Bach's Four Missae

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Bach's four settings of the Kyrie and Gloria, BWV 233-236 – usually referred to as *Missae Breves* or "Lutheran" Masses (with or without the scare-quotes) – are probably his most underrated works. Until recently, many of Bach's most ardent admirers considered them unworthy of their creator; if they spoke of them at all, it was often with dismissive frustration or bemusement. Similarly, many musicians who have otherwise tackled large swathes of Bach's sacred music tended to avoid the *Missae* (at least as far as recordings were concerned). Over the past two decades, however, there have been several superb performances – both of the complete set and of individual works; and scholars are increasingly taking them seriously.

The *Missae* seem to have rubbed against two cherished images of Bach. They are based almost entirely on movements from earlier cantatas, thus clashing with the image of Bach the divinely-inspired, original creator; and their Latin text sits uncomfortably with the image of Bach the faithful Lutheran. But the detractors have made two crucial errors. On the one hand, the works do not quite contradict these images as they believed. On the other hand, the images themselves are problematic, and get in the way of appreciating Bach's achievements – not least in the four *Missae*.

The works' genesis

The two *Missae* that survive in Bach's own handwriting (BWV 234 and 236) were composed around 1738; the other two were probably written at around the same time. Two factors, at least, suggest that the four works were conceived as a cycle:

1. **Similarity of structure**: Each work consists of six movements. The opening Kyrie is a chorus; the Gloria consists of two choruses ("Gloria" and "Cum Sancto spiritu") enclosing between them three arias or duets. In each case, the first aria is for bass solo. On the other hand, the four works do not parse the text of the *Gloria* in quite the same way
2. **Common origin**: Four cantatas – Nos. 79, 102, 179 and 187 – have provided models for more than one *Missa*, creating links that move beyond each individual *Missa*.

Spitta and Schweitzer, who were convinced that the works could not have been used in the Leipzig church service, speculated that Bach wrote them for the Catholic chapel in Dresden. More recently, Peter Williams (*The Life of Bach*, p. 199) suggested that Bach may have written the works for his son, Wilhelm Friedemann, for use in the Sophienkirche in Dresden. Such speculations, however, might be a response to a bogus problem: Spitta and Schweitzer notwithstanding, the Kyrie and Gloria *did* form part of the Lutheran church service on several feast days. Before 1738, Bach had already performed Mass settings by other composers as part of his regular duties as director of church music in Leipzig; the fact that he has also composed his own settings might be less surprising than the fact that he had apparently waited until the late 1730s to do so.

As Robin Leaver points out, the *Missae* were composed at a time when Bach was engaged in a series of retrospective projects – including both the revision of existing works (e.g., the Passions) and the compilation of comprehensive anthologies (e.g., the Schübler organ chorales and the second part of the Well-Tempered Clavier). These collection were meant, *inter alia*, to preserve Bach's best music in a more enduring form. The *Missae* fit into this pattern:

> by adapting cantata movements into settings of the Lutheran *Missa* Bach changed their liturgical function from *proprium* to *ordinarium*. The cantatas were effectively part of the *propria*, along with collects, epistles, gospels, etc., for a given day or celebration, and thus many could only be heard on one particular day in the church year. But if they were reworked into *ordinarium* settings of *Kyrie* and *Gloria* the music could be heard more frequently. (Leaver, "Conservation or intensification?")

Beyond this, however, Leaver argues that the *Missae* were part of Bach's larger, lifelong project to create a well-organised repertory of church music. In his later years, Bach increasingly insisted on raising the level of church music, creating a more professional body of dedicated musicians who would enable the presentation of a varied, demanding repertoire. Again, the *Missae* fit the pattern, forming as they do "a remarkable collection of movements, varied in musical style and form that display an extraordinary range of compositional techniques that are challenging to singers and instrumentalists alike" (ibid).

Parody and theological message

Philip Spitta's critique of the *Missae* remains the most concentrated expression of the traditional suspicion towards them. Spitta was willing to condone and even praise Bach's parody practice in general; in the *Missae*, however, he accused Bach of doing "violence [...] to his own creations":

> There are among [Bach's] remodelled pieces some which are elevated by the process and severed from a connection with some less dignified theme; and this commonly occurs when Bach transfers a composition from a secular to a sacred purpose. There are also re-arrangements which work back to the original germ of the idea, an under the new conditions give it quite a new form. Finally, there are some which are only a vivid reproduction of a piece; and just as a finished composition may differ each time it is repeated, varying with the character of the performers and the feeling, time, place, and surroundings at the moment, so it has happened that Bach makes a composition serve with a different effect, though with but slight alteration, under different conditions of feeling. All these modes of treatment have artistic justification, but none of them have been used in the masses under discussion, which, so far as possible to Bach, are mere mechanical arrangements. [...] no artistic purpose in their transformation is anywhere to be detected; and even a superficial comparison must result in favour of the cantata forms. There each piece seems to have sprung from a living inspiration. It corresponds to the poetical purpose, and adequately fills its place as part of a whole; but here each gorgeous blossom is severed from the stem and bound in an ill-assorted nosegay. (Spitta, vol. III, pp. 30-31)

Schweitzer's Bach monograph contains even harsher indictments; both writers seem to have set the tone for later reception. Their erroneous belief (influenced, perhaps, by Lutheran church practices of their own time) that the *Missae* could not have formed part of the Lutheran church service might explain their willingness to dismiss them: they both hypothesized that Bach rush-composed them for an outside commission that he did not really care for.

Robin Leaver's articles present an opposite view: that, in composing the *Missae*, Bach sought to award some of his music a more permanent and prestigious status within the Lutheran service. Leaver also assisted Paul McCreesh in reconstructing a hypothetical service in Leipzig in Bach's lifetime, incorporating the F-major *Missa*. As the resulting *Epiphany Mass* album vividly demonstrates, Bach's *Missae* and cantatas appeared side-by-side in the same service; Bach would not have known of any objections to using in one part of the service music that had already been composed for another part of it.

In my view, the *Missae* display precisely the sort of "artistic justification" that Spitta proposes for parodies. Some movements in these works constitute extensive

revisions, amounting to re-compositions; others are closer to their models. Yet it is some of the most sophisticated revisions that have been judged particularly harshly – for reasons that might have more to do with the writers' ideologies than with the aesthetic value of Bach's work.

Smoothing the rough edges

There are several cases in the *Missae* where Bach "makes a composition serve with a different effect […] under different conditions of feeling". In almost all of these, the original cantata movement seems harsher, more brittle when compared to its rounder, gentler and often more sensuous revision. Many movements in the *Missae* are modelled on arias and choruses whose original texts contained harsh admonitions against hypocrisy, featuring an air of humility that sometimes crosses into self-deprecation. The text of the *Missa*, on the other hand, alternates between pleas for divine mercy and admiration of divine glory.

The softening is evident even when the change of text does not immediately suggest it. A clear example is the Gloria of the G major *Missa*, originally the opening movement of Cantata 79, *Gott der Herr ist Sonn und Schild*, which posits God as the protector of his believers. John Eliot Gardiner, in the notes to his recording, gives a particularly vivid account of Bach's response to this text:

> The opening movement is fashioned as a kind of ceremonial Aufzug or procession – a moving tableau of Lutheran folk on the march. But their militancy is not in the least grimfaced: the 62-bar introduction establishes a mood of outgoing joy and bonhomie. Underpinning the fanfares of the high horns is an insistent drum beat which, interpreted a little fancifully, replicates the hammering of Luther's theses to the oak door at the back of the church.

In transforming this movement into the "Gloria", Bach imposed upon himself the challenge of re-writing this music for an ensemble that contained neither horns nor drums. His solution seemed too radical for some (Spitta cites it as a particularly egregious example of Bach's re-compositional malpractice). The soprano and alto sing the original horn parts; the tenors and basses are silent as the two upper voices sing "Gloria in excelsis deo". On the words "et in terra pax", Bach arrives at what had originally been the first vocal entry; here, instead, tenor and bass finally join in, playing "earth" to the upper parts' "heaven". The insistent drumbeat – a central feature of the cantata movement – is entirely absent. Though the musical materials – the melodies, harmonies and rhythms – are largely the same, the music still has a

radically different character: where the cantata movement was lavish, extroverted and triumphant, the *Missa* movement is gentler, elegant and flexible.

A similar phenomenon recurs later in the same *Missa*, when Bach transforms the duet "Gott, ach Gott" from Cantata 79 into the *Missa*'s "Domine deus". The two texts express similar, yet not identical sentiments: in the cantata, the prayer is for deliverance from earthly enemies; in the *Missa*, it is a prayer for mercy and forgiveness. It is not entirely surprising, therefore, that the *Missa* version replaces the cantata's angular lines with mellifluous vocal and instrumental writing. In the cantata, the violins' line is characterised by rhythmic regularity and the frequent use of leaps (octaves and sevenths) and repeated notes. In the *Missa*, these are replaced by graceful, gently-ornamented gestures in a narrower range, creating a more relaxed atmosphere. The differences are especially noticeable in the central section of these da-capo duets; yet throughout, the *Missa* duet is more languid and intimate than its model. This is also due to the marked change in vocal scoring. The cantata duet was for soprano and bass; in the *Missa*, the duet is for soprano and alto. The two voices are therefore much closer to each other (and to the violin line); their lines intertwine, and many of their phrases end in perfect unison. One could easily imagine this music being used as a love duet – the singers seem to engage in dialogue, both with each other and with the violins. In the cantata, on the other hand, we are listening to two singers directly addressing a third person.

In *The Learned Musician* (pp. 386-387), Christoph Wolff cites a similar case in point – the alto aria "Qui tollis" from the F-major *Missa*, based on the aria "Weh der Seele" ("Woe the soul") from Cantata 102. In the revised version, he writes,

> the declamatory style of the instrumental and vocal gestures [is] modified in order to generate a more intense expressive rhetoric and, at the same time, greater textural transparency, notably by means of a delicately withdrawn continuo line. The result is a simpler and airier trio in a stylistically more forward-looking setting, typical of Bach's music throughout the 1730s. […] But while the signs of growth and development in his music from the 1730s were an outcome of his exposure to new music of other composers, they were equally the result of an abiding confrontation with his own creative efforts.

Wolff's references to the impact of "new music of other composers" on Bach – including secular Italian vocal music – echo the thesis of Robert Marshall, who, in his controversial article "Bach the Progressive", claimed that Bach's later music reveals, *inter alia*, the influence of the new *stile galant*. To the extent that the *Missae* reveal a similar tendency, this might account for some of the discomfort they caused writers

who were keen on viewing Bach as a stalwart German Lutheran impervious to such influences.

Backing away from his own dark vision?

This stern image of Bach is related to the notion of the cantatas as "sermons in music". Adherents of this position tend to minimise the distinction between conveying a precise verbal message and delivering a more general musical-religious experience. Alfred Dürr, for instance, wrote that the "history of [Lutheran] church music from Schütz to Bach is […] an account of the influx into liturgical singing of sermon-like interpretative and exegetical elements"; as a result, he argues, "[c]hurch musicians were naturally most interested in those parts of the divine service best suited to assuming a sermon-like character" (*The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, pp. 3-4) – explaining, in his view, why they took less interest in the *Missa*.

This commonly-held view inspired Bach's devotees to seek ever-more elaborate theological messages in his church music. In the *Missae*, however, Bach took music initially fitted to a particular text, matching its precise message and detailed imagery – and rewrote it for another text, less richly metaphoric. It looks as if Bach had been flippant with his hard-earned textual-musical inventions, wasting the fruits of his own labour – unless we assume that communicating a precise semantic message had never been his primary goal. For those who view Bach as a primarily theological composer, neither option gives much comfort.

For some listeners, however, the "sermon in music" notion itself sounds problematic: in English, at least, "sermonising" and "preaching" could carry a whiff of moralising self-righteousness. In Bach reception, the most extreme representation of this association can be found in Richard Taruskin's "Facing up finally to Bach's dark vision". In this controversial record review, Taruskin praises Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt for daring to produce ungraceful, even ugly performances of Bach's cantatas, thereby exposing Bach's ungraceful, ugly message:

> The essential Bach was an avatar of a pre-Enlightened – and when push came to shove, a violently anti-Enlightened – temper. His music was a medium of truth, not beauty. And the truth he served was bitter. His works persuade us – no, *reveal* to us – that the world is filth and horror, that humans are helpless, that life is pain, that reason is a snare. (Taruskin, p. 310)

This message can certainly be found in the libretti of several Bach cantatas. One of these is Cantata 179, *Siehe zu daß deine Gottesfurch nicht Heuchelei sei* ("See to it that your fear of God be not hypocrisy"), which Taruskin (p. 313) described as "harsh and minatory". But the opening chorus and two arias of this cantata served as models for the *Missae*; and their transformation suggests that the harsh, uncompromising elements which Taruskin called "the essential Bach" were not even "essential" musical features in this particular cantata.

Bach does seem to modify or remove these elements as he adapts his music to the Latin text. This is particularly evident in G-major *Missa*'s "Quoniam", based on the aria "Falscher Heuchler Ebenbild" ("The image of false hypocrisies"). The cantata text compares hypocrites to "Sodom's apples" whose beautiful looks conceal a rotten core; the "Quoniam" is a song of praise to God's glory. In affecting the transformation, Bach made the new aria more intimate. In "Falscher Heuchler" the tenor is supported by a full string section; in the "Quoniam", he is only partnered by a solo oboe and continuo. The oboe line is based on the first violin of "Falscher Heuchler", but with additional ornaments which render it more fluent and graceful.

The angry affect in "Falscher Heuchler" is partly dependant on the performance. The aria is usually projected in a vehement style that seems appropriate for text and music alike; but it could sound more genial if rendered at a slower tempo, with soft and flexible dynamics, rounder articulation, and gentler timbre. It would be difficult, however, to recapture the original version's anger in renditions of the "Quoniam". The terse, incisive and insistent projection that characterises renditions of "Falscher Heuchler" partly depends on the use of fuller string sections and on the relatively sparse ornamentation; it would be difficult for the lone oboe, with its more richly ornamented line, to achieve a similar affect.

The other aria in Cantata 179, "Liebster Gott, erbarme dich", became the "Qui tollis peccata mundi" in the A-major *Missa*. Here, both texts are direct, personal pleas for Christ's mercy; but there are still notable differences. Taruskin considers "Liebster Gott" a particularly startling example of Bach's quest for deliberate ugliness, which demands the kind of awkward performance it receives from Nikolaus Harnoncourt and his musicians:

> Although the aria is in the key of A minor, the middle section modulates to, and ends in, the key of C minor. Not only is the juxtaposition intensely jarring, it also puts the music in a harmonic region where the instruments simply

> cannot play in tune, especially as Bach takes them down to their very lowest, least tractable range. At the middle cadence the boy, too, is asked to sing lower than his tonal support permits.
>
> The whole performance sounds loathsome and disgraceful. And these are the words [of the middle section]: "My sins sicken me like pus in my bones; help me, Jesus, Lamb of God, for I am sinking in deepest slime." […] the aria […] utterly depends on its performers' failings, and on the imperfections of their equipment, to make its harrowing point. (Taruskin, p. 313)

This sickening, fragile imagery is entirely absent from the Mass text. Correspondingly, the "Qui tollis" version is more ethereal. It is a tone higher – B minor rather than A minor – though the tonal distance between the aria's two sections remains as jarring as before. Bach inserted "Liebster Gott" into the only *Missa* whose orchestra included no oboes – thereby forcing himself to replace the oboes da caccia with a pair of flutes, whose sonorities are gentler. The ethereal effect is enhanced by the omission of the continuo. The vocal line, too, is less fractured in the "Qui tollis". This might have been done for prosodic rather than expressive reasons: the German text has more (and shorter) words than the Latin text; but it does make the *Missa* version, yet again, more flowing than its cantata model.

Even if Bach intended to illustrate rotting sickness in "Liebster Gott", he did not consider this illustration an "essential" component of the aria. In the *Missa*, he created a more beautiful version of this aria (using "beautiful" in the narrow sense of the word) without violating the music's integrity. Both versions are profoundly expressive, and movingly relate the core emotional message – the plea for mercy. This general affect seems to have been more important for Bach than the communication of specific ideas and images related to it.

Elsewhere, the move from sermon to prayer has had virtually no impact on the music. When Bach turned the chorus "Siehe zu" into the Kyrie of the G major *Missa*, he made very few alterations. A piece that originally exhorted Christians to avoid hypocrisy and "serve God with a true heart" became a plea for God's mercy without, in Bach's apparent view, requiring any significant change to the music. The movement's densely intricate polyphonic texture – a feature which this movement shares with the opening Kyries of the G minor and F major *Missae*, and indeed the First and Second Kyrie of the B-minor Mass – might well have been one reason for his choice; the strict, motet-style seriousness, with many tense harmonies and chromatic passages, is equally appropriate for both texts.

In these cases, Bach faced the self-imposed prospect of revising settings of uncompromising, harsh texts – and responded by compromising them. At times, he softened his own musical edges, rendering his music more mellow and gentle; at others, he changed the text without substantially altering the music, seemingly suggesting that the moralising attitude had never been an essential musical component.

It is easy to understand why some Bach interpreters might get worked up about this, accusing Bach of betraying his own works. But the revisions could equally be used to support an opposite point: that even musical features inspired by the original text were not essential components – the music could be re-written in a way that draws upon other elements, and the resulting work can have as much aesthetic "rightness" as the original. Rebecca Lloyd, in a critique of theological analyses of Bach's music, wrote that the stern, moralising Bach image is based on theological and liturgical concepts that neither Luther nor Bach would have recognised:

> As a pious Lutheran, Bach probably hoped that his listeners would gain spiritual refreshment and understanding as God chose to send it via music – or not. But he would not presume to know the specific form such refreshment and understanding might take. [...] By looking again at Luther we can challenge the historically dubious assumption that in order to be theologically orthodox, music has to express ideas. Perhaps Bach, like us, knew the limitations of music's semantic ability; perhaps he too knew that words and music have always signified in different ways. And perhaps this worried him not at all. Indeed it may be that he took special pleasure in this form of Gemütsergötzung, this "spiritual refreshment." (Lloyd, pp. 24, 27)

Bach's parody technique in the examples cited above could be seen as supporting this view. Though the music was initially created to project and intensify the harsher message, it is not bound to that message. Closer to Bach's time, Gottfried Ephraim Scheibel justified the use of parody by claiming that music's function is to move the affections: as long as the affect of the music and the text match, he argued, there can be no accusation of impropriety. The precise message – the object of the affection – is communicated by the words; it does not reside within the music. This kind of thinking probably informs much of Bach's parodying process – except that (as happens in some cases in the *Missae*), he demonstrated that even the affections can be altered (albeit with suitable alterations to the music itself).

The purely-musical consideration

For me, the strangest point in Spitta's diatribe is the implication that the *Missae* lack internal unity: "each gorgeous blossom is severed from the stem and bound in an ill-assorted nosegay". It is an undeniable fact that Bach drew his models from different cantatas without much consideration to the integrity of the original works. Spitta's organic imagery suggests that the failure of such ventures is inevitable: if each movement is a "blossom" that cannot exist independently of its "stem", then it has slim chances of survival when grafted onto a new "plant". This sort of musical-work-as-organism imagery was common currency in Spitta's time; there is considerable doubt, however, as to whether it would have sounded plausible to Bach and his contemporaries.

In order to truly appreciate the internal integrity of the *Missae*, we need to view them on their own terms, ignoring any knowledge we might have of their origins. From this perspective, one could easily argue that the *Missae*, both individually and as a cycle, reveal a more vigorous pursuit of inner unity than many of Bach's cantatas. In the G-minor *Missa*, the quest for musical unity – and especially the connection between the three choral movements – is especially evident. There are clear motivic links between the opening "Kyrie" and the closing "Cum sancto spiritu"; it is surprising to reflect that they are drawn from two different cantatas (both, however, composed for services in August 1726). The Gloria is drawn from yet another cantata, composed for January 1726. This movement is more energetic than the Kyrie, and contains its own internal shading between hectic passages (initially associated with "Gloria in excelsis deo") and calmer ones (initially associated with "et in terra pax"). Yet it sounds as an intensification of the Kyrie, rather than providing a contrasting affect.

This continuity can be a cause for criticism. One would expect a clear musical contrast between a plea for mercy (Kyrie) and a song of praise (Gloria); Bach fulfils this expectation in all his other Mass settings. The G-minor's "Gloria" and "Cum sancto" seem grimmer than their jubilant, festive texts might suggest. Here, it seems that Bach placed a musical consideration – the work's internal balance and unity – above the expressive requirements of the text and the traditions of its setting.

A more nuanced case is the "Gloria" of the A-major *Missa*. This movement is based on the dialogue-chorus "Friede sei mit euch" ("Peace be with you") from

Cantata 67. This is a dramatic, even theatrical movement, constructed through the alternation of two contrasting sections: tumultuous passages for orchestra and three voices (soprano, alto and tenor), who plead with Jesus for help and deliverance, are interspersed with slower, calmer passages in which the bass intones the words “Peace be with you”. The music pits humanity’s insecurity in the face of enemies (Satan, death, the weariness of earthly life) against the calm offered by Christ’s promise of salvation.

In the cantata, the three upper voices represent humanity, whereas the bass appears as *Vox Christi*. This consideration, however, is no longer relevant in the *Missa*. Indeed, having decided to follow this chorus with a bass aria, Bach had good reason to avoid a strong emphasis on the bass in the chorus itself. Instead, he reintegrates the bass into the texture, and assigns him only one of the three solo interjections (the others are given to the alto and tenor). The movement begins with all four voices bursting with a vibrant song of praise (marked Vivace); the words “et in terra pax” (which clearly resonate with the original “Friede sei mit euch”) inspire a calmer, more introspective mood, marked by sparser texture (solo voice, with reduced accompaniment) and a slower tempo (Adagio). At the conclusion of the movement, the calmer material – sung by all four voices – is linked to a final thanksgiving (Gratias agimus tibi). In the central sections, Bach retains the Vivace/Adagio contrast while settings texts that are all but synonymous: the “Adoramus te” is presented in two slow, solo passages, giving it a calmer demeanour compared to the other expressions of praise and benediction.

On the whole, the A-major Gloria can be viewed as another example of Bach’s sophisticated refashioning of his music. The movement’s structure was obviously inspired by the dramatic implication of its original text; yet Bach succeeded in refitting it into its new context through a series of ingenious transformation.

Summary

Discussion of the *Missae*’s reception history cannot be complete without reference to the one work most directly comparable to them – the B-minor Mass. This undisputed masterpiece began life as another *Missa*, containing only the Kyrie and Gloria. This *Missa*, written in 1733, is more ambitious than its four successors. It is

almost twice as long as any of them, scored more richly (five voices instead of four, supported by a larger orchestra replete with trumpets and drums), divided into more movements, and covering a wider expressive range with more dramatic contrasts and transitions. In choosing this large-scale work as the point of departure for his setting of the complete Mass Ordinary, Bach had clearly set himself an even more ambitious task.

There is a host of questions surrounding the B-minor Mass, its genesis and its denomination. However, in the wake of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and the increasing acceptance of monumental church works intended for the concert hall, it managed to carve a niche for itself – even if this niche has little to do with the composer's own intentions.

The *Missae*, on the other hand, are more intimate, lyrical works. They lack the imposing dimensions and (occasionally) arresting gestures that helped promote the B-minor Mass to its place in the canon. Their neglect might well be related with an increasing 19th- and 20th-century tendency to link the "great" with the "grandiose". And yet, they display all the qualities that typify Bach at his best – from textural complexity, unity-in-diversity and compositional sophistication to profound expressiveness and sheer sonorous beauty.

In his notes to Philippe Herreweghe's recording of BWV 234 and 235, Mark Audus writes that the *Missae* could "stand up considerably better to concert and even liturgical use than the now outmoded form of the German cantatas from which they spring". Modern Bach listeners do not all share the same outlook, of course; but many of them are likely to welcome the absence of sermonising texts in these works, and perhaps even the absence of recitatives. These considerations would probably have made little sense (if any) to Bach and his contemporaries. But the *Missae* have long suffered unjustified neglect due to anachronistic considerations; it would be somewhat fitting if another set of such considerations would help restore their reputation and promote their revival.

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Missae discography

The *Missae*'s discography is relatively short, with many of the available recordings – of the complete set and of individual works – appearing relatively recently. The two sets recommended below both respond to recent research – especially by Joshua Rifkin and Andrew Parrott – on the size and constitution of Bach's performing forces.

Among recordings employing a 'traditional' choir, Philippe Herreweghe's is arguably the finest (I have yet to hear Ton Koopman's version, included in the last volume of his Complete Cantatas series). Herreweghe's approach is lyrical and introverted, with refined, rounded phrases and a rich vocal and instrumental sonority; the sheer mellifluous beauty produced by the Collegium Vocale Choir and Orchestra is matched by the four superb soloists. These recordings are available in two different Bach/Herreweghe albums. One of them couples the *Missae* with six Bach cantatas (4 CDs; Virgin Classics 0724356225220); the other couples them with Herreweghe's first recording of the B-minor Mass, as well as C.P.E. Bach's oratorio *Die Auferstehung und Himmelfahrt Jesu* (5 CDs; Virgin Classics 0094637285626).

Another essential contribution to the *Missae*'s discography is Paul McCreesh's Epiphany Mass album (2 CDs; Archiv Produktion 457 631-2). This album reconstructs one of the more opulent ceremonies in the Leipzig church calendar. The F-major *Missa* (BWV 233) is heard together with two cantatas, a *Sanctus* and various other music (from traditional chant through communally-sung chorales to organ works by Bach and others), providing an insight into how Bach himself used this music. The performance is exhilarating.

Lutheran Masses

Vol. 1: BWV 234-235: Chandos Chaconne CHAN 0642

Susan Gritton, Robin Blaze, Mark Padmore, Peter Harvey/ The Purcell Quartet

59 mins; Recorded 1998

Vol. 2: BWV 233, 236 (+ Trio Sonata BWV 529, arr. Richard Boothby): Chandos Chaconne CHAN 0653

Nancy Argenta, Michael Chance, Mark Padmore, Peter Harvey/ The Purcell Quartet

65 mins; Recorded 1997, 1999

Also available for download (MP3 or Hi-Def Lossless Audio) from www.chandos.net

These are intimate, chamber-scale performances: a consort of vocal soloists (probably what Bach had in mind for most of his vocal music) partnered by a one-per-part orchestra (probably smaller than what Bach had in mind). Whatever the historical arguments, the musical results are beguilingly persuasive.

One of the main arguments against one-per-part Bach is that it renders the music inexpressive. This argument is based on the problematic yet common assumption that small-scale, intimate forces are ill-suited for dramatic and expressive intensity. Yet, as these recordings (among others) demonstrate, Bach's choral music can sound particularly touching and compelling when each line is sung with the commitment and sensitivity of a soloist.

In several cases – for example, the Glorias of the G major and G minor Masses – singers and players alike generate an almost breathless dramatic excitement; and throughout, Bach's intricate polyphonic textures are rendered as lively, fervent dialogues. Arias and duets are also performed with refined elegance and touching expressivity, with superb contributions from vocal and instrumental soloists alike. I did find the instrumental bass-line undershaped at times: Bach's continuo lines often have their own independent melodic content, which is not always sufficiently projected here. Aside from this minor reservation, these performances represent chamber music at its best: each musician shapes his or her line with eloquent individuality; yet they also listen to each other attentively. Collectively, they communicate a rare freshness and a sense of discovery.

Missae Breves

Cantus Cölln/ Konrad Junghänel

Harmonia Mundi HMC 901939.40; 2 CDs; 59:07 + 51:41. recorded 2006

This version employs eight singers – single concertists doubled by single ripienists – and an orchestra with doubled violins and violas (3-3-2-1-1). In choral movements, Junghänel alternates between 'soloistic' and 'choral' passages. Whether these alternations match the concertino/ripieno practices of Bach and his contemporaries is a moot point; personally, I would have welcomed more frequent employment of solo voices. Each of the eight singers was probably given at least one aria or duet; frustratingly, the booklet provides no details. For instance, is it Wilfried Jochens or Hans-Jörg Mammel who deserves the credit for a superb rendition of the tenor aria "Quoniam" in the G-major *Missa*?

These renditions, predictably, display a richer sonority than the Purcell Quartet versions, and often reveal a keener sense of direction and overall architecture. In particular, the instrumental bass line is projected with refined clarity and detail, lending a greater sense of animation to the entire texture.

Overall, I find Cantus Cölln's shaping of the instrumental lines compellingly purposeful and eloquent; in this sense, they sometimes surpass their colleagues in the Purcell Quartet. On the other hand, I have a slight preference for the eager vitality and internal dialogue generated by the one-per-part choruses in the Purcell Quartet set (though Cantus Cölln's more expansive and contemplative approach often proves deeply affecting). Future performances might also explore more of these works' dramatic potential. Comparisons aside, each of these sets is profoundly rewarding, and both can be strongly recommended.

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