

# Tafelmusik

## Bach Mass in B Minor

### PROGRAMME NOTES

In the last years of his life, Johann Sebastian Bach set about composing and compiling a series of works that would represent a summation of his life's work. The works were written, not for specific occasions, but rather as a testimonial to his achievements, and include *The Musical Offering*, *The Art of the Fugue*, *The Goldberg Variations*, and the eighteen chorale preludes. The last to be composed was the Mass in B Minor. Much has been written as to why Bach, a devout Lutheran, would have chosen a setting of the Roman Catholic Ordinary as a testament to his choral work. A plausible explanation is that Bach wished to leave to posterity a great Latin mass, a centuries-old symbol of Western culture, and a musical form that had challenged generations of composers. The tradition and the architecture of the Roman mass gave him the opportunity to write a complex, highly-structured choral work, with a formality and on a scale not permitted by the Lutheran cantatas and passions. Like those of the other great cyclical works mentioned above, the score of the Mass in B Minor can be seen almost as a "text book." It was, in fact, never performed in its entirety in Bach's lifetime. Bach's score was inherited by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel, who performed the *Symbolum Nicenum* at a charity concert in Hamburg in 1786. Forkel and Haydn had copies, and Beethoven made two unsuccessful attempts to procure a score. The Berlin Singakademie apparently rehearsed the work in the second decade of the 19th century, but the first performance of the complete work, translated into German and "modernized," took place in Leipzig in 1859, more than a century after it was written.

One of the most astonishing features of this work is that, despite its elaborate symmetry and complexity, it is largely a compilation of works written much earlier. The first section to be composed was the *Sanctus*, first performed in

1724 as part of the Lutheran Christmas service. Manuscript parts of the *Kyrie* and the *Gloria* accompanied Bach's petition in 1733 for a court title to the new Elector of Saxony. Two new sections, the *Credo* and the movements from the *Osanna* to the end, contain large-scale reworkings of earlier works, including movements from several of Bach's German cantatas. Only a few choruses were newly composed. It does not seem, however, that early models were chosen in order to facilitate or hasten the compositional process, a practice that was common in the 17th and 18th centuries as composers struggled to meet deadlines. Bach's reworkings were extensive and detailed: even details of text accentuation and resulting changes in articulation have been fully considered. It seems rather that Bach's use of early material was carefully planned, so that this "text book" score could preserve a vast range of styles and genres. It is a remarkable demonstration of Bach's great skill at reworking and restructuring existing works. It was also a testament to the tradition of the parody mass: parody is the term used to describe the extensive reuse of existing material, and this technique was widely used in mass composition during the Renaissance. Parody masses form a large proportion of the masses of such composers as Gombert, Victoria, Lassus and Palestrina. Bach's use of the Renaissance *stile antico* in several movements of the mass is a further nod to the long tradition of mass composition, here ingeniously coupled with movements written in high baroque style, and others in a "modern," galant musical language.

From this diverse material Bach created a coherent and balanced work, each of the four main parts presented in a symmetrical design complete unto itself, and yet all parts intricately interconnected. This complex work, which both challenges and satisfies on countless levels, is perhaps the ultimate expression of Bach's belief that "the aim or final goal of all music shall be nothing but the honour of God and the recreation of the Soul."