

BACH'S GLORY
Two Views of the Gloria of the Mass in B-Minor
 For the ASO Chamber Chorus
 by Jeffrey Baxter | November 14, 2012

OVERVIEW

Notice below Bach's organization of the Gloria text that he chose to set as individual movements. It is, as in many of his works, a classic gothic cathedral-like chiasmic structure, symbolizing the cross:

Keys
B-Min. / D-Maj.

I
 V
 I
 IV ←---(central movement)---
 i vi/iii
 i vi
 I

GLORIA

- 1. Gloria in excelsis (*chorus*)
- 2. Et in terra pax
- 3. Laudamus te (*Sop., violin*) - [str.solo]
- 4. Gratias agimus tibi (*chorus*)
- 5. Domine Deus (*S/T, flute*) - [ww solo]
- 6. Qui tollis peccata mundi (*chorus*)
- 7. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris (*Alto, ob. d'amore*) - [ww solo]
- 8. Quoniam tu solus sanctus (*Bass, horn*) - [brass solo]
- 9. Cum Sancto Spiritu (*chorus*)

There is also sacred numerology present: the Kyrie consists of 3 movements (representing the Trinity); both the Gloria and the Credo have 9 movements each (3 x 3), and the entire *Missa* totals 27 movements as divided by Bach (3x3x3).

Several of the Gloria's movements are paired or marked "sequitur," indicating temporal relationships for the conductor and performers. All four solo voices are represented (S,A,T,B), and each family of the orchestra is represented in the solo *obbligati* (string, woodwind, brass). The choice of keys is intentional and logical – beginning and ending in D – with the central movement (Domine Deus) in the subdominant, "bowing (as Albert Schweitzer was wont to say) to the will of God."

SOME AMAZING DETAILS

1. Gloria in excelsis

Because it is modeled on a preexisting piece of Bach's, he made it fit this text and his purposes here by alternating a traditional *ritornello* form (instrumental interludes, ms. 34 and 66) with ritornelli that have the chorus "built in" (*einbaut*) in ms. 25, 41. There are even "hidden" ritornelli at m. 77 dovetailed with vocal sections. –But mostly this is in a giant dance-form: a joyous 3/8 *Gigue*. The choral *hemiola* at ms. 99-100 suggests the upcoming tactus for "Et in terra pax," where the eighth-note remains constant.

2. Et in terra pax

The basic dance character of a *Gavotte* (3-4-ONE-2) is transformed at first to a weighty statement over several pedal points, the one over an E-pedal at ms. 13 recalling the great Part I final chorus of the Matthew Passion, "O Mensch beweine deine Sünde gross" – all suggesting a peace longed-for but not yet attained. But darkness gives way to light as the fugue ensues at m. 21, with its ascending countersubject (ms. 23-24) fusing the sacred and secular in its re-working of the material from Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 1. (listen here, in this performance at 0:15: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zpf38dQpMzk>).

3. Laudamus te

Bach chooses to "praise, bless and worship" God with the most well crafted, fine musical "woodwork" one could imagine – like a beautifully carved altarpiece. The solo violin's opening measure tricks the listener to believe he is hearing a combination of 3/8 followed by 2/8 and 2/8 measures, but the whole movement, with its many pick-up notes turns out to be a set of compressed *Bourrée* dance gestures (4-ONE-2-3). The fine "woodworking" comes in the ritornelli that are dovetailed with the vocal sections, sometimes so much so that many are "hidden," or obscured, even "false" as the solo violin entry at m. 15.

4. Gratias agimus tibi

Based on Bach's opening chorus for Cantata #29, "Wir danken dir Gott," it is here a Latin translation of that German text. Most notably, it is this music – a *ricercar*-type old fashioned *alla breve* fugue that Bach brings back at the very end of the Mass to the text "Dona nobis pacem" – a triple transformation of his music that suggests at the Mass's end not a petition for peace but an arrival at a peace already attained (or freely given, in grace-based Lutheran thinking).

5. Domine Deus

In the Gloria's central movement, the Trinity is represented by the three soloists:

Flute – Holy Spirit, fluttering above a *pizzicato* bass

Tenor – Father (sings the text, “Domine Deus” at m. 17; switches text with Sop. at m. 25)

Soprano – Son (sings the text, “Domine Fili” at m. 17; switches text with Tenor at m. 25)

Near the end, in m. 93, the soprano's three notes sung on “Ag-nus De-(i)” (f#-d-b) foreshadow the first three notes sung in the next movement:

6. Qui tollis peccata mundi

Norman commented at our last rehearsal on the amazingly lush harmonic language and the “painful” long suspensions in the voice parts. It is a Renaissance-style motet pitted against a canon between two flutes who hover halo-like above the voices. One fascinating detail is Bach's conscious choice of non-harmonic tones in m. 13 (alto) and m. 14 (tenor): it is the same “cross” motive found throughout his passion settings – a melody that crosses over itself, often in an anguished sounding way.

7. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris

This movement is similar in style to the *Polonaise* in Bach's Orchestral Suite No. 2 in B-Minor, but with more sophisticated dovetailed phrasing. The opening melody, with its descending gestures (played first by the plaintive oboe d'amore, then sung by the alto) suggests genuflection. One writer has even suggested that the oboe's *hemiola* heard in m. 3 suggests (or should dictate) the tempo of the previous movement.

8. Quoniam tu solus sanctus

Interesting that “the most High” should be depicted by the deepest forces possible: bass voice, bassoons, continuo (cello and bass) and horn. Interesting too that the first measure of music in the bassoons provides a rhythmic link to the next movement:



(cum San - cto Spi - ri - tu)

9. Cum Sancto Spiritu

The grand finale for chorus and full orchestra generates a choreatic, Pentacostal fervor, especially in its *stretto* entrances at ms. 85-111. Amen!

Robert Shaw summed it up most eloquently at our performances in 1998:

“It is reasonable, it seems to me, to question the propriety of performing a work of music so specifically and exhaustively theological in text in so secular a setting, before an audience ranging in religious preference from the totally contrary to the totally committed, and ranging philosophically from welcome through indifference to distrust.

Certainly the masses of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, with their four to six movements are almost symphonic in nature and more appropriate to this hall.

Somehow, however, the fact that extra seats have had to be added for these performances attests to the unique position that Bach's *Mass in B Minor* holds in the minds and hearts of men and women of all faiths -- and no faith at all -- except perhaps the oneness of humankind with the universe, and the responsibility of human life to seek beauty and to do good.

It may well be true that Bach's *Mass in B Minor* -- assembled, no less than created -- has become, some two hundred and fifty years after he bound its 27 movements together, the most remarkable musical allegory of human existence -- its pain, aspiration and promises.”

Jeffrey Baxter

Choral Administrator

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra