

Under the surface



‘It all started,’ explains an animated Joshua Rifkin, ‘when the Bach Ensemble and I recorded the Mass in the early 1980s. We wanted to come as close as we could to Bach’s own performance conditions and intentions. But this brought us up against problems with what should have been the best published score – the version in the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*. The NBA as a whole is a fantastic achievement, some of the best scholarship of our time. But the edition of the Mass remains a famous exception. It was one of the first volumes to come out, just about 50 years ago, and unfortunately it got a lot wrong. Even if it had been better, our expectations today are different, and when we turn to perhaps the seminal work of western music, both performing musicians and scholars want really to know the whole truth about every note that Bach wrote: when he wrote it and whether he revised it, or if his son revised it after his death, or if, in certain passages, we simply can’t tell and have to invent.’

As Rifkin speaks he shows me not only a proof of his forthcoming Breitkopf score, but a facsimile of Bach’s autograph manuscript. Every note, every rhythm, every bit of underlaid text seems to tell the proverbial story; and this story is a complex one, in two widely separated chapters. The Kyrie and Gloria – written as a single unit called, according to Lutheran practice, *Missa* – show Bach at the peak of his craft, writing with fluid surety. He inscribed these pages in 1733 as a part of a move to gain favour with his sovereign, Frederick Augustus II, the new Elector of Saxony and King of Poland.

Bach travelled to Dresden to present the Elector with a set of parts to the *Missa*, which languished there unused as the ruler got involved with wars and other distractions. But he kept the score, and much later he returned to it, to add the rest of the Roman Mass. He was approaching the end of his life; and from the Credo onwards the heavy, laboured writing offers witness to the persistence of an ageing and unwell master giving his utmost to complete his last and most magnum opus.

Baroque supremo Joshua Rifkin brings us nearer than ever to what J S Bach actually composed. *Malcolm Bruno* asks him about his new edition of the B minor Mass

opposite statue of J S Bach in front of the Thomaskirche, Leipzig Photo Maggie Williams, *this page* Joshua Rifkin conducting the Bach Ensemble on tour in Italy Photo courtesy of Helen Palmer

'The first problem is the Missa of 1733,' Rifkin continues. 'Remember, Bach had left the parts in Dresden. As often happens with him, these contained a lot of things not in the score: details of articulation and dynamics, even changes of instrumentation and actual notes. Normally, these would represent the composer's last thoughts. But Bach no longer had the Dresden parts when he turned the Missa into the B minor Mass in the late 1740s; and when he came back to his older score, he reworked many details, some quite noticeably. So the Dresden Missa and the corresponding portions of the B minor Mass are really separate pieces. But the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*, like the old *Bach-Gesellschaft* edition before it, combined them, creating a version of the Kyrie and Gloria that Bach never wrote. But musicians,' says Rifkin, 'want to know what Bach wrote.'

'Take the "Domine Deus". Open up the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* or the *Bach-Gesellschaft* and you see a solo flute line. But this is nowhere in Bach. The autograph calls for two flutes in unison. In the Dresden parts, Bach changed this to a solo flute, but with modish Lombard rhythms instead of even semiquavers. So neither of Bach's two versions – that of the Mass or the Missa – exists in print.'

But combining versions is only part of the problem. Worse awaits in the Credo. Only a few years after Bach's death, his manuscript had become difficult to read: not only had he worked over some passages very heavily, but he seems to have used a particularly corrosive ink that ate through the pages. In the mid 1760s, when a colleague of Carl Philipp Emanuel's made a new copy of the Mass, he had to leave a number of spots blank. 'Bach's son did his best to fill in the gaps; and of course, he transferred his solutions back to the autograph, to increase its legibility. But some of CPE's solutions were really just honest guesswork – and it doesn't even look as if he always guessed right. But there they are now in the manuscript, obscuring whatever we still might make out of what his father had left behind!



'In 1769, another scribe made a copy of the Mass. This time, since Philipp Emanuel and he weren't in the same city, the younger Bach took pains in advance to make sure there would be no problems. He went through the score and painstakingly filled in anything he thought missing, corrected anything he thought mistaken... and of course obscured still more of his father's manuscript.' Nor did the process stop there. CPE seems to have performed the Credo at least twice in his lifetime; each performance brought more interventions into his father's autograph score. 'This would have been bad enough. But sometimes things got so cluttered that CPE simply scraped away everything that had been there to write in the music afresh. This made sense when you're trying to get a usable text for performance, but how dreadful for us!'

By now, the autograph of the B minor Mass has almost as many layers as the archaeological Troy, combining J S Bach and C P E Bach in ways often difficult to detect by the naked eye. Only by carefully comparing the copies and sifting out where they differ from each other and from the autograph as it now looks is it possible to get back to the music J S Bach set down not long before his death.

'As luck would have it,' says Rifkin, 'scholars weren't really aware of the problem at the time the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* was prepared; so the version of the Credo in that score abounds with an accumulation of small things that Bach never wrote. It wasn't until I got down to work on my score that it became clear just how much there was to set straight.'

Has Rifkin got everything? No, he explains with another example. In bars 137-40 of the 'Confiteor' – the bars with the unearthly enharmonic transition to the 'Et expecto' – we have completely lost the original tenor line. 'CPE tried to restore it and never got it right. He fell into parallel octaves the first time, poor dissonance treatment the second time. It's as if Hamlet weren't quite sure of the words before "That is the question"!'.

The B minor Mass has a unique (and easily overlooked) history. We tend to look at it as an edifice. And rightly so according to Rifkin: 'It's Bach's last will and testament,' he says, reminding me that *The Art of Fugue* turns out to be earlier in the Bach canon than previously imagined, leaving the B minor as his final work. 'And it was this monument that his son Carl Philipp Emanuel inherited and devoted himself to propagating.' Yet there was no complete performance in his lifetime; for as such a thing had eluded the father, so it did also the son. Indeed the work was not heard in full until a century after its creator's death.

Haydn and Beethoven knew of the great *missa tota* or had copies. Mendelssohn in 1829 was responsible for the great revival of public interest in Bach's music with his legendary Berlin performance of the *St Matthew Passion* (in his own orchestration, complete with clarinets!). 'The B minor's first performance dates to the mid-19th century, by which time it was regarded, unlike the cantatas, as a concert piece.' It was at this time that the Mass first appeared in the *Bach-Gesellschaft* edition, the first complete assembly of Bach's music begun at the centenary of Bach's death. 'Its editors didn't have all the sources, and they didn't always understand what they had. But this is the edition that basically established the text of the Mass as we know it.'

And the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* B minor? 'Friedrich Smend, the musicologist and theologian who prepared it, was a very brilliant man, but he seems to have got wrong just about everything that one could. Some of it, of course, wasn't really his fault; people still didn't understand quite a bit about the sources that became clear not much afterwards. But where he did have a choice to make, he didn't always make the right one.'

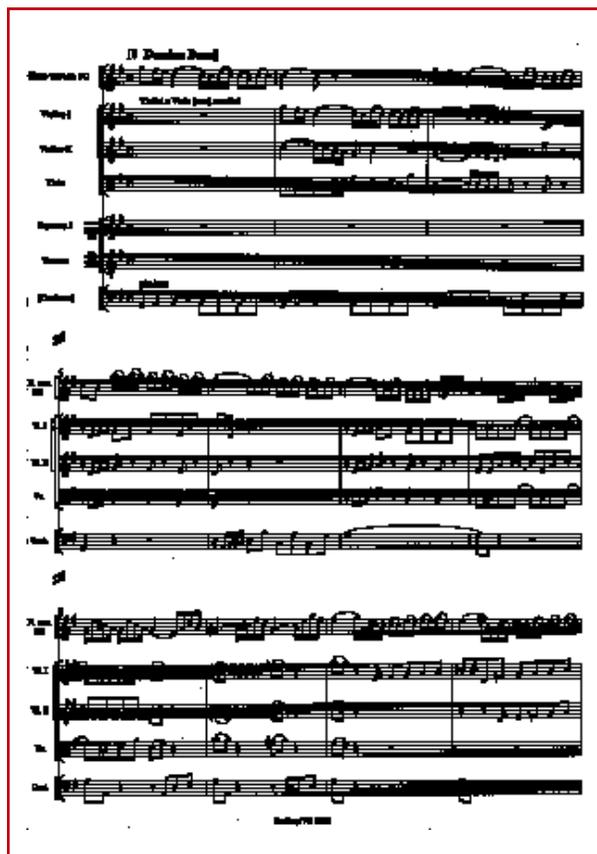
Rifkin prepared the first version of his new score for his 1980 recording. Word spread, and soon afterwards he was approached to publish his work. But there was a long delay: 'The initial publishers dithered and finally abandoned doing music at all.' Meanwhile, Breitkopf had already expressed interest which probably wouldn't have come to pass without the intervention of Alfred Dürr, the grand master of living Bach scholars. Rifkin again: 'I have been very lucky to have Dürr on my side. Many years ago, when I was 21 and totally unknown, I turned up at the door of Dürr's scholarly home, the Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Institut in Göttingen. He welcomed me without any regard to rank or fame. Years later, he not only persuaded Breitkopf to wait out the other publishers, but has even taken on the job of doing the continuo realisation and vocal score for my edition. He is over 85 now, so I want it to come out as soon as possible!'

Rifkin's edition has its roots in practice. But it's not a 'performing' edition, resolving every ambiguity

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above Alfred Dürr, the 'grand master of living Bach scholars'
Photo courtesy of Breitkopf & Härtel



and fleshing out the text according to the editor's ideas. Rifkin sees his purpose as an editor to scale off the artificially smooth finish of absolute 'papal' authority and leave open questions, issues, fissures, as they are left us by Bach, for performers and scholars to decide upon for themselves. 'As a conductor, I hate activist editing. I want to know where there are choices to be made, and I want to make them. So when I edit the Mass, I try to create something that I myself would want to use, which means leaving things open. I'll do what I want as a performer; but why should any other performer have to do what I want?'

As I look at a proof of the new Breitkopf score, I feel a sense of excitement, for its pages appear very different from anything I've seen or imagined. Gone is the grand Mahlerian score paper, in its place a tighter, compact alignment on a page that looks disarmingly like Bach and the style of 18th-century notation. 'My aspiration has been to achieve the most accurate reading of the B minor, that is of the 1748-9 Mass, that can be achieved. The text left us by Bach is in fact perfectly serviceable: the problem is its obscuring by the accretia of too many hands. Where it is illegible, I'll tell you honestly where part-writing is incomplete or spurious, or the text underlay incomplete or corrupted, I'll promise the same!'

This is an edition for all those who want the truth, but not always answers, though often questions are assiduously unveiled. 'In progress,' grins Rifkin, 'is part of the process!' Handling the pages of his proof, I sense myself (and many to follow) letting go of the sort of Edwardian grandeur in which the B minor has been unconsciously garbed. I can now see that its 'monumental stature' is not in a seamless overblown printed text (anymore than performance) to which we have become so accustomed. We are, after all, the unwitting great-grandchildren of Mendelssohn's Bach, of the *Bach-Gesellschaft* generation more than a century and a half ago.

Joshua Rifkin has devoted a great deal of his life to the music of Bach and especially his B minor Mass. From his new edition all kinds of different effects will issue forth, not least of which will be a new closeness to Bach as composer. And in the process of engaging intimately with this, his greatest and ultimate musical statement, the work as we understand it will be transformed. It will sound and feel different, for what Rifkin has given us for a first time is a bridge, textual and historical, straight back to 1750, a hands-on way to enter Bach's own musical chemistry during the precious last years and weeks of his life. ■

left facsimile of the manuscript of the opening of the 'Domine Deus' Score courtesy of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung mit Mendelssohn-Archiv, *right* the opening of the 'Domine Deus' in the new Rifkin edition Score courtesy of Breitkopf & Härtel

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