Johann Sebastian Bach’s Mass in B Minor is rightly regarded as the culmination, the opus sumnum, of his musical oeuvre and one of the most important masterpieces in the entire history of music. It is therefore not to be wondered at that the autograph score, today kept in the Berlin State Library, officially joined the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2017.

Today, the B Minor Mass is one of Bach’s most frequently performed vocal works worldwide. It is all the more to be wondered at that more than 100 years passed between its completion and any record of a public performance of the work in its entirety. This honour presumably goes to the Frankfurt Caecilienver-ein. The performance took place in 1856, the year in which the score was printed by the Bach Society from its complete edition of Bach’s works (Bach-Gesamtausgabe) and eleven years after the first ever printed publication of the B Minor Mass by Nageli/Simrock. – In a shortened version, the mass had been performed already in 1835 in a subscribers’ concert of the Berlin Sing-Akademie. – This does not mean, however, that the Mass had to be awoken like the Sleeping Beauty from a hundred-year sleep. Unlike with Bach’s St. Matthew Passion for example, numerous musicians and music-lovers in the second half of the eighteenth century were aware of the existence of the Mass, as the considerable number of contemporary copies of the score testifies. But these served first and foremost as objects for study than copies serving as performance material.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, who inherited his father’s autograph score and devoted a great deal of attention to the work, as numerous inscriptions in the handwritten score show, gave the first performance after his father’s death of an excerpt from the Mass, the »Credo«, in a highly acclaimed concert in Hamburg in 1786. For the purpose, C. P. E. Bach had composed his own orchestral introduction. The »Credo« was flanked by movements from Handel’s »Messiah« and works by Carl Philipp himself (among them his double-choir »Heilig« and his »Magnificat«). The »Hamburger Staats- und Gelehrte Zeitung« highlighted the occasion offered to Hamburg concert-goers »to admire in particular the five-part Credo by the immortal Sebastian Bach, which is one of the most splendid pieces of music ever to be heard«.

In 1811–1815, the Berlin Sing-Akademie conducted by Carl Friedrich Zelter rehearsed the individual sections of the Mass, but without ever venturing to perform it in public. Perhaps they had too great a respect for the work and its musical implementation. Nevertheless, Zelter described the Mass as »probably the greatest musical work of art [...] that the world has ever seen«. Only since that time, resulting from the manner in which it was referred to in the Sing-Akademie, has it been customary to name Bach’s Mass in conjunction with the key of B minor. Bach himself gave no general title to the work, but simply provided separate titles for the four major sections (I. Missa, II. Symbolum Nice-
num, III. Sanctus and IV. Osanna, Benedictus, Agnus Dei et Dona nobis pacem). This is why for a while it was hypothesised that the Mass was not one unified work but just a collection of individual movements for mass. By contrast, in the catalogue of C. P. E. Bach's estate in 1790 it was called the »great Catholic mass«, which is presumably how it had been referred to within the family. The occasional refutation that the pieces form a single work might be due to its undeniably heterogeneous style and scoring – which one can also view as diversity. This can be seen, for example, in the differing choral forces. These range from five (sections I and II) and six-part choirs (section III) right through to an eight-part double choir (section IV).

But this is also a result of the complex genesis of the individual sections and their fusion into one great whole. After all, between the composition of the first parody basis (the second movement of the cantata »Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen«, BWV 12, from 1714, on which the »Crucifixus« is based) and the final, new composition (»Et incarnatus est«) lies a lapse of 35 years. Much speculation has been made as to the motivation or possible occasion for composing the B Minor Mass. Was it an actual commission? Despite all the meticulously gathered clues, so far not a shred of conclusive evidence of any such thing has been found. We know only from philological examination of the autograph score that in 1748/49, towards the end of his life (although he of course could not know of his impending death), Bach for the first and only time compiled a complete Latin ordinary mass into one score. However, it could not be performed in that form in Lutheran worship under the Leipzig order of service of the time. Only the Missa – that is, the Kyrie followed by the Gloria – as well as the Sanctus (without the Osanna and Benedictus) were permitted to be sung figurally, that is, polyphonically, on high feast days. But because of its huge length in comparison with other contemporary masses, we can virtually rule out a performance as part of the Catholic order of worship. Moreover, the structure of the B Minor Mass, in which Bach separates the Osanna and following Benedictus from the preceding Sanctus, presents a peculiarity of form that did not correspond to customary Catholic liturgy. However, this is a result of the actual genesis of the work. When Bach took the decision to set a complete mass to music, his idea was not to write a completely new setting. Rather, he intended to compile parts of masses that he had already composed and complement them to make a »Missa tota«. To do so, Bach used the Kyrie-Gloria of 1733, a parody based on previous works, composed after the death of Augustus the Strong and dedicated to the latter's successor, Frederick Augustus II of Saxony, in the hope of obtaining a title from the Dresden court. – Bach's hopes were fulfilled in 1736, when he was appointed Electoral Saxon and Royal Polish Court Compositeur. – Of his Sanctus settings, none of which contained an Osanna, Bach chose the longest and most splendid, composed for Christmas
1724. Parts I and III of his subsequent Mass were thus already extant. Moreover, there existed an early version, dating from around 1740, of the first movement of the Symbolum Nicenum, the Credo fugue, about the genesis of which next to nothing is known to date. The other sections of the Symbolum Nicenum, as well as the Osanna, Benedictus, Agnus Dei and Dona Nobis – his later parts II and IV – were also lacking. For most of these, Bach made use of previous works (the Agnus Dei, for example, is based on the aria »Ach, bleibe doch, mein lieb- stes Leben« from the Ascension Oratorio, BWV 11), which is why scholars currently assume that besides the Credo fugue mentioned above only the »Et incarnatus« and »Confiteor« are original compositions.

Bach’s clear intention with this Mass was to draw up a digest of his oeuvre of sacred vocal music for posterity. The cross-denominational and timeless text of the Latin mass formed the ideal textual basis for this. The B Minor Mass thus slots into the series of works, which include the Clavierübung Parts III and IV and the Art of Fugue, in which Bach formulated the apogee of his art.

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