

# BACH'S CREED

## Two Views of the Symbolum Nicenum of the Mass in B-Minor

For the ASO Chamber Chorus  
by Jeffrey Baxter | January 29, 2013

### GENESIS

It took J. S. Bach over two decades to compose his B-Minor Mass. This masterpiece began life as a Lutheran *Missa brevis* (Kyrie and Gloria only) written for a catholic church in Dresden, and ultimately grew into what would be Bach's greatest (and final) large-scale work. In it he not only sums up the entire musical Baroque (it is a veritable musical lexicon of styles and statements), but all his life's work as well (as evidenced by the many re-workings - and transformations - in this Mass of earlier pieces).

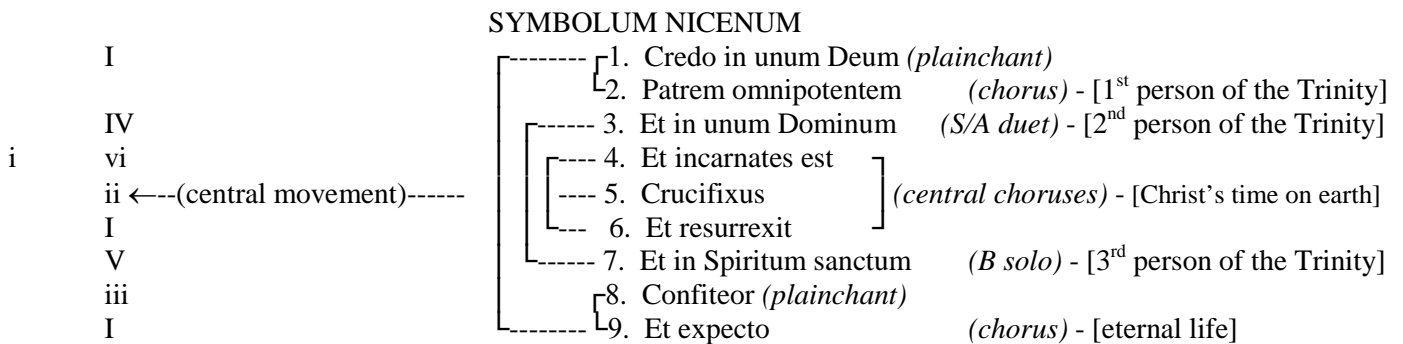
1. Sanctus came first (1724) – performed on Christmas Day in Leipzig.
2. Kyrie and Gloria (1733) – as the *Missa brevis* for the Elector of Saxony in Dresden.
3. Credo (1748-1749) – the decision to enlarge the work to a *missa tota*.
4. Last four movements (all parodies of earlier works, except maybe the Benedictus)

Below are two views of the Symbolum Nicenum [the Credo section] – one macroscopic, one microscopic.

### CREDO OVERVIEW

Notice below Bach's organization of the texts that he chose to set as individual movements. It is, as in many of his works, a classic gothic cathedral-like chiasmic structure, symbolizing the cross:

B-Min. / D-Maj.



There is also sacred numerology present: the Kyrie consists of 3 movements (representing the Trinity); both the Gloria and the Credo have 9 movements each (3 x 3), the centerpiece of the Credo is 3 linked choruses, and the entire *Missa* totals 27 movements as divided by Bach (3x3x3).

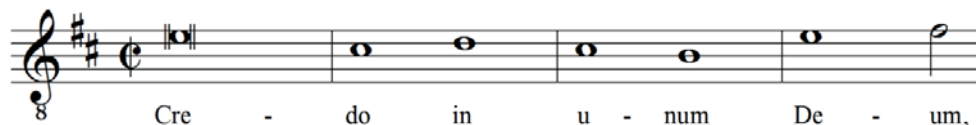
Several of the Credo's movements are paired or linked, indicating temporal relationships for the conductor and performers. The choice of keys is intentional and logical – beginning and ending in D-Major – with the central movement (Crucifixus) in the remote key of E-Minor (ii of D-Major) – its painfully chromatic twists and turns far from the joyful “resurrection” of D-Major.

Bach's decision in his final years to enlarge the *Missa* to a *missa tota* was done as both a personal and historical summation. Deliberately archaic musical styles (Bach's knowledge of the music of Schütz and Palestrina) are contrasted with modern ones, such as the pairing of the Credo and Confiteor movements (old-style compositions with plainchant grounding them as a *cantus firmus*) with the Patrem and Et expecto movements (“modern” Baroque, festal pieces).

## SOME AMAZING DETAILS

### 1. Credo in unum Deum

The opening Credo statement (a choral rather than solo intonation of “Credo in unum Deum”) is cast as a 5-voice *stile antico* (old-style) Renaissance motet. As a unifying element, Bach employs the first seven notes of the ancient Gregorian plainchant for Credo, in *alla breve* notation (whole-note motion) as a *cantus firmus* (a pre-existing “fixed” melody used as the basis of a polyphonic composition). It is heard first, here, in the tenor voice.



The old is contrasted with the new as Bach accompanies this 16<sup>th</sup> century style “a cappella” chorus with a typical, 18<sup>th</sup> century “walking” *continuo* bass line. It was also something Bach had experimented with earlier in his choral Credo intonation movement (like this one), that he added to a mass by G. B. Bassani (whose setting also begins with “Patrem omnipotentem”). Above the voices he also adds two violin parts that hover in imitation (the violins actually are used as the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> wordless “voices” of the motet). This was not Bach’s first experience with this type of violin-writing interpolated above an old motet-style chorus: he did something similar with the two violins in his earlier arrangement of the “Suscepit Israel” of Caldara’s *Magnificat*.

There are three overlapping fugal expositions of all seven “voices:”

**Exposition I** – ms. 1-17 (T, B, A, S1, S2, Vln1, Vln2). Exposition I ends as II begins with Vln 2.

**Exposition II** – ms. 17-33 (Vln2, T, A, S2, S1, Vln2, Vln 1). No bass *cantus firmus*; bass statement reserved for special treatment in Exposition III.

**Exposition III** – ms. 33-end (B, A, S2, S1, Vln1, Vln2). Exposition II ends as III begins with bass singing in augmentation (twice as slow) and with alto and sop. 2 sung simultaneously in 6<sup>th</sup>s. Intervallically, one sees:

Sop. 1 and Bass in 3<sup>rd</sup>s (five beats apart)  
Sop. 2 and Alto in 6<sup>th</sup>s (sung simultaneously)  
Violin 1 and 2 in 3<sup>rd</sup>s (one beat apart)

As is typical in the complex Franco-Flemish music from both the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, towards the end of a piece one sees an increase in energy, driving to a conclusion. In this instance, above the slow motion of the bass, the other parts enter *stretto* (in “tight” succession) and with increasing rhythmic activity (especially in the violins). Exposition III is only given with six “voices” because of the bass’s special elongated treatment and to enable Bach to conclude this Credo intonation in the Dominant (A) of the ensuing D-Major.

An interesting instance of Bach’s penchant for numerology is present in this opening Credo movement. As he was fond of doing with the letters of his own name, Bach found that if one assigns a number to each letter of the word “Credo” (A to Z, 1 to 23, using the 23 letters of the Latin alphabet where j and i are the same, #9), the sum is 43:

C R E D O  
3+17+5+4+14 = 43

Bach sets the word “Credo” to be sung exactly 43 times in this movement.



suggests that Bach may have based this movement on his own arrangement of the “Quis est homo” portion of Pergolesi’s famous *Stabat mater* that he had set in 1746-47 as a motet, “Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden,” BWV 1083. Its sighing, descending string figuration was perfect accompaniment for the new text, suggesting the Incarnation by the Holy Spirit as a dove descending.

## 5. Crucifixus

Numerology and Golden Proportions form the compositional basis of this setting. Here Bach cast the central movement of the Creed in the form of a *passacaglia* – a composition built over a repeated bass pattern. The model for this movement was the opening chorus of his earlier Weimar cantata, BWV 12, “Weinen, klagen, sorgen, zagen” [Weeping, wailing, grieving, fearing]. Bach rightly recalled his rich use of symbolism throughout this cantata and knew how he could take it even further in this Mass setting.

The bass *ostinato* (in this fifth movement of the Symbolum) consists of a mournful, weeping series of five descending half-steps. Some have suggested that this represents the five wounds of Christ on the cross:



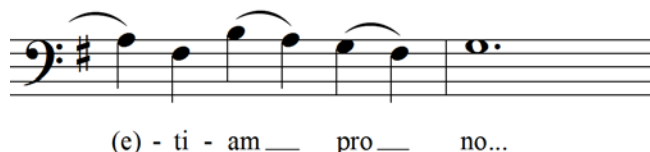
More notable, however, is the number of times that the pattern is repeated: there are 12 complete statements, one for each of the 12 Disciples, but the first statement is without chorus (perhaps to represent Judas Iscariot?). -And the incomplete, unlucky 13<sup>th</sup> statement is found at the end, where burial is described.

Bach’s Crucifixus setting – like the beautiful perfection of the Parthenon’s construction – displays a sensitivity (whether consciously or intuitively) to Golden Proportions. In the musical art, it is where something significant (a “high” point) occurs a little over halfway, at or around 0.618 of the whole number of measures.

The “Golden Mean” (that is, .618 of the whole, minus the “Judas” orchestral introduction) occurs at m. 29 where we find the first appearance of the word “passus” [suffered]. It also marks the only homophonic declamation of text until the final two measures. Hereafter, at ms. 37-41, the word “crucifixus” is set in an emotionally heightened (tortured) way, as the melody makes the sign of the cross, by literally crossing itself:



There is even a “Golden Section” (.618 of .618 – again, minus the “Judas” intro) at m. 20 where the bass voice “stumbles” over (crosses?) itself, in the first instance so far in the movement of an entire measure of vocal quarter-note motion:




Could this represent a Stations-of-the-Cross type depiction of Christ’s stumbling on the *Via dolorosa*?

It is to Bach's great credit that while an awareness of such intricate and complex formal techniques deepens the listener's experience, it is not a requirement for the music's overall stunning effect. Like all truly great art, Bach's careful calculation works at the subconscious level. This movement in particular calls to mind Albert Schweitzer's famous quote: "While Bach was not a witness to the Crucifixion, he was a witness to the *meaning* of the Crucifixion."

## 6. Et resurrexit

The sepulchral low-voicing of the final, hushed G-Major chord of Crucifixus (a modulation not made in its model, BWV 12) is given stark contrast in the sudden, bright D-Major proclamation of the Resurrection that ensues without pause (or introduction). The *tutti* ensemble of instruments joins (in rhythmic unity) the voices who proclaim the text, fanfare-like, with the three preparatory eighth-notes of the main fugal

subject: ♪ 

Bach's original model for this movement (whose fugal entries at ms. 9-12 suggest four instead of five voices) is lost, but – like other large-scale fugal movements in this Mass – there are instrumental interludes (*ritornelli*), but no opening *sinfonia* (instrumental introduction). In the case of the Et resurrexit, Bach deconstructed his original's ABA *da capo* structure by removing its introductory *ritornello* to provide maximum (almost shocking) contrast to the end of the Crucifixus. The "lost" *da capo*'s opening *sinfonia* might have been music comprised of ms. 97-111.

This setting's dance-like style, with its clear-cut phrase structure (and triple meter which some suggest resembles a *courante*), point to a secular origin – some form of worldly rejoicing which Bach had composed and considered appropriate to the euphoria of the Resurrection.

## 7. Et in Spiritum sanctum Dominum

The 3<sup>rd</sup> person of the Trinity (the Holy Spirit) is evoked in this gentle, lilting *Pastorale* in 6/8 for bass solo and winds (a pair of oboe d'amore, resembling shepherd's pipes). Why is music evocative of the "Good Shepherd" used to describe the "Spiritum sanctum?" Bach took his cue from the text, which states that Father, Son and Holy Spirit should be "likewise worshipped and glorified" [simul adoratur et conglorificatur]. The two oboes play in 3<sup>rd</sup>s (representing the Trinity), as well as in imitation and in unison, equating "Patre" and "Filio."

The note C-sharp predominates in the introduction and postlude. It represents the third of this A-Major tonality (signifying the 3<sup>rd</sup> person of the Trinity) and foreshadows (as well as provides a link to) the abundant C-sharps of the next movement's *cantus firmus* and fugal themes.

## 8. Confiteor

As in his Credo intonation, Bach incorporates a simultaneous use of old and new styles by undergirding a *cantus firmus* motet-style writing for five choral voices with a Baroque "walking" *basso continuo* line. There is also a unity of Catholic and Protestant musical styles, as seen in Bach's fusion of *cantus firmus* technique with the fugal writing of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran cantata tradition.

Bach crafts a fugal theme loosely based on the traditional chant for Confiteor. As with the original plainchant, Bach begins his subject on C-sharp. It also shares the general shape of the chant, with its opening half step motion (C-sharp to D), its ascent to F-sharp, and its prominent upward leap of a fourth:

(Gregorian Chant)

Con - fi - te - or u - num ba - pti - sma in re - mis - si - o - nem pec - ca - to - rum

(“Confiteor” first subject)

Soprano I  
Con - fi - te - or, con - fi - te - or

Bach’s second fugue-subject (for the text, “in remissionem peccatorum”) also begins on C-sharp and covers the same range as the plainchant (a perfect fifth). Its quarter note motion provides rhythmic contrast to both the first subject and the slow-moving *cantus firmus*:

Tenor [m. 17]  
in re - mis - si - o - nem pec - ca - to - rum

The two fugue-subjects are so well integrated that Bach is able to use them at the same time, as he does in soprano I and soprano II at m. 31.

S 1  
con - fi - te - or, con - fi - te - or u

S 2  
in re - mis - si - o - nem pec - ca - to - rum

Once the fugue is satisfactorily stated, Bach layers it with a *cantus firmus* technique – the appearance at m. 73 of the original plainchant, here sung in half-note values by the bass and alto in strict canon, one measure apart.

Alto  
Con - fi - te - or

Bass  
Con - fi - te - or

This occurs at .618 of the movement – the Golden Mean, as calculated from the movement’s beginning to the tempo change in m. 121. This kind of dazzling musical construction was not new to Bach; he achieved similarly successful results in the monumental opening movement of Cantata BWV 80, “Ein feste Burg.”

As if all this well crafted musical confession of faith were not enough, Bach then in m. 92 fortifies his statement by writing the *cantus firmus* in augmentation – this time in whole-note values in the tenor voice (the part whose name indicates its traditional role of “holding” [tenere] the tune). The plainchant in augmentation (standing like an island in a swirling stream of counterpoint) recalls what Bach did in the opening Credo movement and – like it – harkens to the Franco-Flemish technique of intensification towards the conclusion.

As with the earlier dovetailing of text between the paired movements of Credo and Patrem omnipotentem, Bach at this point in the Confiteor previews the text of the next section (“Et expecto”) – but to do so, he creates a slow, transitional section of 26 measures that recalls the “secret chromatic art” of the Renaissance Netherlands motet and the dissonant suspensions of Lotti and Carissimi.

Why? He could have easily – and neatly – cadenced in D-Major (on its Dominant) and launched directly into the next movement. The answer lies in the text, which led him to a much more expressive option.

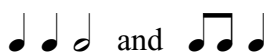
With this *Adagio* (at m. 121) and its slow-moving chromaticism, Bach “stops all the clocks,” as it were, and in double time evokes a mysterious, expectant mood for the final part of the Creed, “Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum” [and I look for the resurrection of the dead]. Though the full liturgical text (including “et vitam venturi”) is sung in the ensuing movement, the “expectation” is given special treatment in the *Adagio*, while the “Resurrection” and “life to come” are reserved for the *Vivace e Allegro*.

## 9. Et expecto

The energetic finale for chorus and full orchestra recalls the choreatic, Pentecostal fervor at the end of the Gloria and indicates that life in the world to come will be a joyous and ecstatic affair. It is a reworking of the chorus, “Jauchzet, ihr erfreuten Stimmen [Rejoice, you joyful voices],” from Cantata BWV 120 (“Gott, man lobet dich in der Stille”), itself a parody of a lost model. The overall rhythmic gesture of this movement is like that of Movement II of Bach’s 4<sup>th</sup> Orchestral Suite (of dances), BWV 1069:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsD1HxwefHI>

It is a *Bourrée*, the courtly dance-form with an emphasis on the *anacrusis*, or pick-up note. –And in both the Suite and here in the Mass, the *anacrusis* consists of two short note-values followed by one twice its length (short-short-LONG). This is Bach’s so-called “joy” rhythm, and in the Et expecto it is used at two levels simultaneously:



The opening measures sound like two trumpet-calls to life-eternal: the slower one first (by the voices, to declaim the text “et expecto”), and the quicker one next, played by the orchestra. Eventually the faster rhythm is taken up by instruments and voices, with a building energy for “resurrectio-nem” and “venturi sae-culi:”



The movement builds to a crashing energetic close (on “Amen”) that many feel is best served with little or no *rallentando* (slowing down). Indeed, this same frantic energy will be evoked decades later in the “et vitam venturi” of the *Missa solennis* of Beethoven, who surely was inspired by Bach’s setting.

## **BACH'S LASTING LEGACY**

“His name ought not to be *Bach* [German for “brook”], but *Ozean* [Ocean], because of his infinite and inexhaustible wealth of combinations and harmonies.”

-Ludwig van Beethoven (Vienna, 1822)

\* \* \* \* \*

“Recognition of human excellence in its highest form, knowledge of the path that leads to it, the necessary done with dutifulness and driven to that point of perfection where it outgrows all necessity – this knowledge is the most precious inheritance given us with Bach’s music.

“If music has the power to direct our entire existence towards nobleness, this music is great. If a composer has dominated his music to this point of greatness, he has achieved the utmost.

“This Bach has achieved.”

- Paul Hindemith (Hamburg, 1950)

\* \* \* \* \*

When American biologist, Lewis Thomas was asked what message he thought humanity should take to other civilizations in space, he replied “I would send the complete works of Johann Sebastian Bach, but that...would be boasting.”

- Lewis Thomas (1974)