for Christmas in 1724, and was originally scored for three sopranos, alto, tenor and bass. As with so many other *Sanctus* settings, the idea of 'three-ness' runs through this movement; the vocal parts often sing in groups of three, the slower opening section uses triplets throughout, the second fugal section (*Pleni sunt coeli et terra*) is in triple time, and the movement is scored for three trumpets and three oboes.

(Incidentally, in St George's, if you look up at the reredos above the stage, you will see the words *Agios, Agios, Agios* – Greek for Holy, Holy, Holy.)

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus,
Dominus Deus Sabaoth.
Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua.

*Holy, Holy, Holy,
Lord God of Hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.*

4. Osanna, Benedictus, Agnus Dei et Dona Nobis Pacem

Osanna in excelsis

This movement is scored for two 4-part choirs, and is another in the celebratory, D major, triple time family. It is modelled on a movement from a secular homage cantata, and the opening instrumental ritornello has been removed.

Osanna in excelsis.

Hosanna in the highest.

Benedictus

Unfortunately, Bach somehow forgot to specify which obligato instrument should be used to accompany the tenor soloist for this movement. The flute, though, seems the obvious choice, given that the range is suitable, and given that Bach often used the combination of flute and tenor voice in other works.

After the *Benedictus*, the *Osanna* is repeated.

Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini. *Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.*

Agnus Dei

Both this movement, and the aria *Ach bleibe doch* from the Ascension Oratorio, BWV11 are derived from the same (now lost) model. There was considerable reworking involved in creating the *Agnus Dei*. Despite the fact that this movement is a reworking, Bach has still managed to make the music meaningfully fit the words. Notice for example the fact that the word *peccata* (sin) is so often set on an awkward or dissonant musical phrase, a very common gesture for Bach.

Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis.

*Lamb of God, who takes away the
sin of the world, have mercy on us.*

Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi,

*Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of
the world,*

Dona nobis pacem

The Mass is brought to a noble and valedictory end by this movement, an exact reworking of the *Gratias agimus tibi* that we heard during the *Gloria*.

Dona nobis pacem.

grant us peace.