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Theological Perspectives of the *Mass in B minor, BWV 232*

Maria Jimena Picado Sandi

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-175) was a German Lutheran composer during the late Baroque period. During his lifetime he held different jobs in different parts of the German States as teacher, capellmeister, and court composer and musician, however, J.S. Bach spent a significant part of his lifetime (1723-1732 and 1737-1747) in Leipzig, where he worked as the Music Director and Cantor of the St. Thomas School. During this time he was also the Capellmeister of the St. Thomas Church, in order to get this job he had to undergo over a series of theological and religious tests to show how much he knew about the Lutheran faith, there are records showing bibles and Lutheran texts that belonged to Bach with annotations on the side indicating that he deeply studied his faith.

Towards the end of his career, in 1736 J.S. Bach moved to Dresden after being appointed Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer, but what would bring the Lutheran composer to temporarily relocate to one of the only German States that practiced Catholicism? In 1733, the newly Elected King of Poland, August III asked the Lutheran composer to write a Catholic mass for the Catholic Church of the the Royal Court of Dresden. J.S. Bach first presented to the King a draft that consisted of a compilation of extracts from five different Lutheran masses that he had already composed. This preliminary work included the *Kyrie* and a *Gloria*, both which were in Latin. It is important to clarify two relevant things, at the time the Catholic Church still held the services in Latin meanwhile the Lutheran Church had translated the texts to German and to the other languages spoken by the congregation in different parts of Germany, and also since Lutheranism parted from Catholicism the structure of the masses held by both faiths are very similar, even though these are different these share several parts (i.e. *Kyrie, Hymn of Praise* or *Gloria, Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*).

The *Mass in B minor, BWV 232* is considered to be the culminating work of J.S. Bach’s musical career because this is the last work that he composed and it is uncertain whether or not he finished the work himself or if his son Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach (1714-1788) finished it. Different manuscripts have been found with editions by his wife Anna Magdalena Bach (1721-1750) and by his son C.P.E., the paper in which these were written was only found in Dresden, demonstrating that this work was never
intended to be performed in Leipzig. This is the only work by the composer that is entirely in Latin, it is structured in four major sections (Missa, Symbolum Nicenum, Sanctus and Osanna, Benedictus, August Dei et Dona nobis pacem), these sections are divided into twenty-seven independent movements and out of those 17 are choruses (9 for five voices, 6 for four voices, 1 for six voices and 1 for two antiphonal four-voice choir). In the process of composing this masterpiece, the German composer also used parts from earlier secular and sacred works and incorporated them into the Mass in B minor. Some of these include the opening of the Gloria which is a portion of a lost instrumental concerto, part of the Gratias agimus tibi is from the opening choir of his Cantata 29, the Confiteor is based on a Gregorian chant, the Crucifixus is build from the opening choir of the Cantata 12, and the Et expecto resurrectionem is based on Cantata 120. The influences of Bach’s earlier works in this Mass makes us wonder if this work was strictly written to be performed during a Catholic mass or if the respective parts could also be used in a Lutheran service.

Over the years, musicologists have put forth various theories as to why such a devoted Lutheran such as Bach wrote a Catholic mass (e.g. Wolff 2001). This research clarifies how sections of the Mass express both Catholic and Lutheran beliefs and theological perspectives. To accomplish this, I analyzed the text and music of specific portions of the Mass, but I also consider the ways in which Bach adapted some of his other Lutheran compositions for inclusion in the Catholic Mass. My investigation of the theological orientation of Bach's Mass also considers the role of performance, a crucial factor when considering the meaning of any piece of music. Previous studies have evaluated different performance practices of Bach's music from a historical point of view (Butt 1991, Melamed 2018), including the various choices that performers must make today in comparison to how this work would have been performed during Bach's lifetime. Along those lines, I analyze two different recordings of the Mass from the 20th Century, one with the English Baroque Soloists and Monteverdi Choir under the direction of, John Eliot Gardiner from 1985, and another by the Berlin Philharmonic and Chorus conducted by Hebert von Karajan in 1974. This leads me to show how the different musical choices made by each conductor and ensemble radically change the theological meaning of the text and the music. Ultimately, I address the question of whether or not Bach wrote this work exclusively for the Catholic Church or if the role of
performance changes the theological meaning of it making it acceptable to also be used in a Lutheran service

I. Theological Symbolism

The *Mass in B minor* is a sacred work, therefore there is going to be a lot of symbolism that might be clear at plain sight and some other that will not. The first place where we find symbolism in this composition is in the first *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord have Mercy) No. 1, Bach presents us with a dense orchestration that uses most of the ensemble that this work was written for; this includes two flutes, two oboes, one basso, two violins, viola, four voice choir, basso and continuo. This opening movement is in B minor which creates a small contrast with the *Christie Eleison* No.2 that is in the relative major key of D and this movement uses a lighter orchestration, less than half compared to No.1, this includes two violins, two sopranos and a continuo. The use of two relative keys and the contrasting choice of instrumentations symbolizes the two natures of Jesus Christ and his relationship of between the Divine and the Human, as He is the son of God who is consubstantial with the Father but also He became man. The following No. 3 (*Kyrie Eleison*) is in F-sharp minor, and uses the same orchestration as No. 1, creating again a reacher and denser orchestration that symbolizing all of society raising a plea for God’s mercy as we repent from our sins. In a Catholic mass, this is the last part of the Penitential Act and it is prayed or in this sung after the Priest invites the congregation to repent from their sins, it is followed by a moment of silence, a prayer and lastly the absolution of the sins. The choice of instrumentation and tonality in this last movement distinctly represents how within the Catholic faith it is of great importance for us to repent from our sins and ask God for his mercy as this would help us walk closer to Him by living a holier life and essentially lead us to Heaven.

The next part of the mass that I will be analyzing is the Credo, specifically the relationship between the end of No. 16, *Crusifixus* and the beginning of No. 17, *Et resurrexit*. Between these two moments we find the most dramatic musical and liturgical content of the work. As previously mentioned Movement No. 16 is based of opening choir of the Cantata BWV 12, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen Zagen* (Weeping, Complaining, Worry, Apprehension) this Cantata illustrates a sorrowing lament; this gives us a similar thematic idea to what No. 16, *Crucifixus* is about. Bach used the same time signature and the
rhythmic line of the violins and the violas and used it as the rhythmic base for No. 16, both of these works are in minor keys. No. 16 is in the key of E minor and the lyrics of this movement, just like the rest of this portion of the mass, are the words of the Nicene Creed in Latin. In No. 16 the words say “Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontic Pilate, passus et sepultusest” this translates to “for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered and was buried”, in this movement of the proclamation of our faith we bow our heads to show reverence. During this section, Bach decided to end the movement with descending chromaticism in the bass and the continuo (see image 1), creating a sense of a decaying ending and it resolves to a III, ending a movement like this is a very uncommon practice. The use chromaticism represents how at the very end of his life of earth, Jesus Christ suffered from the Last Supper until the moment of his Crucifixion, the series of moments lived by our Lord and Savior progressively got worse and this can be seen through Bach’s music in the descending chromaticism to conclude this moment without resolving it into a cadence. Contrasting to this No.17 begins with a full ensemble playing together, it has three different tromba (trumpet) parts that play a very lively and triumphant melody, we can see that ten out of seventeen parts are in unison for the first two measures (refer to image 2). It is commonly known that within the Bible in both the Old and the New Testaments trumpets are mentioned numerous times in different passages (i.e. Numbers 29:1-6, Matthew 6:2, Revelations 8:2) and in all of those occasions the use of this instrument is used to indicate some sort of wake up of repentance for all the sinners. J.S. Bach makes no difference in the use of this instrumentation and the major tonality in this independent movement of the mass as he uses to trumpets to announce that “on the third day He rose again according to the scriptures” (“Et resurrexit teritia dia secundamos scripturas”). The major contrast created between these two movements is nothing other than a great representation of how relevant it is that is that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for all of our sins and that he resurrected and ascended into Heaven. Both of these movements are of equal importance in a Catholic and Lutheran service and the symbolism created by Bach makes very acceptable for both of these movements to be used in both churches.
Another movement that has a great hidden theological symbolism is the *Sanctus*, No. 20. In both the Catholic and Lutheran Church the Sanctus is used as a proclamation of glory to the Lord God of Host, specifically referring to Isaiah 6:1-3 "In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they hovered. One cried our to the other “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Host! All earth is filled with his glory!” No. 20, uses a different instrumentation compared to what Bach had orchestrated in the previous movements, this includes three trombas (trumpets), timpani, three oboes, two violins and one viola, however there serve as the accompaniment for the vocal part. Bach uses six voices (two sopranos, two altos, one tenor and one bass) to sing the words to of the Sanctus, these six voices represent the six wings of the Seprahim around the throne of God. This biblical and musical symbolism makes it acceptable to the performed in both a
Catholic and a Lutheran service as both have the Old Testament in their respective bibles.

II. Analysis of Performance Practices

The performance practices of any work written by J.S. Bach are extremely different now a days to what it was during his lifetime. Many sacred works like this one and *St. Matthew Passion BWV 244* were never intended to be performed in a concert hall in front of a silent audience, these works were intended to be performed during a service where people would be walking in and out, talking and to an extend socializing. Besides this, how else can performance practices now days affect the meaning or symbolism of a sacred work such as the *Mass in B Minor*? It is evident for professional and amateur musicians as well as for the average audience members that a performance of the same piece of music is never going to be the same, not even if the same musicians are performing it. This is due to several determining factors, one of the main ones is the conductor, the person holding the baton has essentially all of the power to get the musicians to play in a different style and just by changing a small gesture the ensemble can sound completely different.

In the case of the Mass in B Minor, the choices made by the conductor can determine wether or not this work was strictly composed to be performed in a Catholic mass or if parts of it can also be used during a Lutheran service. Before expanding on this, it is important to be aware that the Lutheran Church has only three sacraments: Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution and the Eucharist; the Catholic Church has seven sacraments: Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage and Ordination.

To determine wether or not movements from the Mass in B Minor could be performed in a Catholic or a Lutheran mass, I have analyzed two recordings of the *Confiteor unum baptisma*, No. 19 in the Mass, both recordings took place during the 20th century and can be found on Youtube, Spotify or Apple Music. The words of this movement are the following “*Confiteor unum baptisma in remissionem pecatorum*”, this translates to “I acknowledge one Baptism for the forfives of the sins”, as stated earlier the baptism is the fist sacrament that the congregation receives in both the Catholic and the Lutheran faith. J.S. Bach used music that seems simple to the eyes and in his score he did not add any sort of stylistic markings that help the conductor and the musicians determine the style in which this should be
performed (see imagine 4). The first recording that I have listened to and analyzed is by the Berlin Philharmonic and Chorus conducted by Hebert von Karajan, which took place in 1974. This performance of No. 19 is more detached, there is more separation of the notes, this stylistic effect can communicate to the listeners that this is a command. Theologically this can represent how the baptism is a command that was given by Jesus to the apostles as He asked them to go baptize “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”; overall this is closely related to the way Lutheran live their faith and their beliefs because they try to take the actions of Jesus more to heart and they want to get back to the living as closely as possible to the original foundation of the Christian Faith.

The second recording by English Baroque Soloists and Monteverdi Choir under the direction of, John Eliot Gardiner from 1985, presents a contrasting styling sound that it was decided by the conductor. This recording is played more legato (connected) and the same time at a faster tempo, with these stylistic performance choices it is easy to see how the choices made by the conductor have a more Catholic approach. Because in the Catholic Church the baptism is the most important of the Holy Sacraments, this indicates the liberation from the original sin, at the same time the addition of another member to the great Catholic family that we are commemorating the beginning of the spiritual life of one. A baptism in the Catholic Church is a joyful that is celebrated alongside the parents, godparents and other family members that are witnessing this moment of faith and rejoice.

The Mass in B minor, BWV 232 will always be known as a work written by the German Lutheran composer J.S. Bach for the Catholic Church, however it is inevitable to see the influence that his Lutheran faith had in the composition of this work. This leads us to conclude that depending on the performance practices such as style that are decided by the conductor can indicate if works such as the Kyrie, Hymn of Praise or Gloria, Sanctus and Agnus Dei can be used during a Lutheran service as well. Independent
movements like No. 19 could easily be incorporated into a Lutheran service depending on factors such as the scriptures of the day.