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BACH'S



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Portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach (1746).
Painting by E. G. Hausmann. The Bettmann Archive, Inc.

virilistisch" (Better be Catholic than Calvinistic).¹² And indeed the spirituality of Bach's music has more affinity to the basic irrationalism of the medieval church than to the rationalism of Calvin, Erasmus, and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment that aligned itself with Calvinism and Pietism. The reasons for the rich development of music on Catholic and Lutheran soil—and its impoverishment in Calvinistic, Puritan, and rationalistic countries—are not merely exterior and ritualistic. Certainly music could not flourish either in churches that tolerated only untrained, congregational singing of psalms or sentimental hymns, or where Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531) had banished music altogether. There was no religious occasion for which to compose music. But more significantly, the spirit of music is stifled in an environment of rationalism or of overly moralistic discipline. Music is mystic and Dionysian and feeds on intuition of divine and human nature rather than on reason—and feeds on intuition of divine and human nature rather than on reason—though it may employ reason for exterior tools of the *métier*. The living soul of music, however, is no more accessible to reason than is faith, love, or the essence of beauty.

Early in his education Bach probably accepted the Lutheran reconciliation of matter and spirit. God, and therefore Christ, became ubiquitous, even in the material world. Augustine's statement, "To enjoy is to cleave fast in the love of a thing for its own sake," was now shorn of its pessimism. The newborn individual, through his faith in the promise of Christ, is now able to remain a spiritual being without denying himself the pleasure of living. While the ultimate fulfillment, the complete identification with the ideal, is achieved in personal and physical resurrection in Heaven, the spirit of the Lutheran God pervades life on earth: morbidity is overcome by health.

This philosophy is the key to the understanding of many phases of Bach's art. His practice of incorporating so much secular music, dance music, and "Epicurean" music, to use Luther's favorite term, into his religious cantatas is perfectly consistent with the Lutheran conception of Christ's presence in nature. We can even relate his use of instruments in religious music to Luther's Augustinianism; while the organ was barely tolerated in Italy, composers from northern Germany frequently designated a variety of instruments for the music of the Mass. His spirituality and his continuous regeneration by faith form the substance of Bach's exalting art, and are the source of the endless stream of metaphysical yet utterly human music that flowed from his pen. He expresses his sincere and very real spiritual experience in his music, which

was at all times in the service of his deity. To his pupils he often quoted the words of Erhard Niedt: "The sole purpose of harmony is the Glory of God; all other use is but idle jingling of Satan."

Bach's education avoided at all costs provoking resistance against supernatural conceptions. His theology served its magnificent purpose and Bach accepted it as the embodiment of ultimate truth. Although still significant and even efficacious for some, the old theology has lost its power to inspire the composition of great music. It remains as a philosophical symbol of bygone days while Bach's music lives, the object of universal appreciation, precisely because music is not bound to the intellectual framework, either theological or philosophical, of its creator. These scaffolds are temporal. Music remains alive to intuition, and Bach's art finds international response among those who are sensitive to metaphysical realities whatever their intellectual predispositions may be.

read during the meals, and that the boys (whose ages ranged from 12 to 20) did not return drunk after funerals, weddings, and especially the winter *Currenden*. On Sundays the cantor had to march the first *kantorei* in formation to the main church, the *conrector* led the second to the other principal church, and the sextus took the third to the New Church. The inspector on duty (cantor) also had to visit the sick in the school hospital adjoining the church. Since absence from these duties was fined with only four to six *Groschen*, however, the master may occasionally have shirked these cumbersome responsibilities.

The students had to bear severe and cruel punishments for behavior that to us today would be accepted as normal for young boys. The ignorant schoolmasters did not seem to suspect that the youngsters' misconduct was the inevitable result of the tensions and unrelenting disciplines they had to endure. For instance, leaving the religious service before the end—it lasted from seven to noon—was punished with a birching. When severe cold in the unheated church became unbearable youngsters were excused to go to the school building, but then were read the sermon, and had to prove by written examination that the pious words had not fallen upon sleepy, deaf ears.

Bach was not a rigid disciplinarian and based on what we know of his first experience with choir boys in Arnstadt, we can surmise that he was not overly conscientious about administering the regulations. There is no biographical information on Bach's relationship with his choir boys in Leipzig.

Bach's life centered around the Thomas School. His house was attached to the school, he trained his choir boys in the assembly hall and kept all the music he needed for major and minor performances here. During the summers he worked diligently in the school library. The music hall where the cantor held daily singing lessons and rehearsals was on the same level as his living quarters. From here he could enter directly into the bedrooms of his children.


Despite its proximity to the school and its lack of external charm²² Bach's home was very cheerful, with spacious rooms and large windows that looked out upon Leipzig's city moat and surrounding meadows. It had ample room for his continually growing family. On the first floor were five large rooms, a parlor with four windows, a dining room, two bedrooms, and his study, in which his immortal work was penned through the hours, and often through the entire night. Within the house the tinkling of harpsichords and clavichords or the clear voice of young

Anna Magdalena could be heard all day; over 20 instruments were kept in the three-story dwelling.²³ The solid walls of the building and the subdued tone of the instruments allowed the whole family to practice without disturbing each other.

Several beautiful parks and promenades through which the river Pleisse peacefully flowed were within easy walking distance. The old town was still walled in, and the Thomas Church and School were just at the outskirts of the town. Outside the old town many large homes were built, surrounded by lavish gardens. In the summer the Collegium Musicum under Bach's direction met in the garden of the rich burgher Gottfried Zimmerman; the Peasant Cantata was performed in the garden of Carl Heinrich von Diskau, exchequer, *Kammer-Junker*, and district-lieutenant.

The life of the city's boulevards, frescoed inns, and coffee houses was gay: "Little Paris" and "Little Paradise," it was called. The promenade abounded in the gallant life and gained the nickname of *Lästerallee*, alley of vice. Goethe was so astonished when he visited Leipzig that "he thought at first he had entered the Elysian fields."²⁴

The famous university made Leipzig a center of intellectual activity, and many distinguished residents visited the home of the city's famous composer. Anna Magdalena, who was already versed in the amenities of court life, must have made a gracious hostess to those paying homage to her cultured husband. They entertained colleagues at the Thomas School and professors as well as poets, many of whom collaborated with the production of Bach's vocal compositions. And Leipzig was already the hub of the printing business—as it remained until World War II. The famous printing house Breitkopf and Hartel was founded there in 1719. The same firm 100 years after Bach's death began the edition of the master's complete works.

Many of Bach's works were conceived of in Leipzig; many were transformed here from an earlier setting to a form rich in spiritual meaning. In the gay, sophisticated, and stimulating environment of Leipzig Bach began to devote his creative genius entirely to music for the Lutheran service. Later the winds of cultural change would disturb the faithful composer to the point that he retreated into a more private form of art. But when he first arrived in Leipzig Bach brought with him the goal he had set for himself long ago, inspired by his Lutheran education—to dedicate himself and his art to the greater glory of God. 

the sermon gained in significance because it was sung to a text related to the preacher's topic. This topic was determined by the liturgical calendar. The appropriate Bible passage was usually read in the early part of the service; in Leipzig, in Bach's time, it was chanted in plainsong by the minister at the altar. Before the reading from the gospels a hymn, corresponding to the gradual in the Catholic Mass, was sung, called the *Detemporalied*, the song for the proper time. The liturgical rules of the *Leipziger Kirchenstaat* required that "a song were sung according to the nature of the gospel."²

For example, on Advent Sunday the cantor might choose the hymn "Now Comes the Gentiles' Savior" as an introduction to the corresponding passage in one of the four gospels. A chorale-prelude that Bach wrote to precede this congregational hymn contains graphic illustrations of the text, as well as the deep, often tender, sometimes exalted and jubilant musical representation of Bach's personal reaction to the sacred drama of the text. The same hymn formed the musical motive for the cantata: and its poetic text would expound the topic of the day. It is easy to see why this coherence of gospel passage, sermon topic, *determina* hymn, and cantata, inspired Lutheran composers to spend their greatest creative energy and imagination on this part of the musical service, which achieved central importance in the liturgy.

The other parts of the service—the *Kyrie*, the *Gloria*, the *Credo*, the *Sanctus*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Agnus Dei*—were less important. The first two were designated as "Missa," the Mass. Bach did not necessarily compose music of his own for these parts, but usually used music of other composers, Protestant and Catholic alike. Sometimes the texts of these selections would coordinate with the topic of the day. Thus, on Christmas Day the motet before the *Kyrie* would be "*Jerusalem Gaudio Gaudio Magna*." Bach had access to motet collections of Erhard Bodenschatz (ca. 1576-1636), Melchior Vulpius (ca. 1570-1615), and the *Neu Leipziger Gesangbuch* (1682) by Gottfried Vopelius (1645-1715),³ all in the Thomas School library. He seems to have had a preference for the collection of Bodenschatz,⁴ which included, among others, works by Hans Leo Hassler (1564-1612), Andrea Gabrieli (d. 1586), Sethus Calvisius, Hieronymus Praetorius (1560-1629), Christoph Demantius (1567-1643), Melchior Vulpius, Giovanni Gabrielle (1557-1612), Melchior Franck (ca. 1579-1639), and Benedetto Pallavicino (?-1601).

Bach had envisioned his "well-regulated" church music as completely coordinated with the liturgy. Since the cantor—not the preacher—

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FULFILLMENT OF LUTHERAN REFORM

At last, in Leipzig, Bach would realize his final object: "well-conceived and well-regulated church music to the glory of God."¹ He was master of the musical service; he could elevate the musical liturgy to the loftiest heights of his imagination. In previous situations he had been active in parts of the service only. In Weimar he had furnished only the organ music that the service required. Inspired by Erdmann Neumeister and Salomo Franck, he conceived a new form of the cantata, but his subordinate rank prevented him from making full use of the form. Now, finally, he took up the gigantic task of composing complete yearly cycles of the liturgy—the musical part of the service that Luther had sketched out and suggested 200 years before.

The Lutheran Liturgy

The general program of the Catholic Mass was largely preserved in the Lutheran liturgy. Luther had changed only those parts that conflicted with the essential ideas of his Reform. Otherwise he had kept its construction intact for he loved the sacred ritual and revered its significance—the commemoration of the Incarnation and the Crucifixion. His reform was essentially one of emphasis, but because of these changes one function of the music of the liturgy came to dominate the service.

The sermon, not the acting out of the mystery of Holy Communion, was the climax of the Lutheran service. Instead of a priest performing the drama of the Eucharist alone, with the congregation as observers, a minister taught and interpreted the gospel. The music before and after

chooses the *determinata* hymn, Bach could integrate the music according to his own judgment. He could work at these compositions sufficiently in advance to give them all the care and attention such significant artworks needed. It has been estimated that the composition of a cantata took Bach about a month, and many of these works were conceived and composed long before they were performed.

The B Minor Mass

Although Luther loved the beauty of the Latin Mass, he realized that because of language the uneducated classes of the population were excluded from the instruction of the liturgy. Reluctantly at first, he published a German Mass in 1526. The Greek words *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord, have mercy upon us), were retained, but only as a refrain in a German incantation hymn, *Kyrie Gott Vater in Ewigkeit! Gross ist dein Barmherzigkeit* (Kyrie God, Father in Eternity, Great is Thy Mercy).⁵ Similarly, the *Gloria in excelsis Deo* became a hymn *Allein Gott in der Höhe sei Ehr* (Only God On High Be Honored). But, as Luther himself wrote:

On festival days, like Christmas, Michaelis, Purification, etc. it must go as hitherto, in Latin, until we have enough German songs because this work is in its early beginnings; therefore everything that belongs to it is not yet ready.⁶

Faithful to this pronouncement, Leipzig conducted the liturgy in both languages, especially in the Thomas and University churches, which the educated upper classes attended. Here many chants were alternately sung in Latin and German. On many festal days the entire service was in Latin.

Luther's love of the traditional language of the church was probably Bach's motivation for writing one magnificent Mass entirely in Latin—the *B Minor Mass*. Bach's respect for Latin, shared with Luther, inspired his departure from the common German text, and does not, as many scholars have tried to prove, betray a leaning toward Catholicism. He did send parts of the Mass to the Catholic Elector of Saxony, August III. Admittedly, any part of the Mass could be used in the Catholic service, even the solo arias and duets, since similar songs appear in the Masses of Bach's Catholic contemporaries like Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783), a pupil of Nicolas Porpora and Alessandro Scarlatti.⁷ On the other hand, Bach wrote five yearly sets of German cantatas, comprising

the staggering amount of 295 (according to his son Carl Philipp Emanuel as related by Forkel), as compared with a very small number of Latin works. He even composed German works for festal days, although Luther had recommended Latin; there are 56 German cantatas, among those extant, composed for such feasts as John the Baptist (Nos. 7, 30, and 167), Mary's Visitation (10 and 147), Christ's Ascension (11, 37, 43, and 128).⁸ Cantatas in Latin are rare; Cantata 191, in Latin, was performed during the festivities of Christmas.

Ten parts of the *B Minor Mass* consist of partial transcriptions from other works, six of which are cantatas.⁹ Recitatives were excluded from these Latin services, but Bach borrowed the great choral introductions and symphonies, as well as a duet and an aria for alto solo. The aria *Ach bleibe doch, mein liebste Leben* from Cantata 11 ("Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen"), became the *Agnus Dei* of the Mass, and the duet from the Latin Cantata 191, which became the *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, was also derived from a German work, now lost. The *Gloria in excelsis Deo* of 191 is identical with the *Gloria* of the great Mass; the *Gloria Patri* of this cantata, which was sung *Post Orationem*, appears in the *B Minor Mass* as part seven, *Domine Deus, Rex Coelestis*; and part three of this cantata, *Sicut erat in Principio*, emerges in the *B Minor Mass* with the words "*Cum sancto Spirito in Gloria Dei Patris*."

The *B Minor Mass* was never performed in its entirety, nor did Bach intend this when he wrote the work. This, along with Bach's overriding concern with the German cantata form, should dispel any doubts about his possible tendency toward Catholicism. Only parts of the *B Minor Mass* were performed for special festal occasions. Spitta is of the opinion that the *Sanctus* was used as a Christmas piece, even that it was composed for that purpose.¹⁰ Moreover, the rules of the Leipzig liturgy demanded that the *Sanctus* be sung at that time, at the end of the main service, before Communion. The *Kyrie* of the *B Minor Mass*, because of its unusual length, may have been sung on the Sunday before Lent. The *Credo* would fit in on saints' days, when it was customary to sing the entire Nicene Creed.¹¹ (In Bach's time no independent services for saints' days were observed, for they were merged with the nearest Sunday.) Bach's son Philipp Emanuel, who possessed the vocal and orchestral parts of the *Credo*, performed just this section of the Mass in Hamburg when he was musical director there.

The absurdity of the supposition that Bach's Masses were written with the Catholic service in mind is most evident in the *Kyrie* of the *F*

Major Mass,¹² which would never have been tolerated in the Catholic church. The *Kyrie*, a contrapuntal gem, has a Protestant chorale melody, played by two horns and two oboes, which form an obligato above the fugal quartet of voices. Together with this four-part fugue on the words *Kyrie Eleison*, and the hymn tune for the horns and oboes, the bass voice and the bassoon sing a *cantus firmus* which is clearly derived from the Litany, a chant that was intoned in the Leipzig churches on the first Sunday of Advent and Lent.¹³ Similar interweaving of the Catholic with Lutheran music appear in the *Credo* and in the *Confiteor* of the *B Minor Mass*. For the fugue of the *Credo* Bach used the theme of the ancient Georgian plain chant *Credo in unum Deum*, which was sung by the Lutheran choir after the gospel reading. In measure 73 of the *Confiteor* the bass sings another church intonation, *Confiteor unum baptismum in remissionem peccatorum* (I acknowledge baptism for the remission of sins). Luther discarded most of the sacraments, but not baptism, and this ancient chant could be used in Catholic and Lutheran churches alike.

Bach's four Masses, in F major, A major, g minor, and G major (also derived from cantatas)¹⁴ contain only one *Kyrie* and a *Gloria* in four movements. Only the *B Minor Mass* is complete, including the *Credo*, the *Sanctus*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Agnus Dei*, as well as the *Kyrie* in three movements and the *Gloria* in eight. In the Protestant liturgy the *erm Missa*, or Mass, referred to only those parts of the ancient Mass that were used in the Lutheran service, in particular the *Kyrie* and the *Gloria*. The Thomas Church prescribes:

MISSA: (Choir): *Kyrie eleison*, etc. or the hymn "Kyrie Gott Vater in Ewigkeit," followed by the *Gloria*, sung by the choir either in Latin—in that case the entire text, which in the B minor Mass comprises eight movements, and in the four shorter Masses four—or in German. In the latter case the hymn "Allein Gott in der Höhe sei Ehr" is suggested.

Besides these *Kyries* and *Glorias* five short *Sancti* and one *Christe Eleison* in g minor have been ascribed to Bach.¹⁵ One more major Latin work remains to be mentioned—the glorious *Magnificat*.

Bach's *Magnificat*

The *Magnificat* is the gospel canticle that the Blessed Virgin Mary sang in ecstasy when she knew she was to give birth to the Savior. Its text comes directly from Luke 2:46-55. Following tradition, and

Luther's admonition, Bach used the Latin of the Vulgate¹⁶ for this festal performance.

Since the fifteenth century composers have set this text to music, and have performed it at Vespers during Christmas. True to tradition, Bach's *Magnificat* was performed on the first day of Christmas, in the afternoon. Since the bells began tolling at 1:15 p.m. and the sermon began at 3:00¹⁷—after the organ voluntary, the motet on either "*Cum nativitas esset Jesus*," "*Hodie Christus natus est*," or "*Surgite pastores*,"¹⁸ a cantata, and the pulpit hymn "*Ein Kindelein so löblich*"—one may assume that the service began at between 2:00 and 2:30, and that the *Magnificat* was sung around 5:00, which brings it *ad vesperam*, at sunset. This work, which lasts about 35 minutes, is Bach's only Latin work that can be performed in its entirety without violating the composer's original design.

Not long before Bach came to Leipzig some ancient theatrical customs still prevailed. The churches continued to display the manger and to rock the Infant Jesus until 1702. Another custom, that of singing antiphonal hymns between the movements of the *Magnificat* canticle was followed in the early days of Bach's cantorsip: for in an earlier version of his *Magnificat* (in E flat)¹⁹ Bach had written out two chorales, a *Gloria*, and part of a Latin hymn *Virga Jesse*, which were sung by a small choir in the gallery opposite the main one, following the custom in Leipzig of singing antiphonal hymns, accompanied by a smaller organ on that gallery,²⁰ between movements. But Bach abandoned even this last remnant of a theatrical effect in the definitive version (in D major).

Indeed, Bach needed no theatricals to communicate the content of this poem; his music portrayed the Virgin's state of mind much more graphically and penetratingly than any visual display. Indescribable is the ecstatic joy in the music to the first verse *Magnificat anima mea dominum* (My soul doth magnify the Lord). Only by sharing grateful ecstasy with his own bride at her first pregnancy can Bach have absorbed so completely Mary's feeling at this heavenly event. The austere text of the Vulgate and of the King James version does not adequately reflect Mary's exalted state of mind. Just how Bach experienced it becomes clear upon reading the free paraphrase on this text in Cantata 189, "*Meine Seele rühmt und preist*." Instead of "My soul doth magnify the Lord" it reads, "My soul glorifies and praises God's kindness and goodness, and my spirit, heart, and senses, and my entire being is