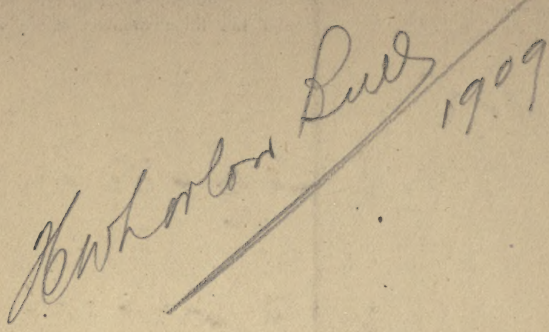
Bach's Mass in B Minor

Alan Gray
Sedley Taylor


H. W. Norton Lewis
1909.

John Sebastian Bach's
Mass in B minor

London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd.
Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons.

John Sebastian Bach's Mass in B minor

in Cambridge, 1908,

Three Papers

by

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CAMBRIDGE
BOWES AND BOWES
1908

PREFACE.

ON March 10th, 1908, the Cambridge University Musical Society, assisted by some members of the Oxford Bach Choir, gave their first complete performance of Bach's Mass in B minor.

By way of introduction to that performance the three following Papers were read at a meeting of the C.U.M.S. chorus held on the previous day:

I., by Mr Sedley Taylor,

'On the circumstances under which Bach composed his B minor Mass.'

II., by Dr Alan Gray,

'On the structure of that work.'

III., by Mr Sedley Taylor,

'On the revival of Bach's choral works after nearly a century of apparent extinction.'

These Papers, though laying no claim to be more than *pièces d'occasion*, are put into print mainly in the belief that members of the C.U.M.S. may like to possess a memento of what, in the history of any choral society, is so eminently a red-letter occasion as its first performance of the B minor Mass.

A. G.
S. T.

May 1908.

I

On the circumstances under which Bach composed his B minor Mass

by

SEDLEY TAYLOR

The chief authority for whatever concerns the life of John Sebastian Bach is of course Spitta's monumental biography, but in preparing this Paper I have had the advantage of consulting a work on Bach by Albert Schweitzer*, published in German in the present year, though in a much less extensive form it had previously appeared in French.

Schweitzer is a distinguished Privatdocent of theology at the University of Strassburg and organist of the Strassburg Bach Choir, whom he has accompanied in the performance of sixty of the Master's church cantatas.

I gladly acknowledge the help I have received from his very able book.

On the 27th of July, 1733, John Sebastian Bach addressed the following letter to the Duke of Saxony:

"To your Princely Highness I present in deepest devotion the accompanying insignificant (*gering*)

* *J. S. Bach*, Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel.

work of that degree of science to which I have attained in music, with the entirely humble petition that you will be pleased to regard it, not according to the badness of the composition, but according to your world-renowned clemency, with most gracious eyes, and moreover to take me under your most mighty patronage. I have, for some years and up to the present time, held the post of Director of Music in the two principal churches at Leipzig, and, while doing so, have repeatedly had to experience undeserved affronts, accompanied, too, from time to time, by a diminution of the allowances appertaining to that position. This would entirely cease were Your Royal Highness to show me the favour of conferring on me a title in connexion with the musical establishment of your Court, and to that end would give a Royal order in the proper quarter for the issuing of a patent. Such most gracious granting of my most humble petition will lay me under an unbounded obligation and I offer myself in most dutiful obedience to make proof of my unwearied diligence, at every most gracious request from Your Royal Highness, in composing music for the church or for the orchestra, and to devote all my powers to your service in unbroken fidelity.

"I remain Your Highness' most devoted and most obedient servant

"JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH."

The composition to which this courtly epistle served as dedication was the Mass in B minor from the beginning of the first Kyrie to the end of the *Cum Sancto Spiritu*, but sent in separate 'parts' only, *i.e.* without a 'score.' These 'parts,' which the composer had mainly copied with his own hand and had laboriously provided with marks of phrasing, etc., are preserved in the private library of the King of Saxony and show, according to Schweitzer, no signs of having ever been employed for the purpose of performance.

In spite of the deferential phrases in which Bach couched his petition, the gist of it appears little calculated to attain the end which he had in view. A man with any shred of diplomacy about him would have laid stress on his desire to serve under so admirable a monarch, or to be numbered among so eminent a body of musicians as those attached to the Saxon Court. Bach does nothing of the kind, but says, in effect, to his Sovereign, "I have been submitted to indignities and my income has been unjustly cut down. If you will confer a title on me an end will soon be put to all that." The petitioner had to wait three years for the title, but, considering the mode of his application, the fact that he got it at all reflects, I think, some credit on the authorities at the Court of Saxony.

But it will naturally be asked, Why and by whom were the affronts and curtailment of income, which Bach's letter complained of, inflicted? To answer this question brings us straight to a palpable defect in his generally admirable character. He had a considerable dose of what the Germans call *Rechthaberei*—a conviction that one is always in the right, manifesting itself in an inflexible determination never to admit that one is in the wrong. Moreover, without being actually quarrelsome, Bach was undoubtedly sensitive, perhaps even thin-skinned, when he thought that the prerogatives of his office or his own personal dignity were interfered with or disregarded. This combination of qualities naturally led to friction between him and those with whom he came into official contact. At Arnstadt, where he held his first organ appointment, there were disorderly scenes with the choir-boys, and a controversy with the clergy of the church, in which, though hopelessly in the wrong, he withheld any expression of regret and behaved with obstinate arrogance. The dispute in which he desired the backing of a Saxon title was with the Town Council of Leipzig, who were the Governors of the Thomasschule where he was the Cantor. The minutes of a meeting of that body have been preserved, at which they decided to cut down Bach's pay, one of the Councillors,

who had inherited the surname but apparently not the patience of 'Job,' declaring that he voted for that measure "Because the Cantor is incorrigible."

Bach's *Rechthaberei* showed itself on a great scale in a protracted contest with the headmaster of the Thomasschule, the results of which embittered the closing years of his life. It began with a collision on a point of jurisdiction, and, as Bach could not get his own way, he brought the matter before the Town Council. The headmaster proved him to have been technically, and I am afraid it must be admitted to some extent substantially too, in the wrong. That, however, did not prevent him from appealing to the ecclesiastical Consistory, nor from finally petitioning the Duke of Saxony, on the ground of his recently obtained title of Court Composer, to overrule the proceedings of both Council and Consistory in his favour. It would really seem as if this last step had some success, for the Duke sent a rescript to the Consistory commanding them to examine into the complaints made by his Court Composer. Unfortunately no further records remain to show how the case ended.

Before quitting this rather unwelcome history I may be allowed to relate an incident witnessed by myself many years ago at the modern Thomasschule at Leipzig, transplanted from the old building in which Bach lived and taught. Wilhelm Rust,

the then occupant of the cantorate, had invited me, and a young musical friend who was my travelling companion, to attend a practice of his choir whom we had a day or two before heard sing most admirably under his direction in the Thomaskirche. On entering the practice-room we found the Cantor awaiting us, but the choir not yet in their places. Presently a lad came in, and walking up to Herr Rust, said to him in, as I thought, a rather off-hand manner: "The headmaster desired me to tell you that there will be no practice this morning." After delivering his message he promptly turned on his heel and left the room. Our host's countenance visibly darkened, and after muttering to himself, "*Sehr rücksichtslos*!" (very lacking in consideration!) he remained for a short time gloomily silent, and then, collecting himself, ceremoniously bowed us out. A more vivid reproduction of one of the 'affronts' put on Bach by his headmaster could not have been arranged by the most imaginative 'pageant-master.' After leaving the school I began to condole with my young companion on his loss of the rehearsal, but he promptly silenced me with the remark: "I had rather have witnessed that scene than heard a dozen rehearsals." Passing from these personal jars let us come to matters of more permanent interest.

We saw that Bach accompanied his letter to the

Duke of Saxony with a gift of Mass-music. I have heard this alleged as a reason for believing him to have been a Roman Catholic, or regarded as very surprising conduct in one who is known to have been a Protestant. Criticisms of this kind would be adequately met by a reference to the fact that as the Duke of Saxony was Roman Catholic, so also must have been any church music designed to secure his favour, and that to have set to music portions of the Roman Catholic liturgy by no means necessarily connotes membership of that Church. But the matter is one which will reward fuller consideration.

The Lutheran service in the principal churches of Leipzig retained in Bach's time larger elements of the Roman Catholic liturgy than had been allowed to remain in it elsewhere in Protestant Germany. Hymns, responses and motetts were often sung in Latin, and the whole of the *Magnificat* was performed in that language four times a year with full orchestral accompaniment. Portions of the Mass were also sung in Latin: the *Kyrie*, *Gloria* and *Credo* on every Sunday and Festival, the *Sanctus* on the great Festivals only. These did not, however, belong to a continuous service as in the Roman Church, but were interspersed with German chorals, while a complete cantata sung to German words held, as its description,

Hauptmusik, implied, the principal place in the musical part of the service.

Bach, who had to direct the performance of these works, must necessarily have thus acquired some familiarity with Roman Mass-music. He took, moreover, an independent interest in such music, as is shown by his having copied out with his own hand entire Masses by other composers. There was thus nothing to be surprised at in his making a present of Mass-music to the Duke of Saxony, in whose chapel he might even hope to have at least some portions of it finely performed.

On Bach's obtaining the title of Court Composer he sent another present to the Duke of Saxony, consisting of four settings of the first half of the Mass-text, but executed on nothing like the vast scale which had characterised his former gift. These settings moreover were largely, if not entirely, made up of adaptations from some of his own German church cantatas now transferred to the Latin of the Mass. Whether he had come to the conclusion that whatever he might send to Dresden would, like his earlier present, be no more heard of and was therefore not worth wasting original composition upon, we are left to conjecture. But thus much is certain that the process of adaptation, though affording frequent proofs of the Master's command of technical power and

resource, deteriorated some of his finest compositions by forcing them into alliance with words embodying a meaning not merely different from, but incompatible with, that to which the same music had previously, and then with artistic propriety, been set. Let me give a few instances of this:

In the Mass in A major, part of the *Gloria* is constructed by adding choral parts to a short orchestral symphony which in the cantata "*Halt im Gedächtniss*" represents the raging of the enemies of Christ's people.

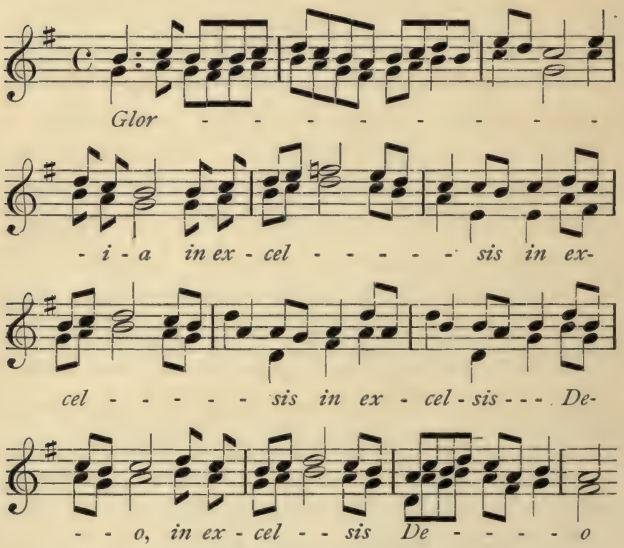
The *Cum Sancto Spiritu* in the same Mass is made out of a chorus in a church cantata set, very sympathetically, to the penitential words, "Try me, O God, and search out my heart."

In the Mass in G minor, the words "*Christe eleison*" are directed to be sung to a passage previously set to a text in a church cantata* describing the Almighty inflicting punishment on hardened sinners.

The *Gloria* of the same Mass is adapted from the opening chorus of the church cantata, "Everything according to God's will," the music of which breathes a resigned, but very far from jubilant, spirit.

* "*Herr, deine Augen sehen nach dem Glauben.*"

It is, I think, significant of the indifference which Bach brought to the compilation of these smaller Masses that in the *Gloria* of the one in G major, which is adapted from a chorus in one of his finest church cantatas*, the soprani and alti are made to lead off with the following fanfare which, in the symphony to the cantata, had been allotted to two horns:



The way in which these short Masses are constructed suggests the question—not to be asked without some trepidation—whether any similar

* "*Gott der Herr ist Sonn' und Schild.*"

proceedings occurred in the preparation of the immortal B minor Mass. The answer is that though six of its movements* are, in whole or in part, adaptations from earlier compositions of the Master set to German words, he has selected, for this purpose, only instances in which the spirit of the old text is genuinely consonant with that of the new.

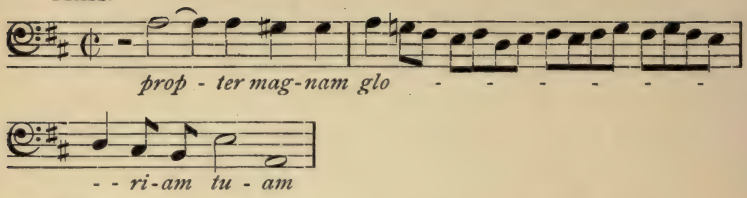
We shall find it instructive to consider separately each of these six adaptations.

The chorus *Gratias agimus*, repeated to other words at the close of the work, is the opening chorus of the church cantata "*Wir danken dir Gott*," which is inscribed "*Bei der Rathswahl zu Leipzig*, 1731," and was therefore an ecclesiastical thanksgiving for an election of the Leipzig town council in 1731. The chorus which Bach adapted has a stately dignified text, "We praise thee, O God, and proclaim Thy wonders," and the music set to it is substantially identical with the magnificent *Gratias* and *Dona* of our Mass.

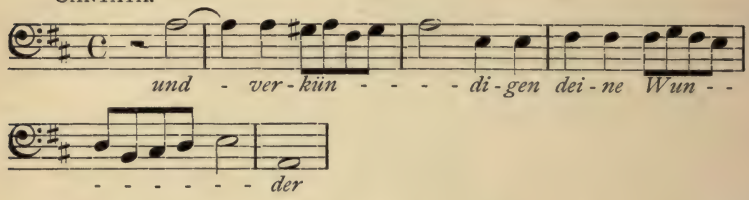
The second subject, bars 5—7, has had more movement and flow infused into it than it possessed in its original form:

* *Gratias* (*Dona*), *Qui tollis*, *Patrem*, *Crucifixus*, *Osanna*, *Agnus*.

MASS.



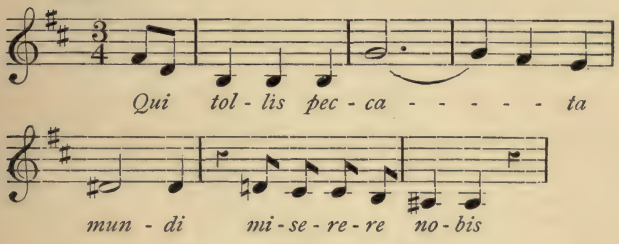
CANTATA.



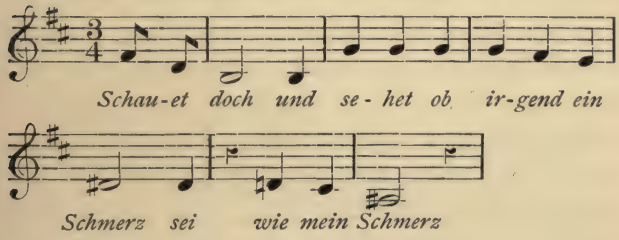
The chorus *Qui tollis peccata mundi* is an adaptation of that which opens the church cantata "*Schauet doch und sehet.*" The words of it are taken from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, ch. i. v. 12, "Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow which is done unto me," the occasion of his sorrow being the destruction of Jerusalem which he had so frequently foretold. Bach set these words so that the most intense sorrow wails along from the first note to the last. And it is a hopeless sorrow over an irreparable loss. Now this is not exactly the feeling of the *Qui tollis*, which is a prayer, "*Qui tollis peccata mundi miserere nobis*," and therefore has a definite element of petition in it as distinguished from blank despair.

Now it is just this element which Bach, as it seems to me, has introduced by a very slight modification of the close of his principal subject, which in the

MASS.

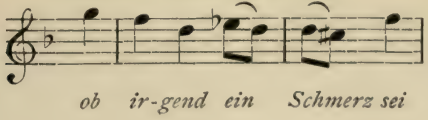


CANTATA (transposed from D minor).

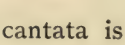


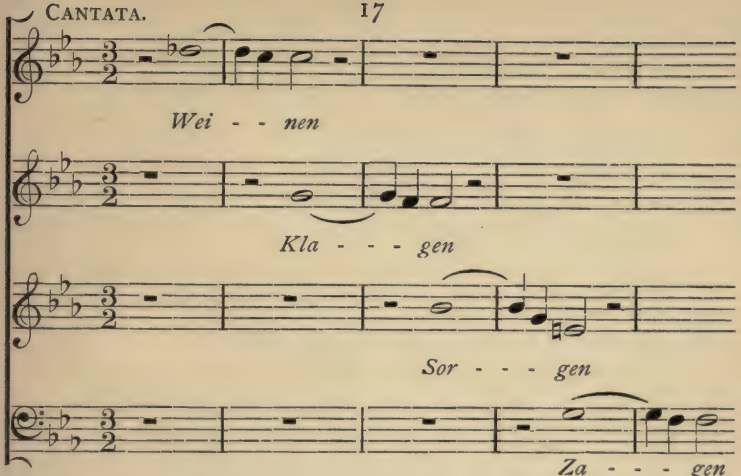
subsequent fugal treatment gives the movement a milder and more beseeching character. The idea for this alteration would appear also to have been derived from the same source, where it makes but one entry as follows :

CANTATA (bars 24 and 25).

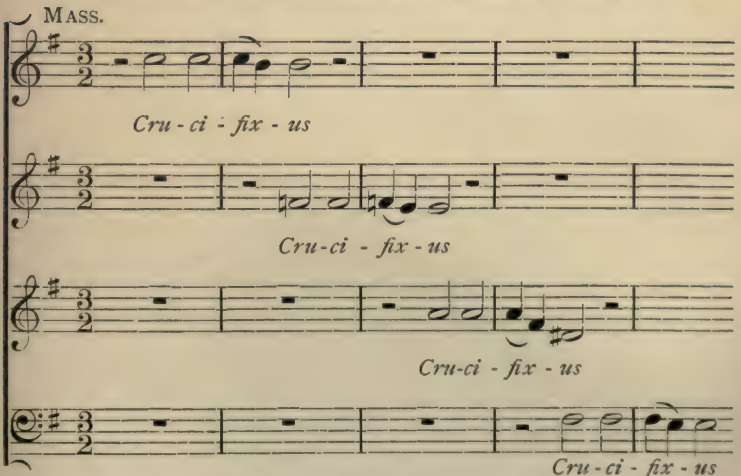


The chorus *Patrem omnipotentem* is an adaptation from the church cantata "*Gott wie dein Name,*" of which it is the opening chorus. The words, "O God, like as Thy name, so is Thy praise to the world's end," are not unworthy of the splendour and festal jubilance with which Bach has set them.

We come next to the *Crucifixus* which is adapted from the opening chorus of the church cantata "*Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen.*" Its words, "Weeping, wailing, cares, faintings of heart, fear and need are the Christian's bread of tears," have about them exactly the same tone of feeling as those of the *Crucifixus*, and the transference of the music has been effected with masterly perfection of workmanship. The ground-bass of the orchestral accompaniment in the cantata moves in minims, but in the Mass in groups of iterated crotchets played pianissimo which impart a solemn, muffled-peal effect to the whole movement. The rhythm of the other accompanying instruments which in the cantata is  becomes in the Mass  The separate entries of the voices in the cantata bring out the separate German words,



but, slightly altered in rhythm, they are equally expressive of the reiterated *Crucifixus* of the Mass,



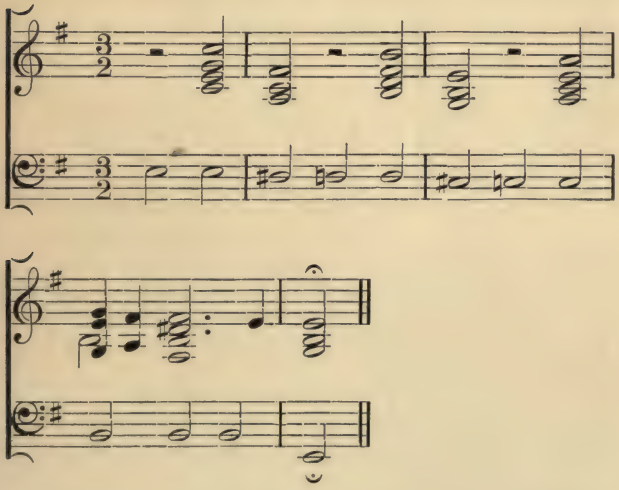
and an intensified expression is obtained by lowering the Alto entry by a semitone.

The five bars which conclude the *Crucifixus* are admittedly one of the greatest things in all music. The orchestral instruments, except the basses, sink into silence and the chorus enters pianissimo accompanied only by the deep pulsating notes of the ground-bass which holds on to the last bar of the movement. The Sopranos, and the Basses at an interval of a Tenth below them, now take up the subject of the ground-bass, the Altos and Tenors filling up a series of wonderful harmonies which pourtray the descent into the cool silence of the grave. Then comes a sudden, but most beautiful, modulation into the relative-major key, which brings the movement to a close with a sense of infinite relief and conscious triumph. The two great sayings, "It is finished," and, "He shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied," seem summed up in these few wonderful progressions*.

It is very interesting to observe that, even in so deeply inspired a passage as this, Bach's genius was content to work upon, and pour the new inspiration into, his older materials. The bars we are considering are not contained *totidem notis* in the cantata, but what may be called their frame-work

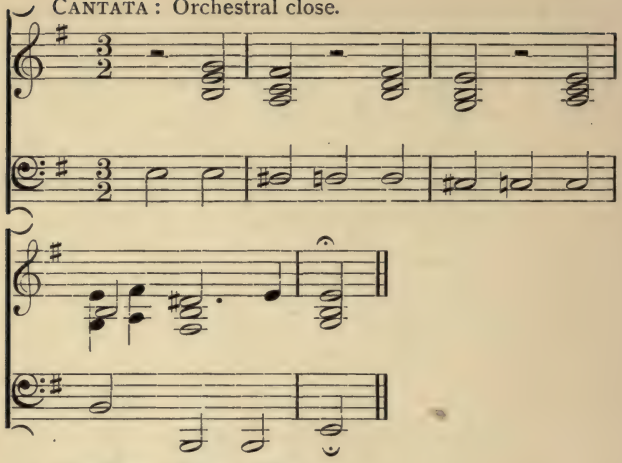
* With which it is, I think, allowable to compare the sequence to which Mozart, in his Requiem Mass, has set the section of the "*Confutatis*" beginning "*Oro supplex et acclinis.*"

is to be found there. The corresponding position in the cantata is occupied by an orchestral close of the same number of bars, but which ends in the minor key of the whole movement. I have, for convenience of comparison, transposed it from the key of F minor in which it there stands into E minor, the key of the *Crucifixus*.

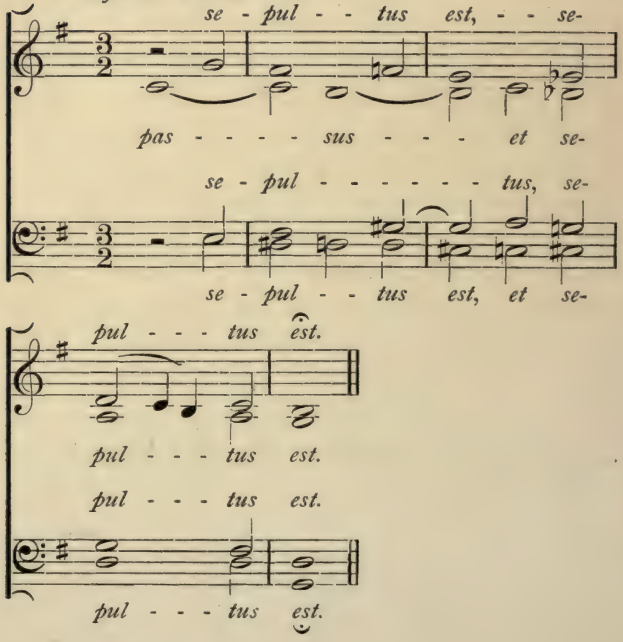


The resemblance grows closer if we strike out the first violin part, leaving the treble to be sustained by the second violin. Comparison then shows how much of his old work Bach retained and what were the masterly touches by which he transfigured it.

CANTATA : Orchestral close.



Crucifixus : Choral close



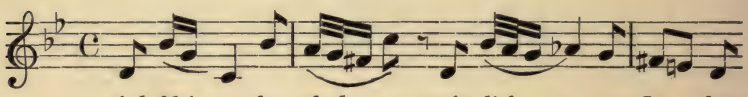
The stupendous *Osanna* differs from the other adapted movements of the Mass in that it is taken, with some changes in the part-writing, from music which Bach had set to secular words—a congratulatory ode to celebrate a visit paid to Leipzig by the Duke and Duchess of Saxony. It is not possible to suppose that the words "Praise thy good fortune, blest Saxony, because God preserves the throne of thy kings" can, of themselves, have given a potent impulse to inspired composition. How then are we to account for Bach's having set them to an outburst of universal jubilation in which one seems to hear "the morning stars sing together and all the sons of God shout for joy"? It has been suggested that the secular work in question may itself have been but an adaptation from some older *sacred* cantata belonging to the category of Bach's lost works. A more probable explanation may be based on the fact that fine music is often set to indifferent texts. Mozart, when called on to compose a piece of music to be performed by clockwork, produced for this humble destination a work of the highest inspiration*. Why may not Bach have done as much for the visit of the Duke of Saxony?

One more adaptation remains for us to consider. About three-fourths of the Alto Song, *Agnus Dei*,

* Fantasia in F minor No. 2. (608 K.)

is freely constructed upon a subject supplied by a song for the same voice to words of a beseeching character in the church cantata "*Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen.*" The following comparison shows how Bach improved that subject and the intonation of the words in making the transfer.

CANTATA: transposed from A minor.



MASS.

The subject, treatment of which occupies the remainder of this song, does not come from the cantata and may have been specially composed for the Mass.

II

On the structure of Bach's B minor Mass

by

ALAN GRAY

"The fact that Bach altered his style in setting Latin words to music need not be demonstrated, as it is obvious to everyone who has ears."* It is perhaps advisable however to indicate here some of the distinctive features which characterise the Mass and the Magnificat. The choruses seem to have a more obvious swing and rush than those in the German cantatas. As examples of this may be quoted the *Et resurrexit* and *Cum Sancto Spiritu.* The part writing employs a more extensive use of thirds and sixths. (See for example *Pleni sunt coeli.*) And all the choruses written especially for the work are in five parts, with the exception of the *Sanctus*, which is in six parts, and of the second *Kyrie*, possibly an adaptation from a lost cantata, which is in four parts. On the other hand, all the choruses adapted from the Church cantatas are in four parts, with the exception of

* Fuller Maitland, *Oxford History of Music*, vol. IV. p. 74.

the *Osanna*, which is in eight parts. The use of five parts with two sopranos is a distinctively Italian practice, but is rare in Bach's other works. One example, the first chorus in "*Der Himmel lacht*," may be quoted. The style in this instance is reminiscent of parts of the Mass, particularly of the end of the *Confiteor*, and of the *Et resurrexit*, so that this exception confirms to some extent what has been stated above.

The instrumentation of the Mass is according to Bach's usual practice—strings, flutes, oboes, bassoons, three trumpets and organ. A horn is used in one number only (*Quoniam*). The oboe d'amore is also occasionally employed. It is an instrument obsolete except in so far as it has been revived for the performance of Bach's works and adopted by a few modern composers in search of new orchestral tone colour. Its pitch is a minor third below the ordinary oboe, and its tone is softer and more plaintive.

Of the music of this great masterpiece, it is difficult to speak in terms of moderation. Its emotional qualities must be manifest to all, while the technical skill displayed in the superb flow of the parts, however numerous they may be, will fascinate the student. It is not only the vocal parts that have to be considered ; the instrumental parts are no mere copies of the former. In the

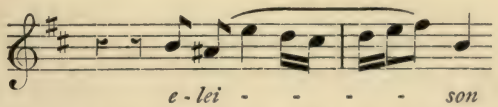
Osanna, for instance, there are something like fourteen or fifteen parts moving at the same time and yet this movement sounds one of the most spontaneous in the work.

The *Kyrie*, the first section of the Mass, is divided into three movements, an unusual arrangement, which harmonises with the colossal scale on which the whole Mass is conceived. The first chorus

1. KYRIE

opens with a massive homophonic introduction, to which succeeds a fugue on a most beautiful and pathetic subject. It is announced by the orchestra and then taken up by the voices. The fugue may be said to be fairly strict, but this is not the impression that a hearer would carry away. It is full of the most emotional feeling, and the wailing tone which pervades the whole is most remarkable. The movement is a long one, and is divided into two nearly equal portions separated by a "ritornello."

The beautiful episode, occurring twice (pp. 7 and 14*)



* This and further references in this Paper are to Novello's edition (ed. Sullivan).

which fits in with the rest of the movement so perfectly, seems to be derived from the first subject by inversion—the diminished fifth of the episode corresponding to the augmented fourth of the subject. It is shortly merged in an unmistakable imitation of the second bar of the first subject with a very remarkable passage of thirds and sixths assigned to the two sopranos crossing each other.

2.

The Duet, *Christe Eleison*, is of a soft and pleading character. It must be recognised however that the solo music in this Mass, as in many other of Bach's works, does not make the same appeal to the average hearer that the choruses do. As Spitta says, the solos in this work are like valleys lying between lofty mountains. An intimate knowledge of them will yield its reward, but the knowledge must be intimate.

3.

To finish the *Kyrie* there is a short fugue on a remarkable subject containing the unusual interval of a diminished third. It is in the strictest style, and is full of the closest imitation, which does not however interfere with the noble and solemn effect of the whole. It forms a worthy finish to the *Kyrie*, though it is in complete contrast with the preceding

sections. It should be mentioned that as this fugue is the only one in four parts which has not been adapted from other works, it has been conjectured that this too comes from a Church cantata which has been lost. There are, unfortunately, many of these.

GLORIA.

The *Gloria* is the most elaborate setting of the text in existence. It comprises no less than eight movements. As has been explained in the earlier part of this book it forms part of the first completed portion of the Mass.

4. *Gloria in excelsis.*

The first chorus is one of those magnificently swinging $\frac{3}{8}$ choruses of which Bach was so fond. There are three of these in the present work, and three more in the Christmas Oratorio, all curiously enough in the key of D. In addition other examples from the Church cantatas might be quoted. In the chorus now under consideration the high trumpets are heard for the first time, and add the greatest brilliancy to the effect which as a whole is pompous and jubilant. At the words "*et in terra pax*" a startling change of time and rhythm occurs. The full choir announces the first part of a theme which, after an orchestral interlude, is given

out at length and fugally by the sopranos. What Mr Maitland calls "the unspeakably satisfying cadence" at "*bonae voluntatis*" should be noticed. The tone of the whole section is still triumphant, but more subdued than it was—the joy has come down from heaven to earth.

The rendering of "*Et in terra pax*" raises the vexed question as to how far modern editors and conductors are justified in introducing marks of expression into Bach's works, from which such indications are almost entirely absent. That they are necessary sometimes no one would deny; it is impossible, for example, to conceive "*Qui tollis*" and "*Et incarnatus*" being sung anything but *piano*. But if we may judge from a recent edition of this Mass, where the singers are directed to sing almost every bar differently from the one before it, there is great danger of this sort of thing being overdone. If the editor's instructions were carried out, the result would be an entirely sentimental rendering of a work which is far too virile and strong to need such mawkish handling. Sir Arthur Sullivan's wise words in his preface to Novello's edition should be remembered by all who have to do with the B minor Mass. "I have employed them" (the marks of expression) "very sparingly, so that the breadth and grandeur of the work might not be impaired." To return to "*Et in*

terra pax," it is a modern convention that whenever peace is mentioned, voices and instruments should be hushed almost into silence. It seems to me, for two reasons, that Bach cannot have intended anything of the sort here, at all events throughout the movement. Firstly, the progression of the bass voices at the change of time almost demands a *forte* or even a *fortissimo*. Secondly, the instrumentation, in which trumpets and drums are prominent, equally forbids a *piano* wherever these instruments are used.

The *Messiah* affords a parallel case. In former years we used to hear the opening of "Glory to God" *f*, and "peace on earth" *p*. We know now that Handel's intentions were that the chorus should open softly and that there should be a crescendo thenceforward. The convention before alluded to is of later date than Bach and Handel, and should not be imported into their works.

5. ARIA : *Laudamus Te.*

This number is a trying task for the second soprano. It is full of so called "divisions" for the singer and a solo violin. It is perhaps the least interesting number of the Mass, though it opens with a fine broad tune, which, however, is never heard again in its original form.

6. CHORUS: *Gratias agimus.*

This fine solemn fugue is taken, as before stated, from a Church cantata. The subject is announced canonically—technically a canon 4 in 1. In the fifth bar a more florid theme appears, and thenceforward the two subjects are worked alternately. The trumpets in their highest register are prominent at the close of the movement.

7. DUET: *Domine Deus.*

Spitta, who is given to finding somewhat fanciful theological allusions in Bach's music, discovers in the first four notes of the symphony of this duet (from which the principal vocal phrases are derived) a musical symbol of the union of the two Persons of the Trinity. The music itself is very expressive, the voices moving in thirds and sixths to a degree unusual in Bach. The flute has an obligato part abounding in delightful figures. The number leads without a break into

8. CHORUS: *Qui tollis.*

This is a marvellously pathetic piece. The astonishing harmony and the deeply felt emotion in this wonderful short chorus seem still unsurpassed and unsurpassable, although it was written nearly two hundred years ago. It is to be noticed that it

is still contrapuntal in style and that it is full of imitations and devices popularly supposed to be the resource of pedants only, but which to Bach were his natural means of expression. The chorus is written in ten parts—four voices, four strings, and two flutes.

To this succeeds a beautiful aria for Contralto.

9. ARIA : *Qui sedes.*

This is one of the most attractive of the solos and the oboe d'amore imitates the voice with charming effect.

10. ARIA : *Quoniam.*

The instrumentation of this song is most interesting. It consists of a horn (the only piece in which this instrument is employed), two bassoons and continuo. The tone colour is consequently very singular, and at first very pleasing, but as, according to the methods of the day, there is no change of colour throughout the piece, which is long, a certain monotony makes itself felt towards the end. Still we must not substitute violoncellos for the bassoons half-way through the movement, as has been proposed by a learned German professor. The horn part is very high and difficult. The song itself is a very fine one, but unfortunately it lies considerably lower than its companion Bass solo

"*Et in spiritum.*" The result is that the same singer is seldom able to do justice to both songs, and one or the other suffers.

Without a break there succeeds

11. CHORUS: *Cum Sancto Spiritu.*

This is one of the most striking choruses in the work. There is a superb introduction, followed by surely the most brilliant fugue ever written. The subject, with its almost rollicking swing, is unlike any fugue subject in the world, and it is twice interrupted by magnificent and most striking harmonic episodes (pp. 87 and 92). There is a brilliant peroration (p. 93), and the chorus ends in the almost abrupt way which is such a refreshing contrast to the long-drawn-out endings which Handel, by his almost unvarying practice, has made to sound conventional.

CREED.

The Creed is set on the same magnificent scale as the rest of the work and comprises eight numbers.

12. CHORUS: *Credo in unum Deum.*

This splendid composition is founded on the old intonation of the Creed, of unknown antiquity, perhaps 1500 years. The voice-parts are treated in the sternest fugal style, and when they have

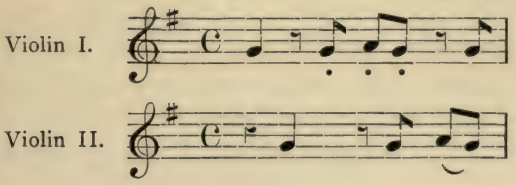
finished the exposition of the theme, the violins are introduced, still in imitation, so that in all there are eight real parts, for the basses continue a stately and independent march of crotchets throughout. The piece is written in the Mixo-Lydian mode, or in other words in A with the ♯ to G left out, and this adds to the uncompromising effect of this authoritative declaration of faith.

13. CHORUS: *Patrem omnipotentem.*

This chorus carries the exposition of the words down to "*visibilium et invisibilium,*" the words "*Credo in unum Deum*" only occurring occasionally in some of the parts. It is one of the adapted choruses, and is of a bright character. It may be described as a free fugue with independent accompaniment. Towards the close (p. 104) the use of the tonic minor seventh at the words "*et invisibilium*" has a very striking effect.

14. DUET: *Et in unum Dominum.*

A long but interesting duet. Spitta draws one of his curious theological conclusions from the varied phrasing of the first subject,



which he thinks suggests a certain distinction of Persons in the Unity.

A remarkable use of the tonic minor will be noticed on the last page (112). It is far from being inappropriate as it stands, but as originally composed the words "*et incarnatus*" occurred here, and the point of the modulation is very much enhanced. The original form of the duet is printed as an appendix in most editions. Still we must welcome the afterthought, as we could have ill spared the chorus which succeeds.

15. CHORUS: *Et incarnatus.*

This, the first of a pair of wonderful choruses, is introduced by a most moving figure for the violins with strongly accented auxiliary notes quite in the modern style. The voices enter in succession—they are quite simple, and their simplicity heightens the effect of this perfect piece.

16. CHORUS: *Crucifixus.*

As the intensity of the emotion in the words is heightened, Bach rises fully to the occasion, and in its way this is the most wonderful chorus in the work. Its construction is a marvel. It is built on a ground-bass of four bars (the same one previously employed by Purcell in the Lament in "Dido and Aeneas"). This is repeated thirteen times, and it

is so extraordinarily varied that many hearers might not notice that Bach had so fettered himself. The ingenuity of the treatment is wonderful, and when it is noted that the music of the voice-parts expresses their emotion as deeply as music can, we marvel the more. Notice the hollow gloomy effect produced by the Altos and Basses moving a thirteenth apart (p. 120 last bar) and the inexpressibly beautiful modulation to G in the last three bars of the movement.

This is one of the adapted choruses. An account of the changes Bach has introduced in fitting it for its present purpose will be found in Part I.

17. CHORUS: *Et resurrexit.*

After these two grand and solemn choruses the jubilant "*Et resurrexit*" bursts out with startling brilliancy. There is no symphony, and the voices enter at once with electrical effect. This chorus is perhaps more irresistible to a hearer than any other in the work. There is a superb tune to start with, and the spirit with which it is developed never flags. The initial style is carried on throughout the piece with the exception of a grand and difficult melodic episode founded (like the whole of the movement) on the principal theme, which the Bass voices deliver to the words "*Et iterum venturus est.*"

18. AIR: *Et in Spiritum Sanctum.*

This solo with its accompaniment of two oboi d'amore is of a flowing and tuneful character, but following as it does a chain of choruses unequalled for pathos and grandeur it must suffer to a certain extent. If we adopt Spitta's simile of the mountains and valleys, "*Et in Spiritum*" is a valley of a pleasing and pastoral character at which we may look with pleasure, while we rest before making the next great climb.

19. CHORUS: *Confiteor.*

This chorus is a very long one, written in the noblest contrapuntal style. Bach again introduces a fragment of traditional ecclesiastical melody, first in the Bass (p. 147), followed in canon by the Altos at a bar's distance, and then in augmentation by the Tenors. When they have finished their exposition the time changes suddenly to *adagio*, and a harmonic progression of the most astonishingly modern kind illustrates the words "*Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum.*" To quote Spitta—"Through a succession of marvellous harmonies wherein the old world sinks and fades we are conducted to the conception of a new heaven and new earth. Hope in that future life is poured forth in

a chorus full of solemn breadth, in spite of its eager confidence."

20. CHORUS: *Sanctus.*

The final section of the Mass opens with the stupendous *Sanctus.* It is difficult to say anything adequate in reference to this astounding conception. It seems as if music had said its last word in the way of sublimity. It is, as Spitta says, the musical realization of the words of Isaiah, "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the Seraphim"—but Spitta goes too far when he suggests that the six parts, which Bach here employs for the first time, are suggested by the six wings of the Seraphim. This seems fanciful and almost grotesque.

This majestic movement leads into another animated $\frac{3}{8}$ chorus "*Pleni sunt coeli*" of the most jubilant description. A feature of this chorus is the prevalence of runs in thirds, but there is no sign of the weakness which is apt to attend on the use of this method of writing.

21. CHORUS: *Osanna.*

This chorus, which must be regarded as the first number of a new subsection rather than as a

pendant to the *Sanctus*, is in eight parts. It is in the favourite $\frac{3}{8}$ time, and is of the most jubilant character. The employment of voices in unison is rare in Bach—there is only one very striking example of two bars in the St Matthew Passion-music—but there is a good deal of it here. The choirs announce the theme in unison and afterwards answer each other in the same manner. In fact the choirs are mostly used antiphonally, but where they combine the part-writing is of the most wonderful description—the number of different parts amounting at places to fourteen or even more.

22. ARIA: *Benedictus.*

This is one of the numerous exacting airs that Bach inflicted on his Tenor. It is very high and difficult, but both voice-part and the violin obligato are very expressive.

According to tradition the *Osanna* is repeated, and then comes one of the most beautiful airs in the work.

23. ARIA: *Agnus Dei.*

One of the numbers adapted with considerable alterations from another work. There can be no question of its expressive beauty and of

its fitness for the place it occupies. Spitta calls it "a gloomy lake lying between lofty hills."

24. CHORUS: *Dona Nobis Pacem.*

This is a repetition of the *Gratias.* The repetition of this chorus with words entirely different in sentiment to those to which it was before fitted has caused comment. But, as Spitta says, "it is not a prayer for peace but a solemn hymn of thanksgiving." "The soaring trumpets at the end seem the very symbol of prayer and thanksgiving ascending to the throne of God*." As a conclusion to the whole work, this chorus is in its proper place, and appears absolutely right and fitting.

* Maitland, *Oxford History.*

III

On the revival of Bach's choral works after nearly a century of apparent extinction,

by

SEDLEY TAYLOR

It is well known that John Sebastian Bach was preceded by four generations of musical ancestors of whose efforts and attainments he was destined to be the top and crown. The whole history of that wonderful body of musicians, the Bach clan, has been carefully investigated and fully told by John Sebastian's biographer, Spitta. But a not less surprising chapter remained to be written on the fortunes of Bach's music from his death to our time. Schweitzer, in the volume which I have already mentioned*, has made at any rate a very interesting beginning in this direction. The short sketch which is all that time will allow me to give on this subject is, in so far as progress made on the Continent is concerned, taken from his book.

During Bach's lifetime his pre-eminence over all competitors in organ and clavier playing was thoroughly recognised, but he was far from being generally considered as at the head of the *composers* of his time. Thus in a work published only four years after his death he is ranked in this respect

* *Supra* p. 3.

as inferior to Hasse, Handel, Telemann and the two Grauns, and sandwiched between Stoelzel and Pisendel* whose names are not even mentioned in Grove's *Dictionary of Music*†. Nor is such a judgment so wrongheaded as at first sight would appear. The fact is that German musical opinion had, even during Bach's lifetime, definitively turned away from the contrapuntal polyphonic style of composition; it was sick of fugues and canons and wanted something "natural," something full of "tender and emotional expression," and the like. Even Bach's most celebrated son, Carl Philip Emanuel, appears to have regarded his father's works as already fossilized, for when Dr Charles Burney spent several days with him at Hamburg in 1772 he played to his visitor a large number of his own compositions, but seemingly not a note of his father's, though he showed Burney the celebrated forty-eight preludes and fugues in manuscript and remarked that they were composed specially for him when a boy and were very difficult. He described canons as dry and despicable pieces of pedantry, and even went the unfilial length of saying that it was to him a certain proof of a total want of genius in anyone who was fond of such wretched studies and unmeaning produc-

* Schweitzer, p. 209.

† First edition.

tions*. Bach's successors in the Leipzig cantorate seem also to have lost all interest in his compositions. It is true that one of them, Doles, when Mozart was on a visit to him at Leipzig, got out the parts of the eight-voice motett, "Sing unto the Lord a new song," and made the choir perform it to his visitor. Mozart's instant recognition of the greatness of the music and his delighted exclamation at its close, "Here is something that one can learn from," are well known. But genius was here wanted to discern genius. For the bulk of musical opinion at the end of the eighteenth century Bach's music was utterly dead and done with. Nevertheless, at the opening of the succeeding century signs of revival began to show themselves. In 1802 J. H. Forkel brought out the first biography of Bach, in which with victorious enthusiasm he pointed out what treasures of art the half-forgotten old Cantor had bequeathed to the Fatherland—treasures which no other nation had anything similar to set against. But another quarter of a century was to elapse before these patriotic words were translated into action on an adequate scale, and it was through Zelter, Goethe's well-known correspondent who directed the *Singakademie* at Berlin, that this decisive action came about. He

* Burney's *Tour in Germany, etc.*, London, 1775, vol. II. pp. 252, 273.

was himself convinced that Bach's music manifested the highest possible inspiration, but yet could not get over the feeling that the contrapuntal and already antiquated form in which his choral works were written rendered their successful public performance at Berlin a hopeless undertaking. But two young friends of his were, fortunately for the musical world, of a different opinion, and not afraid to press it upon Zelter. On a January morning in 1829 he found himself disturbed at his work by two visitors, one of whom asked for the loan of the chorus of the *Singakademie* for a projected performance of the St Matthew Passion-music. Zelter was on the point of returning an ungracious refusal and had already muttered something about "young jackanapes who think themselves capable of anything," when his other visitor struck in with decisive energy and the audacious request was granted. The second interlocutor was the actor and singer Eduard Devrient; the first needs no introduction, he was Felix Mendelssohn.

The performance took place a couple of months later, on March 11, 1829, when Mendelssohn conducted admirably a chorus of some four hundred voices, soloists and orchestra, though he was then only just in his twentieth year and had never directed a great chorus and orchestra before. This

performance must be regarded as one of the most important landmarks in the history of music, for it started a wave of enthusiasm which has since travelled over the world without any sign of abatement. Mendelssohn directed another performance of the same work ten days later, on March 21, 1829, which was Bach's birthday. Zelter, who had meantime become thoroughly appeased, entertained at supper on this second occasion a select gathering of Bach fanatics at which an amusing incident occurred. Frau Eduard Devrient had become rather annoyed with a gentleman seated next her because, in a manner which she considered affected, he exhibited too continuous a solicitude lest a lace sleeve which she wore should get into her plate. "Tell me," she whispered to Mendelssohn who sat near her, "who is the stupid fellow here next to me!" "The stupid fellow there next to you," Mendelssohn whispered back, "is the celebrated philosopher, Hegel." It is painful to think that well-meant attentions should have been so ill-received by a lady who would seem to have been equally indifferent whether she put her sleeve or her foot into an inappropriate position. Mendelssohn was at this very time attending lectures on the aesthetics of Music delivered by Hegel who took a lively interest in Bach and thoroughly appreciated the main characteristics of his genius.

The credit of having given to parts of the B minor Mass their first public performance belongs to Schelble, founder of the *Cäcilienverein* at Frankfurt. As early as 1828 his choir had sung the *Credo*, but no one took any notice of it. In 1831 he added the *Kyrie* and *Gloria*. The Berlin *Singakademie* brought out the first part in 1834 and the entire work, though considerably shortened by 'cuts,' in 1835.

These and other efforts led to the formation in 1850, just one century after the Master's death, of the German Bach Society, which in the course of the next succeeding fifty years brought out its monumental full-score edition of all his surviving works. On the completion of its labours in 1900 the new Bach Society was established, which had for its object the popularization of his works by their publication in handy forms for use in actual performance.

It would be impossible here even to glance at the history of cognate efforts made in other Continental countries, but before bringing what I have to say to a close, I will venture on a rapid sketch of what has been done in this direction in England, a topic which Schweitzer has passed over in silence, though he has noticed less considerable efforts made in France, Belgium and Italy. In 1849, a year before the establishment of the German Bach Society, an

English one was formed with Sterndale Bennett, afterwards Cambridge Professor of Music, as chairman; its objects being the collection of music by, and information about, Bach and the public performance of works by him. After five years of existence the Society gave on April 6th, 1854, Bennett conducting, the first public performance in England of the St Matthew Passion-music. Mr James Sterndale Bennett, in his admirable biography of his father*, has related an incident occurring during one of the rehearsals for this performance which is so amusing that it cannot be refused a place here.

One of the first ladies to join the Bach Society was Miss Helen F. H. Johnston, now honourably remembered as having made the English translation for the first edition of the St Matthew Passion-music published in England. But her services as a Bach votary were far from being limited to this piece of work, considerable and excellently done though it was. Miss Johnston when she took up her membership in the Bach Society was a young lady of eighteen, having a house of her own in London, independent means, ample leisure and an apparently limitless stock of enthusiasm and sustained energy. All these she devoted in the most whole-hearted fashion to a Bach apostolate to which Sterndale Bennett, whose pupil she was, may not

* Cambridge University Press, 1907.

improbably have inspired her. Thus much premised, I let Mr James Sterndale Bennett speak of Miss Johnston in his own words:

"She set up a lithographic press in her house at St John's Wood, and prepared with her own hands all the parts necessary for the practice and at last for the performance of the great work [the St Matthew Passion-music]....At the practices, whether as leader of any voice part within her compass, or as stage librarian, she was indefatigable and ubiquitous. Rather excentric in appearance, with eyes beaming through large spectacles, and with her own ideas of dress, her youth was somewhat disguised. A violinist, unversed in musical chronology, attending the rehearsals for the first time, and astonished at the enthusiasm she displayed, seriously enquired of his neighbour 'Is it *Mrs* Bach?'"*

The English Bach Society sang in 1860 the first eleven movements of the B minor Mass, but they do not appear to have attained to a complete performance of it, and in 1870 the Society was dissolved. Five years later, however, a member of this University, Mr A. D. Coleridge, got together a body of amateurs for the express purpose of studying that work and gave two public performances of it in the following year, 1876, Mr Otto Goldschmidt conducting. The success which these performances met with led to the formation of the

* *Ubi supra*, pp. 207, 208.

"Bach Choir," on which, under Goldschmidt (with energetic aid during preparation from his wife, formerly Jenny Lind) and later under Stanford, Walford Davies and now H. P. Allen, has devolved the heaviest share of responsibility for keeping the Bachian lamp trimmed and burning. At Oxford too, Allen's enthusiastic lead has brought off fine performances of the Mass by the "Bach Choir" there.

It will not, I hope, be considered to savour too much of local vanity if in the last place I say a few words on what has been done in Cambridge to spread the knowledge of Bach's music. Sterndale Bennett was elected to our Professorship of Music in 1856, and during the Long Vacation of that year he spent some weeks here and promptly started work as a Bach missionary. A number of members of the University Musical Society, mostly undergraduates of whom I was one, were got together in a Trinity lecture-room, with some choir-boys to sing the upper parts, and were set to work under Bennett's instruction at chorals and choruses from the St Matthew Passion-music and even encouraged to tackle the formidable double-chorus with which it opens. In those days there was much Bach to be learned from the Rev. J. R. Lunn, a resident Fellow of St John's College. He was an accomplished player on both pianoforte and organ. His zeal for Bach's music may be gauged by the

fact that he had made a complete manuscript copy of the forty-eight preludes and fugues in so microscopically small a hand that he was able to carry it constantly about with him and so be sure not to miss any opportunity of playing these compositions, which, I believe, he sometimes did at ordinarily constituted evening parties somewhat to the dismay of average hostesses. The Rev. H. T. Armfield, then an undergraduate of Pembroke College, had a small organ in his rooms, where Mr Lunn was a standing guest on Sunday evenings and would work away with hands and feet at Bach's organ compositions to the delight and permanent instruction of Mr Armfield's other visitors.

In conjunction, I think, with Mr Lunn, Mr Armfield got together a very enthusiastic, but unfortunately short-lived, little "Bach Society" who executed one probably unprecedented feat—the performance at a single concert of *four* of his concertos for two, or for three, pianofortes. Among the playing members of this Society of enthusiasts were, besides those already named, Mr Pendlebury, Fellow of St John's, to whom we owe the admirable library of full-scores at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Mr Percy Bunting, now Editor of the *Contemporary Review*, and Mr C. J. E. Smith, of St John's, colloquially known as "Pianoforte Smith," who was afterwards a clerical Fellow of his College and

promoted the cause of good music as an assistant-master at Eton and Rugby.

The Fitzwilliam Musical Society conducted by the Rev. Arthur Beard, Chaplain of King's, and the Rev. L. Borissow, Precentor of Trinity, which gave choral concerts from 1858 onwards and was ultimately fused in our own Society, performed the St Matthew Passion-music more than once, and sang other compositions by Bach.

Our present Professor of Music while he was still an undergraduate got together a choir of ladies and gentlemen who gave, *in German*, under his direction, an excellent performance of Bach's church cantata, "*Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*" ("God's time is the best")—I think the earliest presentment in Cambridge of one of those, at that time almost unknown, compositions.

In 1893 extracts from a number of the church cantatas were sung to my pianoforte accompaniment by a quartet from the Royal Academy of Music in connexion with a lecture delivered by me on Bach's life and work as a church composer*.

Dr H. P. Allen conducted, when he was organ-scholar at Christ's College, several performances with orchestral and organ accompaniment of some of the finest among the church cantatas. Dr

* Published by Macmillan & Bowes (now Bowes & Bowes), Cambridge.

Sweeting and Mr Rootham carried on the same good tradition at St John's.

Our Society has, of course, repeatedly performed the St Matthew Passion-music and also presented some of Bach's finest church cantatas. On December 3rd, 1897, it performed, under Dr Gray, the Creed (Nos. 12—19) from the B minor Mass.

To-morrow, however, Dr Gray is to lay-on the coping-stone by conducting our first complete performance of that colossal work.

Schweitzer has said, and I think with profound truth, that for the right rendering of Bach's deepest musical thought something more is wanted than mere technical accuracy of execution, and that in the absence of that something a depressing, chilling atmosphere pervades the work performed. To bring out its meaning fully, each executant must have sought to enter heart and soul into the spirit of the composition and must sing or play as if the entire fate of the performance depended on his or her individual exertions. "Let each of you," I once heard Dr Richter say to an orchestra rehearsing the *Andante* in Mozart's E flat Symphony, "play as if he were playing *solo! then* the effect will be right," and right it forthwith became. In view of to-morrow's performance this advice is capable of a wider application.

CAMBRIDGE: PRINTED BY JOHN CLAY, M.A. AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS.