

13

The Habit of Perfection

Perfection is achieved, it seems, not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.

– after Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des Hommes* (1939)

Ky-ri-e ... Ky-ri-e ... Ky-ri-e e-le-i-son!

The inscribing of that initial three-fold *Kyrie* in sound at the outset of Bach's *B minor Mass* seems almost a physical act, one in which each of us – as listener or performer – is individually or collectively involved. Those four dense, action-packed bars are presented to us as an imposing succession of imploring gestures – just as graphic in their way as an altar-tableau by a Titian or a Rubens. From the downbeat of that first massive B minor chord and its anguished sequel, our expectations have been alerted. At the conclusion of these bars an immense solemn fugue begins to open out, bearing with it a measured sense of prayer. We soon realise that we have been launched on one of the most epic of all journeys in music, a setting of the Ordinary of the Mass unprecedented in its scale, majesty and sobriety. Once aboard, anchors weighed, we are there for the duration – the next hundred minutes or so – to disembark only when the final chord invoking *pacem* ('peace') has vanished into the ether.

To the unsuspecting listener such a strong sense of inexorable unfolding would imply an uninterrupted, start-to-finish conception and execution in the composer's mind. But the facts and what we can glean of Bach's interrupted steps in constructing his great Mass suggest otherwise. It is only in the last three decades that scholars have generally agreed that Bach completed the Mass in the last two years of his life. The seeds of its inception, however, lie some forty years earlier, during those exploratory years he spent at the ducal court of Weimar – an early version of one of its movements, the *Crucifixus*, was indeed composed there. He would have been aware that his friend and cousin J. G. Walther had formulated a project to set the *Kyrie* from the Mass as a *de profundis*, a cry from the depths by the embattled sinner, basing it on the chorale *Aus tiefer Not schrei*

ich zu dir (Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 130).¹ No trace of Walther's work remains; yet perhaps Bach remembered it when he himself set Luther's *de profundis* chorale in the *Clavier-Übung III*. Significantly he set it in the harsh, anguished key of F minor, which Bach reserved for his most poignant, sin-burdened movements. It resembles both in mood (*Kyrie I*) and key (*Kyrie II*) the urgent entreaties of a beleaguered soul in Bach's *Missa*. A different and shorter *Kyrie* and *Agnus Dei* pairing (BWV 233a) has survived from these Weimar years; then no further Mass settings for another quarter of a century.

It was in his middle years that Bach turned his mind to setting Latin texts. What drew him to the idea of setting the complete Mass, with its immutable Catholic text in Latin, is far from certain: in any case it was an unusual form for an eighteenth-century Lutheran composer to essay. Luther had sanctioned its continued usage in liturgical worship, notwithstanding the sturdy vernacular versions of the Greek and Latin originals he bequeathed to his followers. His main concern was for full, universal comprehensibility – and in this Luther could have misjudged the tenacious attachment by the more conservative members of his congregation to the old Latin. So, the twin movements of the Greek *Kyrie* and its sequel, the Latin *Gloria*, survived to constitute the short *Missa* in Lutheran liturgical parlance alongside their new German-language equivalents. Bach's first attempt in the shorter genre was composed in 1733. It is certainly difficult for us now experiencing those monumental opening bars not to hear them as anything other than the harbingers of his complete Mass. Perhaps that indeed was Bach's plan from the outset, but there is no way for us to be sure. Initially, at least, these bars were but the prelude to the two-movement work he dedicated to the new Elector of Saxony, Friedrich August II. It is entirely plausible that at the time Bach saw this presentation *Missa* as a work *sui generis*, sufficient in itself. Many years would need to pass before it occurred to him to incorporate the Dresden *Missa* as the opening pair of movements of the *Missa tota* with which we are so familiar. Such ambiguity of function and purpose is typical of the piecemeal origins of the *B minor Mass*, which, to the consternation of its

nineteenth-century admirers, did not spring complete and fully armed from the imaginative head of its creator. It required years of gestation and assimilation, and for Bach most probably there may never have been the satisfaction of experiencing it directly through performance and so no opportunity to put it to the test as a summation for posterity of his compositional skills.

b

Having encountered Bach at his workbench in the Thomasschule, we can picture him leafing through the scores of those 150 or so cantatas on which he had lavished so much creative invention in his early Leipzig years, wondering what would become of them. In black moods he may have feared that they would end up being used as scrap paper or firelighters.^a Setting the complete Latin Mass, this immutable statement of faith, to music was one way to step aside from the specific and parochial context of his church cantatas, slanted to the weekly homily and geared to illustrating the Sunday sermon, and to uncover fresh compositional challenges. For Bach, as a Christian, the Bible had enormous referential value. It had furnished him with scripts for musical dramas and offered him parables and stories to which everyone of his congregation could relate. In its Latin form, the Ordinary of the Mass allowed him to concentrate on universal themes and in a language weathered by time. At all stages in Christian history it has provided a point of reference and the central means by which individuals can find and redeem themselves. Bach helps us, his interpreters and listeners, towards that end. More than that, through his passionate engagement with the text of the Latin Mass, Bach makes a forward leap, staking out new areas for music to illumine and expound biblical doctrine. His Latin Mass setting is thus both a repository of human doubts and tussles of faith, and a celebration of birth and life. For, compared with other musical approaches to Mass settings of the time, Bach's gave a fresh emphasis to the human story within

it. A narrative filament runs all through his Mass, rising to the surface at key moments, such as the appearance of the angels to the shepherds in the *Gloria in excelsis*, and in the three linked movements at the centre of the Nicene Creed, the *Et incarnatus*, the *Crucifixus* and the *Et resurrexit*. But the most poignantly human moment is reserved for that ghostly bridge-passage that links the *Confiteor* to the *Et expecto*. In these extraordinary bars we can detect traces of Bach's own struggles – with tonality, counterpoint and harmony – but perhaps even with belief. The human emphasis here is presented to us as a bulwark against the fear we habitually feel of the terror of the dark. He lets us feel that terror – because he may have felt it, too, and knew how to overcome it.

In 1733 the completion of the Mass lay a long way in the future. The glimmer of an idea of how to improve his situation in Leipzig, or even to escape it altogether, came to him sometime during his forty-ninth year. We have already seen how around this time his professional situation in Leipzig had deteriorated (see [Chapter 6](#)). The new burgomaster, Jacob Born (see [Plate 11e](#)), having spoken directly to Bach and tried to force him to take his teaching duties more seriously, reported back to the council that 'he shows little inclination to work'² and had attempted to have him disqualified from continuing in office.

Despite signs of genuine approbation from his students, in his beleaguered state Bach's willingness to channel all his creative energies into the service of the Thomasschule and the music-hungry liturgy of the town's churches had clearly diminished. Yet there is no reason to conclude that his creative genius was suddenly dormant. It simply needed another outlet. Three years earlier he had told the Leipzig councillors to look to the Dresden Court to see how music can and should be organised. This was not so much a case of sour grapes as a simple acknowledgement that a far higher value was placed on music and its practitioners in the Saxon capital than in Leipzig. There, the glamorous array of musical talent could enable a composer of Bach's professional standing and ambitions to operate and prosper – or so he thought.^b Everything points to an understandable desire on his part to escape the confines of Leipzig

and to become a part of that talent, rather as he had in his Cöthen years. He was already on friendly terms with many of the Dresden musicians and had good reason to see his professional future linked in some substantive way with that of the Electoral Court. Just then, however, a vacancy for organist presented itself at the Sophienkirche, where Bach had previously given acclaimed organ recitals. Ever the shrewd operator of the family network (and, at the outset of his career, as we have seen, very much its beneficiary), Bach set his sights on this prestigious opening – not for himself, but for Wilhelm Friedemann, his eldest son, by then already an accomplished musician. So with the zeal typical of a solicitous father, he wrote Friedemann's two letters of application himself, but under his son's signature. To make absolutely sure that his candidature was cast-iron, Bach even copied his own Prelude and Fugue in G (BWV 541) and, just as a precaution, placed it in Friedemann's music case ready for his audition on 22 June. He need not have worried. Friedemann was offered the position and received warm commendation from within the Dresden Court Capelle.

Bach now had a valid excuse to travel to Dresden to help his son settle in. Scooping up Anna Magdalena and his three eldest children, he set off. Barely a month after leaving Leipzig, he presented a petition to the Elector, Friedrich August II, requesting a court title – ‘a *Predicate* ... in your Hoff-Capelle’ – along with a beautifully written set of twenty-one parts of his new *Missa*. This left him a bare month in which to complete the two opening movements of one of his most monumental church compositions. The autograph score – but significantly not the presentation parts – is written out on Leipzig paper of the sort he had been using for the past six months, so that it is possible he had already begun the *Missa*, or at least its opening *Kyrie*, during the Lenten period following the death of August the Strong (1 February 1733). This was a time when concerted music was forbidden in the Leipzig churches, and his duties as Thomascantor (though not his teaching obligations) were less onerous. Two questions arise: was the opening *Kyrie* first performed on 21 April 1733, when the new Prince-Elector visited

Leipzig for the Oath of Fealty?³ And, from the sporadic errors of transposition in his autograph score, can we assume that Bach was copying from an original version in C minor? If so, perhaps it was this version of the eventual *Kyrie I* (but so far without those imposing four bars we referred to at the outset) that was performed in April 1733 in Leipzig. Yet this would hardly have been the most tactful moment for presenting the new Elector with a score or parts, let alone a petition for a court title.

The *Gloria* would certainly have been considered inappropriate during what was still a period of official mourning. Almost all of its nine movements can be shown to have originated in previous compositions, some now lost. So when, at the end of June, he set off for Dresden, Bach may have had the basic outline of the *Missa* already present in his mind and with new ideas as to which of his earlier compositions would be most suitable for inclusion. It would still require phenomenal skill to refit them within the pre-existing structure of the Ordinary before the new *Missa* was ready and parts could be copied. The watermarks of the parts presented to the Elector clearly indicate that the paper originated in Dresden. Some are in his own elegant hand, others in that of the family members accompanying him there – but not written by Thomasschule students in the weekly sweatshop where the cantata parts were normally copied out. On close inspection they are full of the kind of detail that makes sense only in the context of an actual or an imminent performance.

What seems to have happened is this. Bach, as head of the family, having directed his eldest son towards securing the organist post at the Sophienkirche, now saw a clear opening for himself in the professional employ of the Dresden Court. To this end the composition of a new Mass tailored to the talents of the court Capelle and conforming to the idioms of Mass-settings then current seemed an obvious tactic, a tactful adjunct to his request for a court title. Bach doubtless exhorted his family to make a heroic joint effort in support of his scheme. Once having completed both *Kyrie* and *Gloria*, he set them to work copying the parts directly from his autograph score. They had to be flawless, as this was to be a

presentation set to be offered to the Elector. For the grand title page, the wrapper and his florid petition he thought it advisable to enlist the help of the official copyist for the council commission in Dresden, Gottfried Rausch. At the back of his mind was the hope that this would clear a way for him to make an honourable exit from the drudgery of Leipzig, or at the very least to obtain a court title to act as a hedge against further affronts by the Leipzig councilmen.

It is only by making a careful comparison of the parts and the score that we can begin to unlock their secrets. Emanuel, his second son, then a nineteen-year-old law student at Leipzig University (though still living with his parents), was entrusted with copying out the two soprano parts. Admonished to make no error, we can follow his way of discreetly entering marker dots in his father's autograph so as to keep his place every time he starts a new page. Then he makes a slip: midway through the *Christe* he arrives at a bar ending with a tied B³. Both the next two lines of the autograph begin with a tied B³, as it happens. Inadvertently he skips a line and is obliged to enter the missing line at the foot of the page. This was an easy mistake to make – unimportant in itself – but it could have arisen only if he were copying directly from the autograph score and not from a pre-existing set of (Leipzig) parts. It confirms therefore (besides other supporting evidence) that the *Missa*, if not conceived there, was carried out *in* Dresden and *for* Dresden.^c

The obvious and desirable outcome should have been a performance of this short, two-movement Mass, or *Missa corta* – ideally in the presence of its dedicatee, the Elector. It would have been entirely in character if Bach had prepared the ground for this by enlisting the support of his more influential colleagues and friends within the Dresden Court Capelle. But we cannot be sure that it ever materialised, or, if so, where it took place. It was liturgically appropriate for either the Sophienkirche, where son Friedemann was now ensconced,^d or the Catholic Hofkirche, where the court Capelle regularly performed on solemn feast-days, complete with its troupe of operatic solo singers. There are enough features of Bach's score and the way it resembles the large

Neapolitan-style Mass-settings that were just coming into fashion in Dresden to suggest that it had been crafted with this particular ensemble in view – arias for the individual vocal soloists newly recruited from Italy in 1730 and for the several virtuoso instrumentalists within the Capelle. He himself had heard four out of five of the new castrati taking the leads in Johann Adolph Hasse's opera *Cleofide* in 1731, and was thus well placed to adjust his solo music to their capabilities and vocal ranges when composing his *Missa*.^e

In the same way, his orchestral writing gave plenty of opportunities for displaying the stylistic versatility and the virtuosity that he admired in the court orchestra and singled out for praise in his ‘Entwurff’ (see [Chapter 7, this page](#)). Bach would have been made aware by his friends that there had been a major shake-up of the musical Capelle since the time of his first visit in 1717, both in personnel and stylistic orientation. Not only had the entire French comedy and dance company who had served August the Strong been dismissed, but there had been a reduction in the number of instrumentalists, and only six boy choristers remained. The musical side of the liturgy was now in the hands of the court orchestra, the *Musici regii* operating under new regulations. With Capellmeister Hasse abroad, it was directed by Bach’s Bohemian friend, Jan Dismas Zelenka. At full strength the Dresden Hofcapelle could muster twenty-six string players to perform both operas and, on solemn occasions, music in church. This was in addition to the multiple woodwind and horns and the separate (and greatly privileged) ensemble of twelve court trumpeters (*Hoftrompeter*) and two timpanists. It could claim to be one of Europe’s top-ranking orchestras, but perhaps not at this particular juncture, when its members, jittery because of the recent dismissals, were submitting a flood of petitions relating to back pay and promotions to the Elector’s chancellery.^f

Tempting as it is to envisage Bach supervising a star-studded premiere of his embryonic *B minor Mass* in the congenial and well-rehearsed company of his Dresden friends, we lack all proof. It is just as likely that he was, at most, a mere spectator, and that if a

Dresden performance did in fact take place, it was either Friedemann, encouraged by his father (and naturally keen to show his own credentials so soon after his appointment), who was in sole charge, or Zelenka. This notion is supported by the evidence of the continuo part, which is unusually explicit, not just in terms of figured bass, but also in providing cues for the separate voice entries – valuable, indispensable even, as a mnemonic for a continuo-director to keep a track of the performance, but totally superfluous had Bach as composer been in charge.

Performance or no performance, there was no immediate response from the Elector. Preoccupied with issues of international diplomacy, in 1734 he moved his court to Warsaw for the next two years. Bach would just have to bide his time along with other petitioners such as Zelenka, who in any case might have felt that, having served as the acting head of the church ensemble since the 1720s, he had a prior claim. Bach nevertheless kept up the pressure by producing no fewer than eight secular cantatas in the Elector's honour or that of his family – a none too subtle means of jogging his memory.⁸ It took a further three years, a second letter of application and intercession by the Russian diplomat Count Keyserlingk before Bach finally received his coveted court appointment in Dresden – and even then it brought with it no financial reward sufficient to justify a move from Leipzig. His name finally appeared alongside Zelenka's in the list of composers of church music at the Saxon and Polish courts in the *Hof- und Staats-Calender* of 1738. Meanwhile the combined incomes of Capellmeister Hasse and his diva wife – who for long stretches of time were absent from Dresden – amounted to sixteen times that of Bach's Leipzig salary.

There is an alternative scenario – plausible, too – in which the *Missa* did make its mark and on the very musicians with whom Bach so hoped to be associated, those of the Dresden Hofkapelle – Zelenka, Pisendel, Buffardin and others. All except Zelenka (who was then in Vienna) would have remembered Bach's walkover victory in the rather contrived contest with Louis Marchand, the French virtuoso keyboard player, back in 1717. More recently, he had given organ recitals in 1725 and 1731 'in the presence of all the

Court musicians and virtuosos in a fashion that compelled the admiration of everyone'.⁴ So they already had ample proof of his all-round talents. Regardless of whether they took part in a performance of his Mass or not, in 1733, the manuscript parts would have passed from hand to hand for scrutiny and evaluation. Normally it would have been Hasse as Capellmeister who would have been first to pass judgement on a new score; next in line came Zelenka, for some time past the most active musical director in Dresden during the declining years of Hasse's predecessor, Johann David Heinichen. So far it has not proved possible to unravel the chain of influences in the Zelenka / Bach relationship, but it looks very much as though it were two-way traffic: Zelenka impressing Bach with his performances of large-scale Neapolitan Masses by Sarro and Mancini and of his own works in a similar style; Bach returning the compliment in the way he styled his own *Missa* along Dresden lines; Zelenka then reciprocating with his own tribute, the *Missa Sanctissima Trinitatis* of 1736, which manifestly owed a great deal to Bach's *Kyrie I*.

Even the most sceptical of the Dresden Court musicians could have seen that here in Bach's Mass was a work well attuned to their own house style (and even to the individual talents of their ensemble). Many of the Mass-settings they regularly performed by composers such as Lotti, Caldara, Sarro, Mancini and others, for all their opulence and grandeur, lacked musical substance. Bach's setting extended well beyond these counterparts, and by any objective standards his *Missa* was on a totally different level of invention and complexity. Even in this two-movement form, it already constituted a major work in its own right, testimony to Bach's habit of surpassing all the models he assimilated. This could be the main reason why it does not seem to have formed part of the repertoire of the court chapel.^h Probably no one at that stage foresaw that it was to be just the starting-point for a *Missa tota*, and one of the most substantial and indeed epic of all Bach's works. That lay some way in the future – and, arguably, the best of it was still to come.

b

The first thing that would have struck the Dresden musicians was the immense seriousness and grandeur of the opening exordium of the *Kyrie*. They would have sensed its emergence as an impassioned *de profundis* – the sinner’s cry of help to a forgiving God. Choral writing on this scale was unprecedented, even in Dresden. The principal theme of Bach’s opening *Kyrie* begins with a graceful gesture in dotted rhythm and then promptly divides: an ascending, aspiring delineation of prayer, balanced by a responding sigh, more instrumental – like one of his two-part Inventions – than vocal. Ask any singer: it is not easy to keep alive the sense of uplift in the prayer motif while preparing for the appoggiated sigh without chopping the upper line short. The way that the solemn yet lilting fugue stretches out so naturally and coherently in a single panoramic sweep suggests that the momentum needs to be maintained, the pacing deliberate but not comatose, dignified but never plodding. For all its twists and turns of harmonic tension, the fugue subject itself stays constant throughout. Only its tailpiece gets altered, first flattened, then raised. These modifications serve as ‘episodes’ between the fugal expositions – moments for the listener to step aside and reflect before the procession moves on again. Once re-absorbed within the fugue’s development these same intervallic tags are stretched wider and wider. Like a painter allowing the brush in his hand to take temporary charge in shaping a design, one senses Bach, the born improviser, taking momentary control here: the tension is ratcheted upwards – once (bars 92–4), then a second time (99–101) even more emphatically – thrilling in performance. One’s attention is drawn to the second soprano line: they seem to be the ones generating all this collective energy. In the process it is easy to miss the fact that it is precisely their fugal entry (in the subdominant) that paves the way for the first sopranos to re-enter (on the tonic) and so to instigate the smoothly effected recapitulation. Bach has whipped up a storm. Yet he has carried all his participants safely through the start of the journey, and at the

movement's satisfying conclusion he leaves them chastened but not browbeaten.

Next he enjoins his performers and listeners to follow that epic and polyphonic plea to the Lord with a matching – but far warmer and personal – appeal to the Son. The *Christe eleison* is expressed in the intimate language of a Neapolitan love-duet for two sopranos – home territory to the Dresden Court musicians – in which the singers glide over their parallel thirds and sixths in perfect euphony. No sooner is it over than the appeal to the Lord is resumed, this time with still greater urgency. The stern granite-like outlines of this *Kyrie II* are sculpted in a deliberately archaic style, an impression mitigated by the rhythmic drive and rich harmonic density of a four-part choral fugue. This is not art made to downcast. It exhibits a rare combination of complex musical elaboration and sheer generosity of spirit. Bach's own plea for forgiveness is woven into the fabric of his music, just as Rembrandt's features peer out at us from his *The Stoning of St Stephen*, 'claiming no halo of special piety', as Nigel Spivey observes; 'he is simply there.'⁵ So, in this moment, is Bach.

No sooner has the curtain come down on this sombre penitential scene than it is raised again. We might expect the new tableau to depict the heavenly host of angels appearing to the shepherds. This, of course, is the way Handel paints it in *Messiah*: in 'Glory to God' a distant angelic battalion approaches, delivers its message and then retreats into the heavens – naive, theatrical and highly effective. But that is not Bach's way. In his *Christmas Oratorio* his angelic choir will appear to consist entirely of expert contrapuntists. Here, on the contrary, he startles us with his announcement of the *Gloria* as a decidedly earthly dance. There is no upbeat: the music just explodes into action. With its alternation of strong and weak bars in triple time, this is clearly a celebration that is taking place not up in the skies but down here. It is more peasant stomp than dainty celestial waftings, more Bruegel than Botticelli.

Making their first festive appearance in the Mass, the three trumpets and drums galvanise the whole ensemble. It is they who instigate – but do not efface – the exuberant swirling figuration

within the rest of the band. Leading off in the ‘royal’ key of D major with trumpets was standard fare in the Saxon capital, but the writing there seldom reached this degree of sophistication, with the players swapping parts and vying with each other for stratospheric supremacy. The style Bach used to propel the choral voices into action in imitation of the trumpet theme, their ends of phrases cascading like fireworks, had no equivalent in the sort of music customarily heard in the Dresden churches. Bach, as ever, makes not the slightest concession towards vocal, as opposed to instrumental, style. He fully expects the human larynx to be able to function with exactly the same agility as lips pressed to brass tubing or fingers slammed down on wooden fingerboards.ⁱ The interjection of an occasional bar’s rest is less to give the singers a chance to breathe than for rhetorical effect: to isolate and punctuate their shouts of *Gloria!* A fine web of intricate contrapuntal detail is spun from the eighteen separate vocal and instrumental lines, here compressed into a mere hundred bars of *vivace* triple rhythm. Culminating in the swagger of a collective hemiola – a clear indication of the new unit beat – this great dance flows seamlessly into the proclamation of ‘peace on earth’.

There are signs that Bach might once again be having mild fun at the expense of the theologians. First he invites us to celebrate the night Christ was born on *earth* with a festive jamboree (not, like Handel, with the angels *in excelsis*). Then, switching to common time, he introduces the calm prayer for peace as though led by the angels – *et in terra pax*. It has the hallmark of an operatic *scène du sommeil* in Lully’s mould: caressing and soothing in its initial syncopated outline, as phrases are exchanged between choir, upper strings and upper woodwind. It also reads beautifully as ‘eye’ music: in the autograph score the instruments seem to drift upwards away from the fixed bass pedal, like prayers floating heavenwards. We might have guessed that all this is just preparation for a grand vocal fugue, its gentle theme aspiring and its counter-subject made up of the roulades of the earlier *Gloria* dance – now blues-like in the way they seem to vault over the regular bar-lines and the gentle beat-to-beat punctuation of the instruments. The magic of this fugal prayer

now begins to take effect. The voices conjoin to proclaim ‘good will to all men’ (*bonae voluntatis*) and the instruments immediately answer in assent. Even the trumpets are propelled back into action, as though to confirm the imminence of God’s gift of peace on earth.

We or the Dresden musicians – it matters not which – have been shown how an essential part of Bach’s overall design for his *Gloria* is to vary the texture by exchanging public (choral) with private (solo) utterance. There are no recitatives in the Ordinary of the Mass to break these satisfying alternations of movement and scale, and Bach is very particular in the way that he indicates the intended flow and pacing of successive movements by means of pauses, double bars, the absence of both, the merging of one section into the next, or the simple injunction *sequitur*. For the ensuing *Laudamus*, despite its plural pronoun (‘we praise thee, we bless thee’, etc.), he narrows the focus here to a single singer, an obbligato violin and the string ensemble in support. The challenge for both performer and listener is not to be flummoxed by all the ornamentation – the plethora of trills he scatters along its path. To know that he could count on the combined technical virtuosity of a violinist like Johann Georg Pisendel, the Dresden Concertmeister, and an accomplished soprano such as Faustina Bordoni (if it was indeed she who first sang the *Laudamus* and not one of the castrati) must have been reassuring for Bach. It was Faustina, according to Charles Burney, who ‘in a manner invented a new kind of singing, by running divisions with a neatness and velocity which astonished all who heard her’.⁶ Essentially the *Laudamus* is a simple binary folk-melody which he has decorated with garlands of improvisatory ornaments – *fioretti*, or ‘little flowers’, as his cousin J. G. Walther called them – meat and drink to an Italian opera-trained diva or a castrato. Success in this movement depends on the two solo performers keeping the essential ‘bones’ of the folk-melody always to the fore, on making adequate provision for breath between the phrases and on gliding effortlessly through Bach’s thicket of embellishments. In particular the solo violin needs space and time to hover high above the voice line, like Vaughan Williams’s *Lark Ascending*, while supported by the thermal currents – the accompanying figures of the lower strings.

Even before this free spirit has landed, in the ensuing silence a monkish sound of men's voices intoning *Gratias agimus tibi* is heard in a version of the Gregorian chant *Non nobis Domine*, one of the oldest canons in all Western music. Here he is re-working and transcribing the opening chorus of a cantata (BWV 29) for the Leipzig municipal elections of 1731. We can watch him adjusting a German-texted theme, eliminating its strong tonic accents (*wir danken*) by widening the bars into 'breve' units (despite the confusing and corrupt *alla breve* appellation) to make room for the new Latin words (*Gratias agimus tibi*). With the second clause – *propter magnam gloriam* – we are propelled forwards again into the world of Baroque figural music, now firmly locked into diatonic harmony and defined by articulate rhythms.^j The whole chronological carpet of diatonic harmony – nearly 200 years of it – is being unrolled before us. The sense of arrival is complete only at that magical moment when the kettledrums thwack out dominant and tonic – always accompanied by their accomplice, the third trumpet – to underpin the bass canonic entry (bars 35–7). Bach's three trumpets seem to be leading off into the thin ozone layer, in the same way that the limbs or gestures of Baroque painters occasionally fly off the canvas as though the frame were too small to contain the full extent of their expression.

↳

We have now arrived at the apex of Bach's nine-movement *Gloria*. At this point he finds ways of bringing to the surface that partially concealed narrative thread of the Mass Ordinary (which eludes all but a few composers). You sense his delight in juxtaposing a Gregorian-based movement like the majestic *Gratias* with an elegant *galant* duet like the *Domine Deus*, which uses the same rising bass line (three whole tones and a half step) in double diminution and follows it with a similar melismatic figure, proof that with his technical mastery he can encompass any mood or style at will. Next

he pairs the *Domine Deus* duet (without its expected *da capo* structure) with the *Qui tollis* chorus. The dramatist in him makes delicious play of the seraphic innocence of the filial relations between Father (tenor) and Son (soprano) in a canonic duet. This he contrasts with the extreme pathos of the *Qui tollis* – the pain caused to the Son-made-man in anticipation of Christ's suffering on the Cross. Everything about the *Domine Deus* is conceived in terms of benediction: the key (G major), the benign mood created by flute over pizzicato bass and answered by muted upper strings, the sense of its being a spiritual love-duet – both modern and *galant*. Even the two eldest of Bach's fashion-conscious sons might have approved. But their father is not playing to the gallery. If the task is to find suitable music for such a central doctrinal text, he seems to be saying, then set it with a smile – with euphonious parallel thirds and sixths, syncopated or plain. Musicologists have been oddly perplexed by the clear traces of rhythmic alteration, the back dotting of the paired semiquavers to be found in the Dresden part-books. That Lombard rhythms (back dotting) were fashionable in Dresden in the 1730s, particularly in movements which emphasise Christ's intimate relationship to mankind, does not imply that Bach was currying favour with the Dresdeners; it is merely the gentlest of hints that he was au fait with current trends, one likely to have found favour with the likes of Zelenka and Pisendel.^k More to the point, they fit idiomatically with the sentiment of the words and give lilt and charm to the flute theme, with its answer in the strings.

Now, with the words *Domine Deus, Agnus Dei*, a shadow passes across the music as it modulates to E minor, as though in anticipation of the Crucifixion. It is also perhaps an indication to the performer that the back dotting should now cease. If this was Bach's way of indicating to us a B, or a 'middle section', he confounds our expectations by doing away with a *da capo* altogether and merging his duet imperceptibly into the ensuing four-part *Qui tollis*. He then slows the momentum and eases us into the sarabande-like chorus, even adapting the outline of the final phrase of the singers in anticipation of the melodic shape of the new sorrow-laden chorus proclaiming that God in Christ bore the sins of the world on the

Cross. This is the central text of the *Gloria* and, by means of this reminder, its most serious moment. As the ‘miserable offenders’ necessitating Christ’s atonement, we are referred back to those desperate cries of help at the outset of the *Kyrie*.¹

The prevailing mood of this remarkable fifty-bar movement is one of woebegone heaviness and anguish, generated by the violas, now un-muted. Their paired quavers slice through the texture with sighs of lamentation (just as they did in the opening chorus of the *John Passion*). They are the grieving heart at the centre of the choral and orchestral body. The clarity of the vocal scoring – initially two voices at a time – makes this grief appear to be more personal. A pair of flutes enters high above the dark sonority of voices and strings, a soothing and occasionally disturbing presence. Bach has chosen his Jeremiad cantata (BWV 46), the one predicting the destruction of Jerusalem, as his model (see [Chapter 9, this page](#)), crucially adjusting its rhythmic inflection – and he makes these adjustments straight on to the score. The measured declamation of *wie mein Schmerz* (two crotchets and a minim stretched over a descending diminished fourth) now becomes the much more urgent *Miserere nobis* (in four consecutive quavers) – a tiny, innocent-looking adjustment, but huge in its new expressive potency. Significantly he also omits the cantata’s opening sixteen bars of instrumental prelude, plunging straight into the opening *Qui tollis*.^m

There are several ingredients to this remarkable creation. First, there is the background of the familiar Old Testament penitential text, with its reference to the destruction of Jerusalem as predicted by Jesus (Luke 19:41–8). This is conveyed through the harmonic dissonance and intense expressivity of the vocal lines. Then there is the single emphasis by the bass line at the start of every bar; and the hovering of those flutes – serene at first, but later fluttering like wounded birds. The effect is poignant (still more so in our own times, when the implied references to Jerusalem and the frequent threats to its sites, holy to three religions, are excruciatingly topical). The individual vocal lines begin in imitation. Sometimes they collide, with prolonged bruising dissonances, then part, each

apparently pursuing an independent trajectory. There are momentary pairings (*deprecationem nostram*), and all four voices come together at cadences. This gives to the whole movement a sense of tragic choreography – of slow-motion spirals, of furrows being turned, or of geometric dance patterns loosened and redrawn. Only the highest and lowest voices bind things together: a single harmonic emphasis per bar in the continuo (but pulsated in the cello line like a slow bow vibrato) and the flutes high above the enactment of this pained human ritual. We may be tricked into hearing this amazing polyphony as the result of autonomous melodic movement, whereas all the time it is being controlled by the inexorable harmonic rhythm, the tonal grammar of Bach's bass line. In performance the effect of such a *tableau vivant* etched in sound is spellbinding – provided that every one of its ten strands (four voices, four strings and two flutes) is balanced, combed and always distinct.

Bach has ended on a half-close. In a Passion-setting one might expect a *secco* recitative at this point. In Bach's original (BWV 46) the music now erupts into an energetic fugue. Here, on the other hand, he keeps things moving forward by means of consecutive arias. Once again, as with the *Kyrie* trilogy, we encounter the rubric *Qui sedes sequitur* and *Quoniam tu solus sanctus sequitur*. The music is through-composed, in other words, and no awkward pauses are called for. Doctrinally Bach has moved from Atonement to Mediation. In the first of the two arias, the *Qui sedes* (for alto, oboe d'amore and strings), he portrays Christ's role mediating between God and man, and 'sitting at the right hand of God'. This is symbolic and even ironic; for here the music is anything but sedentary – as an Italianate *giga* it is unequivocally balletic and its ritornello structure is made up of overlapping phrases which erode the stability of its underlying dance pulse.

In the second aria (*Quoniam*) the text refers to Christ's kingly office. It clearly appealed to Bach's particular vein of humour to evoke the 'most high' with the growliest forces available to him: two bassoons, bass soloist and basso continuo. The treacherous *Waldhorn*

is the exception here. The bassoon counter-theme, as Tovey rightly insists, ‘must always be brought out as a main theme and not treated as an accompaniment’,⁷ particularly at the point where they chug along above the horn line in *buffo* style (bars 72–4). It seems that he had the sound of a particular ensemble, even of particular individuals, in mind. Five bassoonists were on the payroll of the Dresden Capelle, and two or three of them were on call at any given time (whereas in Leipzig he was lucky to find even a single competent bassoonist). Both Heinichen and Zelenka regularly composed for pairs of solo bassoons, and Hasse had featured the *Waldhorn* in his opera *Cleofide*, which Bach heard in Dresden in 1731. In Bach’s hands the overall effect of these instruments in combination is magnificently stilted, bucolic and slightly grotesque. As befits a polonaise, the horn is noble, regal even (but we need to ensure that the singer is never engulfed by the surrounding sonorities), while the continuo line often bumps into – and sometimes rises above – the bassoons.ⁿ

The *Quoniam* begins to make sense by its strategic placement, in the way that it follows the pathos of the *Qui tollis* and its dance-like sequel, and heralds the epic razzmatazz of the *Cum sancto spiritu* – the three movements are closely bound together. Bach reminds us that this is the completion of a clause – ‘for thou only art holy ... with the Holy Ghost in the glory of God the Father. Amen.’ Towards the end of the aria there is palpable expectancy as the bass-messenger rounds out his proclamation and the instruments pipe him off stage. Immediately the *Cum sancto* takes off with a tremendous jolt, rather like the way a Big Dipper deceptively inches its way along, then suddenly hurtles off. Mention of the Holy Spirit is the key to the changes in both pace and mood of this new music. As in his double-choir motet BWV 226, *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf*, the invigorating power of the Holy Spirit is the determining factor in the Christian’s acknowledgement of Christ’s Godhead. This is cue for celebration – in dance as much as in song. The throbbing pulsation of a single note (which was already present in the horn part of the *Quoniam*) passes to the upper strings, and

later the trumpets and finally the woodwind, but now with a greater sense of forward propulsion and ebullience. For this is the fourth movement in a row to use triple or compound metre, and in ever-quickenin tempo: the *Qui tollis* as a sarabande, the *Qui sedes* as a moderately paced *giga*, the *Quoniam* as a stately but forward-thrusting polonaise, and finally the *Cum sancto*, a free-spirited, corybantic dance.^o

The sense of release and of liberation in this fabulous choral dance is contagious. Bach's technique is at first to alternate contrasting groupings of voices and instruments to build structure and generate excitement. The fleet-footed exposition of the fugue then begins in the voices alone (bar 37) and bears a striking affinity with the balletic choral fugue 'Die Kinder Zion' from his motet BWV 225, *Singet dem Herrn* (see [Chapter 12, this page](#)). Now the instruments re-assert themselves – downward arpeggio cascades in the strings, a jazzy syncopated figure in the winds, and skittish curlicue flourishes which are there purely for high spirits (for they do not advance the thematic argument one jot). The orchestra *wills* the choir to re-join them with their plain, chordal Amens. On their next appearance the vocal lines are doubled by the instruments in a second fugal exposition (which, interestingly, shows slight variants, hinting that a four-voiced original may stand in the background of this movement's creation). The trumpets are finally sucked back into the action, and the music breaks free with the sort of Dionysian abandon one might associate more with Beethoven or Stravinsky than with Bach.

We have seen that the Lutheran year had its feasts no less than its fasts, and again and again in the cantatas Bach delights in the seasonal punctuation of the year and in any of the pagan festivals that Christianity appropriated for its own calendar. Well, here is one – let us say it is for Midsummer's Day – which was *not* included, or as far as we know given official approval. It is celebrated in carnival style – 'almost pre-Christian, if not overtly pagan, in its abandon'.^{8p} The contrapuntal zest that Bach generates in these final bars – and the aural pleasure he gives us – is immense. Part of its magic lies in

the several ways he finds of dividing the twelve semiquavers of a bar into different groups, involving cross-rhythmic patterns and syncopations.

What, then, did those Dresden Court musicians make of this ‘apotheosis of the dance’? We have seen that there was much that would have been familiar to them in the earlier movements of the *Gloria* – the sectional treatment, the balancing of solos with choral movements, the florid writing for solo voices and obbligato instruments – which displayed Bach’s perfect assimilation of modern Neapolitan style exported to the Saxon capital. But a choral movement with this degree of athleticism and secularity was surely something utterly new. The contrapuntal virtuosity was dazzling enough, and the uncompromising exuberance of his writing for voices and instruments – particularly for trumpets – was beyond anything in their repertoire. Perhaps for at least one of them, Zelenka, the spicy rhythmic virility and ornamental daring of the *Cum sancto* put him in mind of his native Bohemia.⁹



For the next twelve years we lose all trace of the *Missa* and its potential expansion. Was it dead in the water, as it were, after the big disappointment in Dresden? Did Bach just file it away in the well-stocked recesses of his memory bank, waiting for a new set of circumstances to present him with an opportunity for revival and reappraisal? If so, the single trigger that detonated the creative energy needed to complete the Mass is probably to be found around Christmas-time in 1745. The Second Silesian War had just come to an end, having brought considerable hardship to Leipzig and its citizens. For the first time in his life Bach had first-hand experience of the horrors and suffering of war, as Prussian troops occupied Leipzig in the late autumn of 1745 and devastated its surroundings. Three years later he still remembered it as ‘the time we had – alas! – the Prussian invasion’.⁹ A special service of thanksgiving to

celebrate the Peace of Dresden was held in the Pauliner (University) Church on Christmas Day. Sandwiched between the early morning Mass in the Thomaskirche and the afternoon service in the Nikolaikirche, this was one of those occasions when members of Bach's two best church choirs were available to perform together.¹⁰ Here also was an opportunity to give Leipzig audiences a chance of hearing his unusual five-voiced Latin cantata BWV 191, *Gloria in excelsis Deo* – in which he had hastily re-assembled and condensed three of the Dresden *Gloria* movements (*Gloria*, *Domine Deus*, *Cum sancto spiritu*) into a new triptych. In addition, his six-voiced Christmas *Sanctus*, first heard on Christmas Day in 1724, was almost certainly revived for the same service. So, five of the eventual twenty-seven movements of the *B minor Mass* might have been performed together for the first time. Given the political context and the sense of collective relief at the ending of the war, it is possible that we have here the embryo of a *Friedenmesse*, a 'Mass of peace'.¹⁰ That would have been consistent with the in-built alternation of human woe (*Kyrie*) and its release in God-inspired joy (*Gloria*) latent in the structure of Bach's Dresden *Missa*. Was he struck afresh by the quality of his Latin-texted music? Perhaps he suddenly saw a destiny for it – the potential for incorporating it into a much more ambitious framework, one which gave him the motivation to create a definitive statement of faith comparable in scale and grandeur to his Passion-settings.

At some stage, then – perhaps immediately after the Christmas peace celebrations, but perhaps not for another two years – came the momentous decision, with the *Missa* of 1733 as its starting-point, to complete his 'Great Catholic Mass'. (This was the title under which it appeared in the estate catalogue of C. P. E. Bach in 1790.) The ramifications were huge. Bach was still in possession of the dedicatory score – but not the parts of the *Missa*. He would have reasoned that any complete Mass-setting would need to match the original *Kyrie* and *Gloria* pairing in terms of scale and structure. It meant that for the *Credo*, for example, he would need to devise a multisected movement of comparable weight to the preceding

Gloria. The risk here was that he would end up with a work on a gargantuan scale, too long, apart from the most exceptional circumstances, to fit into any liturgy, no matter whether it was Catholic or Lutheran. Whereas his *Kyrie / Gloria* pairing was just about within the acceptable liturgical dimensions of the Dresden Mass repertoire, its new portions would be far in excess of what was considered fitting as a setting of the Ordinary of the Mass.⁵ Grouping them in this way for practical use in no way compromised what may have been his twin aspirations in completing the work: to encompass within a single work an encyclopedic survey of all the styles he most cherished in the music of his own and of earlier times, and to achieve perfection in the execution of that work. It shows phenomenal ambition.

His preparations were meticulous, characteristic of the exercises he deliberately undertook every time he committed himself to formulating a definitive statement. Bach was reverting to first principles (in the same way that all good scientists do at some point), wanting to move beyond the limits of what he had done before. If that meant going back almost to square one, that would be a sacrifice worth making: he had decided to carry out a fundamental reappraisal of the very building blocks, mathematical, musical or otherwise, that would enable him to refresh and to bring alive his thoughts and questions about the Mass and its wider implications.

First came considerations of basic structure, logistics and style. The choice of the *Missa* of 1733 as the starting-point for a new *Missa tota* meant that some aspects had already been settled: the five-part vocal scoring and the full-sized orchestra; the division of the text by coherent (though linked) sections fitted into a chiastic structure; the mosaic of solo and choral movements and the intermixture of styles – Italianate *concertato* movements on the one hand, and pronounced contrasts of archaic polyphony on the other. It is conceivable that Bach could have departed from the Dresden-specific style of the *Missa* at this point – but to what end? It had served him well so far and, besides, he had promised to furnish the Elector with further examples of his ‘indefatigable diligence in the composition of *Musique* for Church as well as for *Orchestre*’.¹¹ As things stood, he

might have felt that his best chances of obtaining a performance of so ambitious a setting of the complete Mass Ordinary lay in Dresden, not in Leipzig.

Several years before, he had embarked on an intensive period of study of *stile antico* techniques that in his view were indispensable for use in a Mass setting. The first fruits of it are to be found in the organ works of *Clavier-Übung III*, published in 1739: three austere and densely textured organ chorales representing the *Kyrie* and a six-part *de profundis*, *Aus tiefer Not*. In the sharpest of contrasts (reminiscent of his *Missa* of 1733), a *Gloria* was set as a brilliant, nonchalant-sounding Italian trio. Now on his desk lay a selection of settings for these later portions of the Mass. Pride of place was given to Palestrina, whose *Missa sine nomine* he had transcribed and performed in 1742. But there were other models by more recent composers, his immediate predecessors – Caldara, Durante, Lotti, Kerll and at least two by Zelenka.^t All these composers had been attracted to Palestrina's polyphony in one way or another, and had found ways of integrating elements of it into their own style. There was also Pergolesi's exquisite *Stabat Mater*, which, with infinite patience and manifest effort, Bach was to re-work with a German text, BWV 1083, *Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden*, in 1746–7. These served as his guides and as points of departure for his increasing interest in setting the *Credo* polyphonically. In particular six Mass-settings (encompassing a *Kyrie / Gloria / Credo / Sanctus* sequence) by Giovanni Battista Bassani attracted his attention. He transcribed all of them, and into each of Bassani's *Credo* sections (which begin *Patrem omnipotentem*) Bach inserted the first line, *Credo in unum Deum*, a sign that he may have performed it sometime between 1747 and 1748. Bach composed a new sixteen-bar intonation to the *Credo* of the fifth of Bassani's Masses (BWV 1081) – with an *ostinato* bass line in apparent anticipation of his own opening *Credo*. Closer still there is also an intriguing version – perhaps a dummy run – for his own *Symbolum Nicenum*^u but a tone lower in G, which survives in the hand of his pupil Johann Friedrich Agricola.

The next stage was to refer back to his earlier compositions, both sacred and secular. It is extraordinary how unerringly Bach's memory store seems to have guided him to the perfect choice from pre-existing movements. It is as though all the possibilities latent in the musical material suddenly flashed on to the screen of his mind, only reaching their full potential through the process of selection. In their effort to trace a stem-like genealogy for the *B minor Mass*, scholars show signs of uneasiness with Bach's way of assembling it.^v While they readily accept that his tidy mind favoured cyclical structures, and that from about 1730 onwards there was a gradual shift in his output from German-texted cantatas to Latin works, it was the recycling of perhaps as many as twenty movements in the Mass which bothered them, the way that he resorted so readily – beginning with the *Christmas Oratorio* and culminating now in *this* of all works – to 'parody' technique. But why should not the eclectic, slow-burning origins of the Mass, instead of making it suspect from an academic viewpoint, be precisely one clue to its greatness? After all, Bach was not a compulsive borrower, like Handel, who famously needed the spark of another composer's idea in order to fire up his imagination. Plagiarism may have been widely considered an acceptable literary and musical convention in the eighteenth century, but Bach, unlike Handel, did not need to turn other men's rough pebbles into diamonds.^w As we have seen, Bach's was the classic method. First you study your models – transcribe them, add layers of preface or commentary to them, and then assimilate them so fully into your creative processes that, at a stroke, you have a vocabulary with a multiplicity of techniques and styles at your fingertips, all in the cause of being as comprehensive and all-encompassing as you possibly can. The extraordinary stylistic reach and wide range of Bach's sources in no way diminishes his achievement in having synthesised his models into such a unified whole.



The most striking aspect of the opening of his *Symbolum Nicenum* is its great hieratic force of delivery. In performance from the moment that the tenors launch into the Gregorian intonation we should be pinned back in our seats. Bach has chosen the local Saxon version of the chant (as published by Vopelius in 1682) and articulates it in long notes intoned over an active walking bass: an unequivocal affirmation of faith and a very modern, tonal underpinning to the most ancient formulation of Christian belief available to him.^x Bach ends his first section with a dazzling treatment of the chant, whereby he rapidly piles no fewer than seven of them on top of one another, each beginning on a different beat of the bar and all within the time it takes for the vocal bass to deliver a complete statement of the theme.

The formal design of his *Symbolum Nicenum* is still more tautly structured than the preceding *Gloria* that it needs to complement in both scale and content. The two outermost choruses are couched in a hybrid style, half *stile antico*, half Baroque, in the way that they are harmonically conceived and supported by their independent bass line. Two separate but interlocking patterns give it structure. The first scheme, organised on the basis of chiastic symmetry, matches that of the preceding *Gloria* and is underpinned by tonality. In this way the *Crucifixus* stands at the apex of an equilateral triangle which has at its base the twinned choruses: *Credo /Patrem omnipotentem* at the outset, and the *Confiteor /Et expecto* pairing at its conclusion. Christ's Crucifixion, according to Luther's *theologia crucis* ('theology of the Cross'), is the event to which the belief of the true Christian is orientated, the means by which he can perceive God as a result of Christ's sacrifice and suffering. But this is not reflected in Bach's first plan for the *Symbolum*: initially he absorbed the words of the *Et incarnatus* into the soprano /alto duet *Et in unum*. This, in turn, shifted the pivotal emphasis on to the *Et resurrexit* in line with Catholic practice. The autograph score reveals that sometime after completing the *Crucifixus*, Bach changed his mind. To rectify the emphasis on Catholicism in the structural alignment, he was even willing to jettison the expressive word-setting of 'and was made man' and to re-apportion the text to bring it into line with

Lutheran orthodoxy. His purpose was to create a balanced and unified work, one with fluent transitions and deliberate contrasts between the arias and add a still greater weight to the choral movements.

But there is an alternative way to interpret the design of the *Symbolum*, one in which it falls into *three* segments, each culminating in a brilliant D major chorus featuring trumpets and drums. These segments coincide with Luther's three articles of belief: that of 'Creation' (the *Credo /Patrem omnipotentem* pairing), that of 'Redemption' (the *Et in unum /Et incarnatus /Crucifixus /Et resurrexit* sequence) and that of 'Sanctification' (the *Et in spiritum* extending as far as the *Et expecto*).¹² The new division overrides, but does not contradict, the chiastic structure. Luther's first article 'becomes flesh' in the second (in other words, in Christ's death and resurrection), and the eschatological events of the second article are re-enacted symbolically through baptism in the third. This may sound unduly complicated, and of course through Bach's treatment it is characteristically ingenious. But the listener, carried along by the natural flow of Bach's chain of narrative movements – those great successive choruses in triple time (*Et incarnatus*, *Crucifixus* and *Et resurrexit*) – will not necessarily be aware of the huge stylistic shifts that are taking place from one movement to the next, nor of their unusual provenance. For example, the middle movement, the *Crucifixus*, with its extreme anguish, has its origins in the earliest music of Bach's to be absorbed into the Mass – his Weimar cantata bwv 12, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, composed thirty-five years earlier, in 1714. Bach's re-working of this powerful *passacaglia* is outwardly minimal, but extraordinarily apposite: he adds a four-bar instrumental prelude, and two flutes to vary the texture and to give a pendulum swing to the rhythms of the mournful sarabande; strings are reduced from five to four parts; the ground bass is now pulsated by means of bow vibrato (six crotchets per bar, in place of the three minims per bar); and the *passacaglia* cycles are grouped in subtly changed ways, creating tension at different points in the *ostinato* progression.^y Whether by substituting and repeating *Crucifixus* for

the fourfold *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* (the opening section of the cantata) he improved the underlay is a matter of taste.^z Indisputably compelling, on the other hand, is the conclusion's five modulatory bars (which seem to symbolise the lowering of Christ's body into the tomb) in which the choir is left descending quietly to its lowest tessitura, accompanied only by the continuo. In this, its thirteenth repetition of the *ostinato* pattern, the bass line swerves off unpredictably and with a surge in dramatic intensity.

It has been suggested that the *Et resurrexit* began life as a lost secular ode (BWV Anh. I 9), which originally started with the words *Augustus [lebet]* and was performed alfresco in front of the Rathaus in Leipzig to mark the birthday of the Elector Friedrich August I on 12 May 1727. This would account for the courtly elegance that marks it out from all the other triple-metre choruses in the Mass – the rising opening motif and the circular triplet figure (associated with the word *Sterne* / ‘stars’) which stand metaphorically for the rise of August the Strong (‘Disperse, you fair stars! The reigning sun is rising before us’).¹³ From the way the voices immediately proclaim and lead off in this stately polonaise with its throbbing dance pulse, one would not necessarily guess what a prominent role would be given to the orchestra. Bach assigns no fewer than five ritornelli to his orchestra, with witty and delicate exchanges between the instruments. Yet, paradoxically, the most virtuosic and essentially instrumental figuration is reserved for the voices: in the fiery coloratura melismas of *Et resurrexit* and *cujus regni*, and a devilish and acrobatic *Et iterum* for the bass. In performance the presence of conjunct semiquavers strongly suggests *inégale* treatment – that characteristically French way of gracing a line with a rhythmic swing, a feature which would have appealed to August the Strong as a devotee of French Baroque style, though perhaps less to his son, who much preferred Italian music.^{aa}

By far the newest and most progressive music here is that for the *Et incarnatus*; yet, remarkably, it was a last-minute addition. In Christoph Wolff's view it could be the final completed musical movement that Bach composed.¹⁴ Nothing, not even the sublime *Qui*

tollis that in some ways it resembles, can compare with it for simplicity of design allied to such profundity of expression. The idea for the chain of figuration in the unison violins (a detached quaver followed by two pairs of upward-resolving appoggiaturas) may have come to Bach in 1744–6 while transcribing Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* (the ‘Quis est homo, qui non fleret’ section), where it is repeated nine times in seven successive bars of music linked to the theme of self-questioning.¹⁵ But before meekly ticking the box of an external prompt (as might be in the case of a Handel) we should remember a similar procedure in the opening chorus of his cantata BWV 101, *Nimm von uns, Herr* (see [this page](#)), where a persistent three-note ‘sighing’ figure is tossed between upper strings and oboes in the context of a sombre contemplation of humanity’s need for redemption for its ‘countless sins’. There appears to be a direct interweaving of the themes of divine incarnation and the paramount need for redemption made explicit in Bach’s self-referral, one that exposes the ambiguities of meaning in the art of music itself. For the contemplative stitches that Mary seems to be sewing in her tapestry can also be interpreted as emblems of sorrows to come. Bach might want us to reflect that, in the very act of becoming incarnate, Christ took on ‘the grave punishment and grave distress’ cited in the text of BWV 101/i. The *Alpha* and *Omega* of his life on earth is here inscribed.

Nothing to do with Pergolesi, however, and entirely Bach’s own invention, is the movement’s conclusion, in which, after forty-four bars, the hypnotic symmetry of the *Credo* is fractured. For the first time the bass line takes up the ‘weeping’ violin motif and develops a mini three-part canon with the two violins as they drift downwards. Simultaneously and moving upwards, a second three-part canon is formed among the three highest voices to signal ‘and was made man’: *et homo fac ...* (before settling back again on) ... *tus est*. It is not simply that, as Wilfrid Mellers noticed, the equilibrium between negative and positive tones, in these concluding bars, is wonderfully subtle.¹⁵ Nor is it that the announcement of Christ’s Incarnation and his gentle placement on this earth acquires a sudden radiance via

the *tierce de Picardie* (in B major). It is that the ensuing silence encapsulates the supreme mystery of Bach's music – pregnant with a sense both of anticipation and of lost innocence, like a childhood faculty miraculously restored. To me it is on a par with the startling midpoint silence in his early *Actus tragicus* (see [Chapter 5, this page](#)).

The text of the Ordinary of the Mass is not every composer's idea of a perfect libretto, least of all the section following all this vivid narrative drama. Tovey described it as 'the most unmusical part of the Nicene Creed'. As he says, 'after we have been stirred to the depths by those miracles of Christianity which all can recognise though none can pretend to understand, we are now asked to find music for the controversial points that were settled at Nicaea by the theologians.'¹⁶ He goes on wittily to compare composers' different solutions to 'this really appalling problem': setting everything to equally attractive music (Palestrina); blatantly resorting to the clichés of *opera buffa* (Mozart); or ducking the issue altogether (Beethoven) by introducing enthusiastic shouts of *Credo!*, which almost manage to obliterate the gabbled delivery of the text with all its thorny theological complexities. Bach, on the other hand, seems to be not in the least fazed by Tovey's ('really appalling') problem. When a catalogue of doctrinal beliefs is itemised for congregational assent (and could all too easily degenerate into hectoring theology), he hits on solutions that ensure the momentum never sags. Bach had already exploited the tension between Gregorian chant-derived objectivity and contemporary dance-driven Baroque form in his two opening movements to brilliant effect. Now, faced with the words *Confiteor unum baptisma* ('I acknowledge one baptism'), he sets them in motet-like polyphony, but suddenly cuts into it sharply with a version of the chant given out in long notes and in strict canon by the basses and altos. At its completion the tenors initiate a half-speed version of the same theme, still more stentorian in the way it obtrudes from the texture like an exposed beam or structural girder. Then, without any warning, the forward momentum is halted and the counterpoint dissolves: the throbbing vigour has dropped to a barely perceptible pulse. The vocal lines are collapsed into a slow

stretch of probing and unstable bars and a series of murky modulations, pausing on the word *peccatorum*. This is a maze from which there seems to be no egress.

At this point, one feels, the music could go in any direction and seems passive, waiting for a fresh impulse. Even with the help of C. P. E. Bach's annotations in his father's full score it is hard to decipher exactly what Bach intended here. Doubt has suddenly been cast over the very possibility of our sins being remitted. The words change to 'and I hope for the resurrection of the dead', but the music seems anything but optimistic. With the apparent crumbling of the whole doctrinal edifice, we have arrived at a most precarious stage in Bach's Mass. A shadow passes over this illuminated missal, a disintegration and collapse of momentum, a place where expertise in learned counterpoint counts for little. The harmony veers off course, first to B_8^3 minor before plummeting towards the remote key of E_8^3 minor (regarded as the key of 'deepest distress, of brooding despair, of blackest depression, of the most gloomy condition of the soul',¹⁷ and rarely used in Bach's day because it clashed horribly with the way keyboard instruments were tuned).

Here is also one of those rare instances when his defences seem to be down and we are privy to his vulnerability and doubts – as to the likelihood of this momentous transformation. Can he look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, or was the exemplary advocacy of the *ars moriendi* we encountered in the cantatas just a brave front? There is so much at stake here: the horrors of man's transgressions and the need of redemption to lift us out of our fallen state. This could be one of the few times Bach felt Luther's terror of death and found a way, perhaps even a need, to express it in music. How he deals with it will be critical to the success of the work and perhaps to his own future. It is painfully clear from the autograph score that Bach had a gigantic tussle with this pivotal moment. The page is besmirched with emphatic crossings-out and revisions to the inner parts. The bass descends chromatically, but at the last moment swerves away from E_8^3 minor and comes to a halt on the dominant of D (bar 137). The sopranos inch their way forward to a tentative C_4^3 . This is mysteriously – and

enharmonically – transformed into a B \natural , an example of that place where in an instant one passes from one realm of existence to another.^{cc}

Experience of performing the church cantatas reveals how brilliantly, even on a regular basis, Bach was able to interpret these dark moments, and how resourceful he could be at guiding the listener back to the path of faith and light – never more so than here, the eschatological crossroads of the entire Mass. Struggling to find the most appropriate chordal sequence (which anticipates some of Beethoven's more probing harmonic expressions) Bach seizes this moment to convey, in Wilfrid Mellers's phrase, that 'tremor of fear and dubiety' which any of us, himself included, might be feeling at this point. Those confident affirmations of *Credo* which prefaced nine tenths of the articles of the Nicene Creed have given way to progressively weaker verbs – to *Confiteor* ('I acknowledge') and now to *et expecto* ('and I look for'). Bach may have set *Confiteor* on a par with *Credo* for sureness in affirmation, but not when it comes to *et expecto*. This is the only time in his Mass where he provides two completely opposed settings of the same phrase of the text. First he conveys the shock and horror of realisation: the full extent of man's transgressions that have necessitated the Incarnation and the atonement by means of Christ's Crucifixion. Next he evokes the moment of death in sleep (as in *Der Tod ist mein Schlaf* ... that we encountered in cantatas BWV 95 and 125); then the first tentative 'hope in' (by no means yet 'belief in') the resurrection of the dead. This is the stage at which we might discern a parallel with St Paul's mysterious moment when 'we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye' (I Corinthians 15:51–2). This then leads to the conviction – *his* conviction – that 'the dead shall be raised incorruptible'. At this point – 'at the last trump' – the dam finally breaks: *et expecto* now becomes *credo resurrectionem mortuorum*.

The new movement, marked *Vivace e Allegro*,^{dd} propels us forwards, time for only one beat per bar in the basso continuo – but enough for the dead to 'leap from their graves in sprightly almost frisky arpeggios'.^{ee} 'Open wide the mind's cage-door!' enjoined

Keats¹⁸ – and Bach does just that, leading the way in widening our understanding the mystery of the Resurrection. Coming after that searching enharmonic change, the explosive *vivace* return to life in the *Et expecto* generates colossal energy in the emphatic *re-sur-rec-ti-o-nem* reiterations in four-square rhythms. This is the second jubilant chorus of the *Symbolum Nicenum*, the fourth in the whole Mass till now, each one utterly distinctive and germane to its context.

With any other composer of his generation it might have sounded trite or, at the very least, anti-climactic, but something in his subconscious seems to have flashed a memory of earlier music perfectly suited to the mood – the second line of a chorus, ‘Steiget bis zum Himmel nauf’ (‘Soar right up to heaven’), in the second movement of BWV 120, *Gott, man lobet dich in der Stille*, a cantata for the inauguration of the Leipzig Town Council of 1728 or 1729. This is no straightforward ‘parody’ but it aptly conveys the revitalisation and resurrection of souls ‘at the last trump’. Bach rifles through the material of this chorus – a four-square *da capo* movement – unsparingly. His task was to find a suitable sequel to the *Confiteor*, one proportionate to those twenty-five mysterious linking bars of *adagio*; but he also needs to balance that other pillar of the *Symbolum* which matches the opening *Credo/Patrem* pairing. So he pares away anything that gets in the way of this inexorable release of energy. Out go the staid formality, the chiastic scaffolding, the closing ritornello; in come eight bars of fresh material (twice), the opening ritornello now shortened and overlaid with voices, a fifth voice not merely appended but extrapolated from the constituent fabric, and 105 bars of irresistible, unrestrainable vigour. Nothing, not even the way that each choral section is enriched by the cumulative addition of instruments, is allowed to get in the way of this jubilant collective sprint to the finishing line.^{ff}



Emanuel Bach at this point comes back into the story. Now principal harpsichordist of the Prussian Court Capelle in Berlin, he had just completed a new *Magnificat* setting (Wq. 215) in Potsdam in August 1749. He appears to have brought it to Leipzig, perhaps to show to his ailing father, and at least one witness claims to have heard it performed in the Thomaskirche during a Marian feast, perhaps on 2 February or 25 March 1750. Was this Emanuel's bid (perhaps with parental prompting) to be considered his father's successor as Thomascantor? Emanuel's *Magnificat* reflects so much of his father's influence, with its striking allusions to the latter's *Gratias* and to the *Et expecto* conclusion of the *Symbolum Nicenum*. The links between his own work and his father's *Symbolum* were so close that years later when he was in Hamburg he performed the two works in the same programme. The benefit concert given in aid of Hamburg's Medical Institute for the Poor in the spring of 1786 contained, besides the works already mentioned, the aria 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' and the 'Hallelujah' chorus from Handel's *Messiah*. While he would have remembered the *Gratias* from the time when he helped copy out the parts in Dresden in 1733, he could only have become acquainted with the *Symbolum* much later on and probably just prior to the composition of his own *Magnificat*. This opens up the possibility that he witnessed a performance of the *Symbolum* in Leipzig during his father's last years. Clearly, the date of 25 August 1749 on the autograph score of Emanuel's *Magnificat* provides us with a *terminus ante quem* for at least this portion of his father's Mass. Also, given that he and his elder brother were apparently allowed to perform in both churches during his father's final illness, and knowing the work so well, one cannot rule out the possibility that one of them directed sections of the *B minor Mass* in Leipzig.

This is all highly speculative. Beyond doubt is Emanuel's close connection with his father's Mass at separate stages in its assembly. He was the son who would inherit his father's autograph score and, indeed, his fingerprints are all over it – from the innocent marker dots intended to ease his early task of copying, to the helpful bass figuring in the *Credo* that he added much later in life. Beyond this there are far more radical interventions: the addition of a newly

composed 28-bar prelude; and changes of underlay and instrumentation, including the replacement of the (then redundant) oboes d'amore with normal oboes and with violins in the *Et in spiritum*.

Evidently the *Symbolum Nicenum* was the single segment of Bach's *Missa tota* to make the greatest impression on the next generation, not just on Emanuel, but on others within Bach's close circle of pupils, such as J. F. Agricola and J. P. Kirnberger. Emanuel Bach's Hamburg performance in 1786 seems to have led indirectly to copies being made and circulated far and wide. One found its way to England and ended up in the hands of Charles Burney, and from him it somehow passed to Samuel Wesley, whose enthusiasm resulted in an abortive project of publishing it as a demonstration of Bach's skill in vocal composition. Agricola, who had already copied out an early version of the opening movement (see above), referred to the *alla breve* notation of the *Credo* 'from a great Mass by the late J. S. Bach with eight obbligato voices, namely five vocal parts, two violins, and general bass'.¹⁹ Kirnberger (who had been lent the autograph score posted to him by Emanuel Bach in 1769 with permission to copy it before returning it by prepaid post) seems to have been especially drawn to the *Crucifixus* and its *passacaglia* ground bass. He described it as a 'ten-voice example ... from a Mass by J. S. Bach, full of invention, imitation, canon, counterpoint and beautiful melody'.²⁰ This puts one in mind of Claude Lévi-Strauss's dictum: 'music itself [is] the supreme mystery of the science of man'²¹ – a fitting epitaph for Bach's astonishing *Symbolum Nicenum*.



When it comes to the final part of the Mass, opinions divide. Some scholars have cast aspersions on the way Bach assembled it, and suggest a marked diminution in its creative originality.^{g8} But how can this be? True, there are tell-tale signs clearly visible in the autograph of effort and precipitation, of notes doggedly pressed on

to the page, and at movements' end of a certain shakiness or indecision as to what movement came next. One could account for this in a number of ways: Bach's unfamiliarity with this closing section of the Catholic liturgy; his failing eyesight; or his determination to complete it, maintaining all the while his high ideals for it as a statement in music of the universal church. But nothing, least of all the recycling process extending to all its component movements, betrays a diminution in quality or intensity, as we shall soon see. Bach was working in a void: there were no Lutheran models for these last segments of the Mass to guide him. From his own library shelves he could have referred to Bassani's Masses, which end with the *Osanna* (as sequel to the *Sanctus*); or to Palestrina's, which did indeed reach the end, completing the Ordinary in unruffled *a cappella* polyphony. In a sense, Bach was a victim of his own success. Having set himself standards of scale, proportion and duration in his original *Missa*, which he then complemented so majestically with the *Symbolum*, he now had the task of sustaining the dramatic momentum and epic proportions, while putting together a final sequence of movements, unified and smoothly interlocked. In this he succeeds triumphantly.

The idea of opening the last part of the Mass with his great *Sanctus* of 1724 – one of the most flamboyant of all his D major choruses – came to him, as suggested above ([this page](#)) with the peace celebrations at Christmas 1745. Judging by the quantity of Bach's own revivals of it over the years, he valued it highly. In its new position, coming hard on the heels of the immense *Symbolum*, there is not the slightest risk of bathos, as every musician and listener can attest. If we might have questioned the function of the individual arpeggiated upward riffs at the conclusion of the *Et expecto*, the way they contrasted with the long-noted imitative exchanges of the vocal lines and then fused in the final section as everyone lunged to burst the finishing tape, the answer is surely to be found in this sequel – the *Sanctus*, with its angelic clanging of church bells in celebration of the final victory over death. Its very scoring entails an augmentation and expansion of forces used hitherto: trinities of trumpets, oboes (a third oboe joining in for the

first time) and upper strings are now joined by a *double* trinity of voice lines (despite Bach's new way of grouping them in pairs). Memory of the sixfold wings of the seraphim in Isaiah (6:2–3) may have suggested to him this new sixfold scoring: 'with twain he covered his face, with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly'.²¹

Whatever the source of his inspiration, Bach provides us with the most monumental music we have heard so far to convey the majesty of God, and he does so with a kind of Byzantine or Venetian splendour. Bach evidently intended his *Sanctus* to be sung and played by angelic forces divided among five different groupings, and, in the case of the vocal basses, iron-lunged heroes capable of imitating a gigantic peal of bells or an organ diapason. With the sequel *Pleni sunt coeli*, however, he brings us back on to terra firma. This is not the same world of peasant round dances of his *Gloria*; instead it is as though a group of tenors have been thrown into the ring to celebrate the glory of God's creation by dancing a vigorous *passepied*. The regular one-in-a-bar swing of the rhythms is varied by hemiolas, and the melismatic runs for the voice lines hint at the possibility of ticklish groupings (of three times three) starting on a syncopation and crossing the bar-line before 'righting' themselves with a huge single arc and flourish.

One has to admit that Bach's division of this final section of his Mass is slightly peculiar. Yet, even in this last phase of his creative life, when he was much concerned with completing cyclical and 'speculative' works, he never conceived of his vocal and texted compositions as standing outside the possibilities of performance, though this may have meant restricting them to shorter coherent units. A glance at his autograph score reveals that he subdivided his Mass into a fourfold physical structure: *Missa* (in other words the *Kyrie / Gloria* pairing), *Credo*, *Sanctus* and *Osanna / Benedictus / Agnus Dei* – one that conforms neither to the Catholic fivefold Ordinary nor to common Lutheran usage. As Robin A. Leaver explains, within the Lutheran liturgy the first three segments could be performed independently, while parts of the fourth could not.²² The *Agnus Dei* could be performed as an independent movement

(and even sung along with the *Sanctus* during the distribution of the sacrament), but the *Osanna* and *Benedictus* were not separable from the *Sanctus*.

Obviously when the Mass is performed in its entirety, Bach's fourfold division disappears automatically. But, in the event that the work is performed sectionally, the *Sanctus*, with its glittering conclusion of *Pleni sunt coeli*, can stand magnificently alone (just as it did originally in 1724 and in some subsequent revivals), while the final five-movement sequence also makes for a satisfactory unit, its *Benedictus* – enclosed in a chamber-like intimacy by the *Osanna* choruses – comprising the centre of a double-choir sandwich. Isolating the *Sanctus* in this way for purely functional purposes did not disassociate it from the final sequence, to which it is artistically and structurally bound and thematically linked. Leaver confirms that the only reason the last two sections of the manuscript score exist in this shape is because of the pre-existence of the separate *Sanctus*, and that conceptually they should be seen as one complete section – *Sanctus / Osanna / Benedictus / Agnus Dei* – forming a symmetrical pattern similar to those of the first two segments:

Sanctus
Osanna
Benedictus
Osanna
Agnus Dei

Lutherans with their respect for the musical traditions of Catholicism could condone the reference in the *Credo* to *unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam* – so long as, in the words of the theologian Johann Benedikt Carpzov, the '*ecclesiam catholicam* is not to be understood as the Roman-papist church ... but as the universal community of saints [or believers]'.²³ⁱⁱ

Either on its own or, better still, in context, this final sequence is riveting and suitably conclusive. The technique that Bach adopts in all four sections of the Mass – that of contrasting choruses and arias, movements in *stile antico* with others in a more contemporary style,

emphasising, indeed polarising, both ‘public’ and ‘private’ aspects of the Eucharist celebration – is never more in evidence than here. The very principle of contrast – of sense as much as of style – that has characterised the Mass-setting to this point is now pushed to greater extremes: moving from unbridled joy (*Osanna*), to a wistful quest for serenity (*Benedictus*), and to the heartfelt plea (*Agnus*). The two arias – *Benedictus* and *Agnus* – are still more intimate and chamber-like than their predecessors in the earlier movements, and the flanking choruses if anything still more opulent (the *Osanna*, now for double choir, in eight parts and the orchestra neatly divided into twelve real parts) and uplifting (the final *Dona nobis pacem*).

Each of the final arias is compelling. By showing the pilgrim’s endeavour to pursue and complete his life’s journey, the *Benedictus* postulates the type of dualism we have encountered before in the cantatas. In the serene (and almost disembodied) voice of the tenor, Bach evokes the ‘blessed’-ness of he ‘who cometh in the name of the Lord’; and, simultaneously, in the angularities of the flute melody he insists that the path of life is never smooth (one is reminded of *der saure Weg wird mir zu schwer*, which he set so expressively in his motet BWV 229, *Komm, Jesu, komm*). There are of course moments when this is eased and the flute takes on a consoling role: like Virgil guiding and protecting Dante on his journey through Hell and Purgatory in Botticelli’s second parchment drawings for the *Divine Comedy*, Bach seems to embrace his travelling companion with his melody.^{jj} In contrast to the *Benedictus*, the interweaving between voice and unison violins in the *Agnus Dei* is inextricable. Given the trouble it cost him – in one of his very last vocal compositions – to reduce an eight-line-stanza aria-setting to one of merely eight words, Bach must have prized the nostalgic alto aria ‘Ach, bleibe doch’, from his *Ascension Oratorio* (BWV 11), very highly, although it is likely that both versions go back to a lost original. He discards slightly more than half the cantata material, but adds four new bars for the first vocal entry (in canon with the violins) and eight for the second, ending on a dramatic *fermata*. Here we find him returning to the sighing figure – slurred pairs of conjunct notes – which we first

heard in *Kyrie I* and which recurred to enrich the expression of the *Qui tollis*, the *Et incarnatus* and the *Crucifixus*, superimposed over a similar regular, punctuated rhythm in the bass. His mechanism for binding this heart-stopping music into the overall scheme is an extreme, angular re-shaping of the final instrumental ritornello, the violins landing on an open-string bottom G. It provides the perfect link to the ensuing *Dona nobis pacem*, which, in strict liturgical practice, belongs to the text of the aria; but, by detaching it in this way, Bach seems to imply a change in the Godhead being addressed.

Even this, the final *Dona nobis*, has come in for musicological shouts of foul play just because it repeats note for note the earlier *Gratias*. There are no grounds for this. It was a long-standing Lutheran custom to end the main service with ‘Verleih uns Frieden gnädiglich’, Luther’s version of the antiphon *Da pacem, Domine*. In re-using the music of the *Gratias* as the summation of the entire Mass, Bach was connecting with the Leipzig tradition of ending the Eucharist with a collect of thanksgiving – ‘Wir danken dir’ – taken from Luther’s *Deutsche Messe*, published in 1526. A hymn of thanks is thus converted into a universal plea for peace, followed by a prayer of thanksgiving. Bach’s decision conformed to precedent in Catholic Dresden as well and justifies its place with convincing naturalness – at least in performance. Whereas in the Mass Ordinary the *Dona nobis* text belongs to the *Agnus Dei* (coming at the end of the third phrase), it was common in Dresden to set this text to a closing chorus with music derived from either the *Kyrie* or *Gloria*. This served as a recapitulating and unifying device – Dresden Mass composers such as Caldara and Durante, whom Bach had studied, made a practice of repeating the music of an earlier movement in the *Dona nobis*. What also seems to bother the purists is what they regard as slovenly text adaptation: whereas the two clauses of the *Gratias* are perfectly adjusted to Bach’s contrasted fugue subjects – (1) *Gratias agimus tibi* (‘We give thanks to Thee ...’) and (2) *propter magnam gloriam tuam* (‘... for Thy great glory’) (a perfect transposition from the original cantata composition which served as its model, BWV 29, *Wir danken dir, Gott*) – here there is only a single

clause, *Dona nobis pacem*, to be split between the two subjects, an infelicitous grammatical error. Or is it?

Bach cuts the ground from under his critics' feet by creating a new dualism: *Dona nobis pacem*, followed by a re-ordering of the words, *pacem dona nobis*. The appropriateness of this solution is immediately apparent in performance – nothing, simply nothing but the *Gratias* music can follow at this point – provided of course that due adjustment is made to the style and mood of delivery of the second phrase. For where the earlier *propter magnam* was vigorous and assertive, the *pacem dona nobis* is lyrical and gentle, suggesting a dignified restraint in its vocal delivery. As befitting a universal plea for peace, its melismas are equally suited to *dona* ('give') and to *pacem* ('peace'). The solid rock-like steps of the initial fugue subject, which have an inexorable forward momentum in the *Gratias* – a foretaste of the finale to Mozart's 'Jupiter' symphony – are softened and their edges rounded off in the *Dona nobis*. In both versions, Bach holds back the entrance of the trumpets and drums – which represent the final battalion recruited to acknowledge God's glory (*Gratias*) and the most imposing and eloquent petitioners of peace (*Dona nobis*). It is an inspired decision.



Let us take stock. We have identified several starting-points and perhaps as many as four punctuation points marking the development and composition of the *B minor Mass*. Starting with the Dresden *Missa* of 1733, there is the 'war trauma' hypothesis that brought the *Gloria* and *Sanctus* movements together at Christmas-time in 1745. This is followed by Emanuel's last visits to his father and the (rather remote) possibility of partial performances in Leipzig in 1749–50. None of these wayside markers is in itself definitive proof of the precise moment when Bach decided to complete his Mass. While it is possible that the project took root in his mind very early on and that before completing it he felt he

needed to re-educate himself in *stile antico* techniques before committing himself to paper, it is also conceivable that he needed a specific occasion to focus his mind and to move on to the final stage in the process of composition and assimilation.

The final piece in the puzzle takes us back to Dresden. It has been suggested that he may have seen a possible opening for his Mass in the anticipated celebrations for the inauguration of the new Hofkirche in Dresden.²⁴ The cornerstone had been laid in 1739; and, judging from a landscape view of Dresden by Bernardo Bellotto (known as Canaletto the Younger) painted in 1748, the Hofkirche was nearing completion, its bell tower still encased with scaffolding. Was this the occasion that Bach was looking for? If so, it is supported by the feverish haste evident in the clumsy, effortful handwriting of the last section of the Mass. But if his idea was to present it for performance as part of the dedication celebrations, this was not to be. For, besides his failing eyesight and the two cataract operations carried out by the English oculist Sir John Taylor in March /April 1750, it has been suggested that Bach was suffering from untreated diabetes. Though he rallied for a while, he suffered a stroke on 20 July and eight days later he died.

The Hofkirche meanwhile was not finally completed until the following year. Not without a certain irony, it was his old friend Hasse whose much shorter *Mass in D* was performed at the time of its inauguration. We saw that Bach's *Symbolum* might have owed something to Zelenka's Masses. This is as nothing compared to the close dependence of Hasse on Bach – particularly in the opening of the *Credo* and in the *Et incarnatus* of his *Mass in D*. Forkel tells us that 'Hasse and his wife, the celebrated Faustina ... also [came] several times to Leipzig and admired [Bach's] great talents.'²⁵ Perhaps Hasse had after all clapped eyes on the early sections of the *Missa* back in 1733 at the time of its presentation. In his later visits to Bach in Leipzig, Hasse would have been able to examine, or conceivably hear, the later portions of Bach's *B minor Mass*. As an astute professional, Hasse was ideally placed to appreciate that at the moment of its completion Bach had succeeded in formulating a comprehensive survey and a unique synthesis of all that he

considered to be the best in his own church music, as well as that of his predecessors and contemporaries; in short, that it was unsurpassed and unsurpassable. At the same time he would have seen Bach's Mass as a practical working score eminently suited to performance. The only thing lacking was a complete set of parts. But it was not Hasse's style to pass over a prestigious opportunity to air music of his own. Were his references to it in his *Mass in D*, and in a subsequent *Requiem Mass* he wrote at the time of the death of his patron Friedrich August II in 1763, conscious gestures of homage and debt to Bach?



None of this rules out the possibility that had Bach lived long enough to direct or witness a complete performance of his Mass, say in Dresden in 1751, he would have continued to revise and make changes to it. For, unlike a scientist who repeats his experiments to make his work unassailable – and with the aim of getting the exact same results each time – Bach did not get the chance to submit his Mass to equivalent tests. To view it therefore as a static object, a summary and repository for one man's human thoughts and actions, even as an absolute statement of his faith comparable to that in his two Passions, is but one way. Another is to see it as part of a seamless process of self-correction and self-definition that never reached – perhaps never could reach – a state of finality. It is only in performance that the essential mobility of meaning contained within its music can be released and savoured. And yet Bach's Mass can and certainly does stand up to repeated 'testing' in performance. He assembled it over time, absorbed into it some of his earliest musical ideas, and then concluded it in such an ineffable way – demonstrating his 'habit of perfection' – that this could have been his way of saying, 'I'm off now from this planet; my work is done. I leave you here with a pure and beautiful idea, and the expression of

that idea is my gift to the world, and my ancestors are part of it, too' – a kind of *Nunc dimittis*, in other words.

But we can see from the reactions of his son Emanuel, and of his pupils Agricola and Kirnberger, that their admiration for the master's 'Great Mass' was more technical and theoretical than aesthetic or philosophical. The truth is that the cultural milieu which Bach was leaving behind at his death was not yet ready for the degree of independence of thought and conception that he manifested here. We are his successors and the beneficiaries of his vision. Every time we perform it marks just the latest point in the work's continuing and continuous unfolding.

Performance is a creative physical enactment, one that achieves the provisional completion and realisation of a musical work only as a result of its being 're-composed' or 're-painted' in that particular instant. Part of our role as interpreters is to beckon to the listener, drawing him into a responsive environment so that he becomes privy to the construction and unwrapping of the creative act in which we are engaged. And here it is important to distinguish between the materials of performance – the instruments, be they 'modern', 'conventional' or 'period' – and the people who play them. Of course those of us who have learnt to play or direct period instruments and listened to what they can tell us feel that we stand a rather better chance of re-entering and inhabiting Bach's sound world than was possible when we set out thirty-five or so years ago. An ensemble of period instruments played by expert virtuosi – a whole orchestra, no less, accompanying equally accomplished solo singers stepping out from a choir – carries with it a colossal element of excitement and zing. The performance then becomes a communal rite, one built on complicity and trust; a willingness to adjust and blend on the part of all the participants must be present for it to succeed and for the shared vision to be realised.

The primary role of the conductor is to identify and transmit that vision to all those involved. At every instant he needs to know where the music is headed; and he has to be able to convey to each musician how individual lines fit into the overall pattern. He has to ensure that everyone's antennae are operational and capable of

responding to any new impulse at any given moment, while at the same time encouraging the freedom necessary for everyone, but particularly for the solo players and singers, to contribute to the performance. The skill lies in keeping the music's glue, and in making every note urgent and fresh. Achieving the sense of being caught up in a shared experience is crucial to the potency and impact of this re-creative process.

Sometimes this falls short, and a precious opportunity is missed; as musicians we then fail to engage the audience or to draw them in as participants, not just hearing, but 'receiving' and responding. But when we succeed – when technical skill adequate to meet even the stiffest of Bach's challenges is no longer an issue, when the calibration of vocal and instrumental forces is optimal, when a coordination of style, a matching of timbres and a mutual understanding of everyone's role is achieved – that is the point when interpretation can really begin.

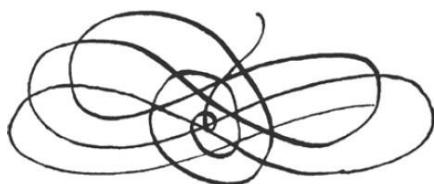
b

Bach, in the breadth of his vision, grasped and then revealed to us his conception of the universe as a harmonious whole; yet he was composing at a time when the breakdown of social unity was well advanced and the old structures of religion were fast being eroded by Enlightenment thinkers. Revealing as the work of recent musicologists has proved to be in tracing the varied provenance of the Mass and in uncovering more and more signs of its having been recycled from earlier compositions, it carries a certain danger: it could diminish Bach's music to a bundle of influences, to a collection of parts that are less than the whole; whereas it is precisely his ability to transform material and weld it into new patterns, and his willingness and courage to strike out on his own, regardless of fashion, which is so inspiring about the *B minor Mass*. Without this realisation we run the risk of missing the driving force behind it: Bach's resolve not merely to mime the gestures of belief,

nor to interpret doctrine via music of his own invention, but to extend the very range of music's possibilities and through such exploration to make sense of the world in which he lived and whatever lay beyond it.

Even to sceptical and agnostic minds, Bach's *B minor Mass* radiates a recognisable and powerful spirituality, one that does not rely on credal orthodoxy, odd though that might appear. His art celebrates the fundamental sanctity of life, an awareness of the divine and a transcendent dimension as a fact of human existence. Interpreting it is all about the drama of discovering the revelation inscribed in each movement, and is indissolubly fused to his personal style – the inner poet hiding in the recesses of his counterpoint. Above all, as musicians you can never afford to be earthbound – to plod, in other words: it has to dance. Ultimately his style is also vision. Misjudge the style and you miss the vision.

To conduct his Mass is to be filled with a tremendous sense of anticipation: you know as you embark on a journey with and through his music that you are going to be exposed to a heightened sense of consciousness – of the role of music, of its capacity to affect and change people's lives, of its power to reflect and even to mitigate the way people respond to contemporary events. Then, as you approach the final straight of this great adventure and the trumpets soar one last time to announce the homecoming, you realise that Bach's final prayer for peace, *Dona nobis pacem*, is both an invocation and a resounding confirmation of its immanence.



^a Only a few years later Caspar Ruetz, the cantor in Lübeck, complained that a huge pile of church music that he had inherited from his predecessors had been reduced by half by these methods: 'who will give anything for it, other than someone who needs scrap paper, for nothing is more useless than old music' (Kerala J. Snyder, *Dieterich Buxtehude: Organist in Lübeck* (2007), p. 318).

^b The Saxon Court is said to have had one of the best-trained orchestras in Europe in the first part of the century, a reputation which drew musicians like magnets to serve under the Elector August the Strong and his son Friedrich August II. When Bach visited in 1717 the Capelle consisted of approximately 33 instrumentalists, not including composers, trumpeters or the Capellmeister. With the accession of Friedrich August II the number increased to around 42, with a regular string strength of 6 to 8 first violins, 6 to 8 second violins, 3 to 4 violas, 2 to 4 cellos, 2 double basses and harpsichord, together with whatever other continuo and wind instruments a particular score required (Ortrun Landmann, 'The Dresden Hofkapelle during the Lifetime of Johann Sebastian Bach', *Early Music*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Feb. 1989), pp. 17–30).

^c The organ part is in *Kammerton* – perfectly suited to the organ in Dresden's Sophienkirche, but not to the organs in the Leipzig churches, which were tuned to the higher *Chorton*. However, a prominent feature of Bach's scoring was the use in the *Kyrie* of two oboes d'amore, instruments which, as Janice Stockigt has pointed out, were very much in use in Leipzig in Bach's time, but seem to have become obsolete in Dresden after Heinichen's death in 1729, when they were replaced by the chalumeau (Stockigt, 'Consideration of Bach's *Kyrie e Gloria* BWV 232i within the Context of Dresden Catholic Mass Settings 1729–1733' in University of Belfast International Symposium, *Discussion Book* (2007), Vol. 1, pp. 52–92).

^d Christoph Wolff suggests that a performance took place here (the church generally frequented by the Lutheran court officials) on 26 July, the eighth Sunday after Trinity, 'probably as a special afternoon concert comparable to the organ recitals Bach had given there before' with Bach and members of the family participating (*Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (2000), p. 370).

^e Stockigt has analysed the ranges and vocal profiles of the Dresden castrati – Rochetti, Bindi, Annibali and Campioli – from the oratorio and Mass repertoire they undertook in the early 1730s and compared these to the vocal ranges of the two soprano and alto parts in Bach's *Missa*, revealing a close, plausible correspondence (op. cit.).

^f It was, however, a flexible body, varying in numbers (see footnote pp. 482–3). On one occasion in 1739 Zelenka directed an ensemble of five singers, four violins, two violas, pairs of flutes and oboes, trumpets and drums, and a continuo section of four players in a work to mark the birth of Prince Clemens Wenceslaus of Saxony, which was celebrated in the small chapel of the Hubertusburg Palace. A striking combination of individual technical skill and panache within the orchestra, and of its discipline under Johann Georg Pisendel's direction, seems to have been achieved only after a long-drawn-out period of in-fighting between the older French-style musicians favoured by August the Strong and the ardent advocates of Italian music patronised by his son Friedrich August II. This and the fact that each player was allowed and even encouraged to specialise (not like the usual jack-of-all-trades) impressed Bach enough to refer to it in his 'Entwurff' (BD I, No. 22/ NBR, p. 150).

^g Actually Bach already had an honorific title, one that bound him for the past four years to the lesser court of Duke Christian of Saxe-Weissenfels, though in Bach's eyes it did not carry anything approaching the prestige or bargaining power of the Dresden title.

^h If it had, the performing material would have been housed in the cupboard behind the choir gallery of the Hofkirche and entered into its library catalogue (1765). Instead, it was preserved on the shelves of the Saxon royal library (see Stockigt, op. cit.).

ⁱ This was, of course, one of Scheibe's criticisms – that Bach demanded 'that singers and instrumentalists should be able to do with their throats and instruments whatever he can play on the clavier' (BD II, No. 400/NBR, p. 338). He had a point – but that is exactly why Bach's works are so challenging (and rewarding) to the performer.

^j Donald Tovey observes admiringly that now 'the real business begins when no less than thirteen entries of the first subject, all on tonic and dominant, are piled up without intermission, the trumpets providing the 8th and 9th entries in extra parts. This I believe to be Bach's record in such edifices' (*Essays in Musical Analysis* (1937), Vol. 5, p. 31). On the differences between word-setting in German – full of meaning, theological purpose and stress-awareness – and in time-hallowed Latin, I am grateful to David Watkin (admirable continuo and solo cellist and now also a conductor) for his suggestion that one should not try to apply the same interpretative scanning mechanisms to both, Latin being more instrumentally and plainly conceived than vernacular German.

^k It is amazing how the dry, literalist mind-set of successive editors of Bach's great *Mass* can ignore evidence that did not appear to fit with their preconceived notions of how his music ought to sound. Julius Rietz, in preparing the *Bach-Gesamtausgabe* in 1856, found the Lombard rhythms indicated only in the flute's first bar (and not in the parallel violin 1 part). He considered them therefore to be an aberration, so he omitted them. One hundred years later, the Lutheran editor of the NBA, Friedrich Smend, intent on expunging any signs of Catholic orientation by Bach, gave no credence whatsoever to the Dresden parts. So he, too, omitted the adjusted rhythms. Both editors thus succeeded in eliminating one of the few riveting signs of Bach's own performance that have come down to us and in ignoring the type of spontaneous idiomatic adjustment good musicians make as a matter of course: the flute plays the melodic arc with back-dotted rhythms, the violins, automatically and as a matter of etiquette and courtesy, follow suit.

^l Stockigt (op. cit., p. 21) points to a feature of Bach's setting that would have clashed with the local Dresden practice of the time – of slowing the tempo down still further, dropping in dynamic and introducing a string *tremolo* in support of the voices.

^m This is related to the celebrated penitential text *O vos omnes qui transitis*, set so darkly by the Renaissance composers Victoria and Gesualdo, and much later by Pablo Casals, and in English by Handel in *Messiah* – 'Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto his sorrow.'

ⁿ The polonaise was apparently perceived at the time as 'a majestic, processional, ceremonial and chivalric dance ... [with] its proper, slower tempo, since it was usually danced in tall boots, often with a sabre at the side, at times also with torches' (Szymon Paczkowski, 'On the Role and Meaning of the Polonaise in the *Mass in B minor*' in University of Belfast International Symposium, *Discussion Book* (2007), Vol. 1, pp. 43–51). Dresden composers such as Zelenka, Heinichen, Hasse, Schuster and Naumann habitually turned to music à la polonaise for the *Quoniam* and the *Et resurrexit* sections of the Mass, so Bach was following a local tradition here and, according to Paczkowski, achieving a double aim: 'he expressed the sense of the liturgical text in the best possible way and, at the same time, he paid

homage to his ruler, to whom the *Missa* was dedicated. Thus the polonaise in the aria *Quoniam tu solus sanctus* should be interpreted in association with the customs of the Polish–Saxon court, as a “royal dance” usable, in both a secular and a religious context, as a symbol of a monarch’s power.^o Mellers’s view is that in Bach’s treatment, ‘the God of Power seems larger than life and too big for his boots, as did the absolute monarchs who tried to emulate him in mundane terms’ (*Bach and the Dance of God* (1980), p. 205).

^o There is absolutely no way that the absence of a double bar or a metre sign here could indicate that the ‘neutral allegro’ of the *Quoniam* is to be continued in the *Cum sancto* (George B. Stauffer, *Bach: The Mass in B minor* (1997), p. 238). *Vivace* certainly implies liveliness of articulation, but it also inescapably influences the tempo of the movement.

^p It is impossible to disagree with Mellers’s detecting ‘an element of danger in this music’s power and glory’. This he contrasts with ‘Handel’s Augustan assurance’ (op. cit., p. 208).

^q Zelenka’s own compositions sometimes contain traces of Czech folk-music. Though generally admired for his skill in counterpoint, it is in his instrumental *capricci* and his seven-part *Hipocondrie* that he shows his originality in matters of experimental tonal colouring, rhythmic groupings and dynamics.

^r In the course of 2012 Michael Maul unearthed new evidence relating to the existence from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century of an elite octet of singers (two per part) from among the boarders of the Thomasschule, those who, in the estimation of the cantor, ‘outperform all the others’ (*Schulordungen*, 1634 and 1723; see H.-J. Schulze, ‘Bachs Aufführungsapparat’ in Christoph Wolff (ed.), *Die Welt der Bach-Kantaten*, Vol. 3 (1998)). This is the one constant factor in the organisation of the school choir lasting from J. H. Schein’s cantorate up to that of J. A. Hiller. This elite octet constituted the cantor’s first *Kantorei*, had their own regulations, music lessons and rehearsals, and in comparison with the other boarders were exceptionally well paid (mostly from performing at weddings and other private events), even after the cantor’s and other teachers’ shares of their earnings had been deducted. Under normal circumstances they would have been the ones to perform the *Haupt-Musik* (the cantata, in other words) at Sunday services, but could be supplemented at the cantor’s discretion by other *Alumnen* when extra singers were needed to perform his more elaborate and festive music – a practice well documented for the late seventeenth century, which may well have extended into Kuhnau and Bach’s time. These new findings need to be set against all the other fragmentary evidence pointing to the constraints and difficulties both these Thomascantors experienced in fielding an ensemble adequate to meeting the increasing demands of their church music. It goes to show how the realities of performance practice in their time were in a state of continual flux, warning us not to rely exclusively on the same old source material which has proved to be susceptible to widely different interpretations (see Maul, ‘*Dero berühmter Chor*: Die Leipziger Thomasschule und ihre Kantoren 1212–1804’ (2012), and an article in BJb in preparation for 2013).

^s Wolfgang Horn (*Die Dresdner Hofkirchenmusik 1720–1745* (1987), p. 192) shows that, at 770 bars, Bach’s *Gloria* was in the top 6 or 7 per cent of stand-alone *Gloria* settings in the Dresden repertoire of the time. Interestingly, the ones that are actually longer than his (by Mancini, Zelenka and Sarro) are a great deal longer.

^t It could have been Zelenka's *Missa votiva* of 1739, with its chant-like melody given out in long notes within his polyphonic setting of the opening *Credo*, which encouraged Bach to use plainchant so prominently in his setting. It could also have been Zelenka's *Missa Circumcisionis* of 1728 which gave Bach the idea of how to approach the *Et in unum*, as well as the chromatic bridge-passage at the end of the *Confiteor*, when the instruments drop out at mention of *mortuorum* ('the dead'). But, as we saw (p. 488), it looks very much as though Zelenka had learnt from Bach's example (*Kyrie I*) when he came to determine the chromatic and rhythmic outline of his *Kyrie II* in the *Missa Sanctissima Trinitatis* of 1736.

^u Originally *symbolum* meant a token or badge of membership, but by Bach's time it had come to signify an expression of divine meaning contained in Scripture. The Christian 'creeds' were devised to summarise the essential articles of belief. The most controversial of those articles were settled by theologians at Nicaea (hence *Nicenum*).

^v Malcolm Boyd, for example, refers to the 'curiously haphazard way of composing a major work'. Yet he concedes that 'at the highest level Bach's process of parody, adaptation and compilation must be accepted as a creative act almost on a par with what we normally think of as "original composition".' He is surely right, too, that the technique works in the case of the *B minor Mass* more successfully because the text has more subdivisions than the short Masses, therefore enabling him 'to match music and words more carefully' (*Bach* (1983), pp. 187–91).

^w This formulation of Handel's method was made by a contemporary, possibly his first biographer, John Mainwaring. It satisfies the criterion of Handel's friend Johann Mattheson when he states that 'borrowing is a permissible thing; but one must return the borrowed with interest, that is, one must arrange the borrowed material in such a fashion that it acquires a better aspect than the setting from which it has been lifted' (*Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739)). But I have so far found no evidence in support of Joshua Rifkin's claim that Bach 'lifted' another composer's work when he composed the *Et incarnatus*.

^x By this means he is drawing on the musical-rhetorical figure of *anaphora*. J. G. Walther describes this as occurring 'when a phrase or even a single word is frequently repeated in a composition for the sake of greater emphasis' (*Musicalisches Lexicon* (1732), p. 34).

^y These changes are further analysed in René Pérez Torres, 'Bach's *Mass in B minor*: An Analytical Study of Parody Movements and Their Function in the Large-Scale Architectural Design of the Mass', University of North Texas master's thesis (Dec. 2005), pp. 64–5.

^z I for one cannot rid from my mind the poignantly stuttered mouthing of *Angst ... und ... Not ... Angst ... und ... Not*, where later he substitutes the smoother *passus et sepultus est*. On the other hand the alteration of the melodic intervals to create augmented seconds in the soprano and alto lines in bars 13 and 14 gives an enhanced grief-laden tang to the *Cru-ci-fi-xus*.

^{aa} This has a bearing on the tempo of the movement, which needs to be a shade slower than that of the *Cum sancto* for example. You know you are 'in the groove' when everyone can swing the adjacent *inégale* semiquavers in a

deliciously blues-y lilt without any sense of underlying pressure. Yet at the same time the coloratura melismas need to fizz and sparkle like the ‘tongues of fire’ in the Whitsun cantata BWV 34, *O ewiges Feuer*.

^{bb} This has been pointed out by Christoph Wolff (‘Bach und die Folgen’, *Offizieller Almanach*, Bachwoche Ansbach (1989), pp. 23–34) and by Reinhard Strohm, who suggests that the recourse to Pergolesi’s rhetorical figure ‘seems to bring into the Mass the meaning that the incarnation is a “question”’ (‘Transgression, Transcendence and Metaphor: The “Other Meanings” of the *B-Minor Mass*’ in *Understanding Bach*, Bach Network UK (2006), Vol. 1, p. 65).

^{cc} Observing Bach manipulate and adjust the harmony at this point, we can see how Andreas Werckmeister could define an enharmonic change as ‘a mirror and image of our mortality and the incompleteness of this life’ (Ruth Tatlow, ‘Recapturing the Complexity of Historical Music Theories; or, What Werckmeister’s Doctrine and Mattheson’s Invective Can Tell Us about Bach’s Compositional Motivation’, Eastman Theory Colloquium, 28 Sept. 2012).

^{dd} This is a most unusual marking reserved for movements in which there is only one beat per bar. It simply cannot signal ‘a neutral, *tempo-ordinario allegro*’ or even ‘a return to the brisk *alla breve* tempo of the *Confiteor*’ (Stauffer, op. cit., p. 240). The downward scale in the continuo and its arrival on a bottom D is like the starting pistol which fires off a German *galop* of the sort that became so popular in Vienna in the 1820s, starting with Schubert, Lanner, Johann Strauss, and even Rossini (as in the end of his *Guillaume Tell* overture).

^{ee} As Mellers aptly comments: ‘The introversion of the previous section is replaced by an extraversion as naive as that depicted in the resurrection paintings of Stanley Spencer, or of the medieval painters who were his model’ (op. cit., p. 230).

^{ff} As John Butt observes, Bach’s tendency here to prune away everything that might inhibit his intended momentum contributes ‘to the impression of a work which seems to contain twice the amount of music that its duration would normally allow’ (*Bach: Mass in B minor* (1991), pp. 56–7).

^{gg} Philipp Spitta, critical of Bach’s heavy dependence on parody in these last movements, which he felt was due to the fact that the music would have been performed *sub communione* (that is, during the distribution of the bread and wine), suggested that Bach assembled it ‘with no great effort’. He found it ‘unsatisfactory, not only as regards each of these numbers separately, but as to their connection and their position as finishing the whole mass’ (*The Life of Bach*, Clara Bell and J. A. Fuller Maitland (trs.) (1873; 1899 edn), Vol. 3, p. 61). Later Friedrich Smend referred to ‘the decline of artistic quality in the last part’, finding the music following the *Sanctus* ‘distinctly inferior to what comes before’ (NBA II/1, KB, pp. 178–87).

^{hh} Alternatively, according to Mellers, it was the vision of St John Chrysostom which may have inspired him – those ‘thousands of Archangels ... that are six-winged, full of eyes, and soar aloft on their wings, singing, crying, shouting, and saying *Agios! Agios! Agios!* *Kyrie Sabaoth!* Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts! Heaven and Earth are full of Thy Glory! Hosanna in the Highest!’ (op. cit., p. 232). Tovey, on the other hand, sees the *Sanctus* as ‘almost drastically Protestant ... Bach is himself beating time to the angels swinging their censers before the Throne, and has entirely

forgotten the awe-struck mortals kneeling in silence before the miracle which gives them immortality' (op. cit., p. 23).

ⁱⁱ This implies that the appellation 'Die große catholische Messe' (as catalogued in C. P. E Bach's estate, 1790) denotes 'the universality of the Ordinary of the Mass, shared by both Catholics and Lutherans alike' (Robin A. Leaver, 'How "Catholic" is Bach's "Lutheran" Mass?' in University of Belfast International Symposium, *Discussion Book* (2007), Vol. 1, pp. 177–206).

^{ij} This is an almost exact reflection of the flute/voice dialectic in Bach's Epiphany cantata (BWV 123), where in the aria 'Lass, o Welt, mich aus Verachtung' the flute acts as a consoling angel or companion to the bass singer, bleak in his isolation, and infects him with new purpose and resolve.