

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

Mass in B minor, BWV 232

Completed in 1749

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Born in Eisenach, Germany; March 21, 1685

Died in Leipzig, Germany; July 28, 1750

This work was first performed by the Oratorio Singers of Charlotte and the Charlotte Symphony on May 1, 1965 with Donald Plott conducting at Ovens Auditorium. The sixth and most recent performance set was on February 28 and March 1 & 2, 2002 with David Tang conducting at the Belk Theater of the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center.

The history of Johann Sebastian Bach's composition of his Mass in B minor—one of the greatest sacred choral works—spans several years, and is somewhat complex. On February 1, 1733, Friedrich Augustus I, the Elector of Saxony, died. A five-month period of mourning was declared in Saxony, during which time, all musical performances were forbidden. Bach took advantage of this hiatus in his official musical duties to compose a setting for vocal soloists, chorus and orchestra of the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* portions of the Catholic Mass. On July 27, 1733, Bach presented the score of his new work to the successor to the Elector of Saxony, his son, Friedrich Augustus II. The following letter by Bach, requesting a court appointment, accompanied the score:

To His Most Serene Highness, the Prince and Lord, Frederick Augustus, Royal Prince in Poland and Lithuania, Duke in Saxony...My Most Gracious Lord.

My Most Gracious Lord, Most Serene Elector, Most Gracious Lord!

To Your Royal Highness I submit in deepest devotion the present small work of that science I have achieved in *musique*, with the most wholly submissive prayer that Your Highness will look upon it with Most Gracious Eyes, according to Your Highness's World-Famous Clemency and not according to the poor *composition*; and thus deign to take me under Your Most Mighty Protection. For some years and up to the present moment, I have had the *Directorium* of the music in the two principal churches in Leipzig, but have innocently had to suffer one injury or another, and on occasion also a diminution of the fees accruing to me in this office; but these injuries would disappear altogether if Your Royal Highness would grant me the favor of conferring upon me a title of Your Highness's Court Capelle, and would let Your High Command for the issuing of such a document go forth to the proper place. Such a most gracious fulfillment of my most humble prayer will bind me to unending devotion, and I offer myself in most indebted obedience to show at all times, upon Your Royal Highness's Most Gracious Desire, my untiring zeal in the composition of music for the church as well as for the orchestra, and to devote my entire forces to the service of Your Highness,

remaining in unceasing fidelity Your Royal Highness's most humble and obedient servant.

Dresden, July 27, 1733

Johann Sebastian Bach

From 1723, Bach had served as Kantor (Music Director) of the St. Thomas's Church and School in Leipzig. Bach remained in Leipzig for the remainder of his life. Nevertheless, Bach often found his dealings with the Leipzig authorities to be less than satisfactory. The composer often felt that he was not accorded sufficient resources to carry out his musical duties. Further, Bach was frustrated by the menial tasks he was frequently obligated to perform at the Thomasschule. As is clear from Bach's letter, the composer hoped that his gift of the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* to Friedrich Augustus II would result in an improvement of his fortunes. However, it was not until 1736 that the new Elector of Saxony appointed Bach as Court Composer.

It is clear that Bach viewed the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* he submitted to Friedrich Augustus II as a self-contained work. Nevertheless, toward the end of his life, Bach returned to this composition, adding the *Credo*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei* portions to form what is now known as the composer's Mass in B minor, BWV 232. The motivation for Bach's revisiting of this work is uncertain. It is highly unlikely that Bach envisioned that the Mass in B minor could be performed in its entirety—at least under the circumstances of the composer's time. Modifications to the prescribed Latin text made the work unacceptable for presentation in the Catholic Church. Further, the work's epic length precluded its incorporation into any religious service. Many scholars therefore surmise that Bach—who viewed all of his compositions as offerings to his Lord—completed his Mass in B minor not for any practical purpose, but out of some profound inner need.

Mention should also be made of Bach's employment of "parody." A common practice in Bach's time, "parody" involved the reworking of material from previous compositions. Numerous portions of the Mass in B minor are, in fact, based upon earlier Bach works. The *Sanctus* portion of the Mass, for example, is derived from music Bach composed for Christmas, 1724. Additionally, music from several of Bach's cantatas forms the basis for sections of the Mass in B minor.

It is a testament to Bach's genius that, despite the circumstances surrounding the composition of the Mass in B minor, it emerges as a glorious, unified masterpiece. German composer Karl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832) praised Bach's Mass in B minor as "probably the greatest musical work of art that the world has ever seen." His reverential words were echoed by Swiss composer Hans Georg Nägeli (1773-1836), who acclaimed Bach's creation as the "greatest work of music of all ages and of all peoples." The Mass in B minor is a work that continues to inspire awe in all who are fortunate to make its sublime acquaintance.

Duration: ca. 2 hours