

New releases of Mozart's 'Great' Mass in C Minor

by Kathy Wolfe

"Great" Mass in C Minor, K.427

by W.A. Mozart

Claudio Abbado, conductor; Berliner
Philharmoniker and Berlin Radio Chorus, 1991
Sony Classical CD SK46671, \$14.99

"Great" Mass in C Minor, K.427

by W.A. Mozart

Philipp Herreweghe, conductor; La Chappelle
Royale and Collegium Vocal Choir, 1992
Harmonia Mundi CD 901393, \$14.99

The "Great" Mass in C Minor was composed in Vienna in 1782, during Mozart's discovery of the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, amidst major scientific inventions in the string quartet and symphony by Franz Joseph Haydn. It is almost an experimental laboratory work, in which Mozart tried out these new discoveries, but which he never completed. Perhaps because it is incomplete, it was not well-recorded in the era of the great conductors; no Furtwängler or Klemperer versions are available.

Examining with trepidation the good number of new releases, this author found some pleasant surprises.

Claudio Abbado's late-1991 Sony classical release contains fine singing by some of today's best soloists. Soprano Barbara Bonney's "Christe Eleison" is more robust than the usual chirping and worth the admission price. Her phrasing is aided by Abbado's Italian singing line. The tempi are a bit

fast, however.

Philipp Herreweghe's May 1992 release, performed on very good original instruments at Mozart's pitch of C=256 Hertz (A=430), is really a find. The players of La Chapelle Royale, which Herreweghe founded, have mastered their "old" instruments to the point that there is tremendous transparency of musical voices. That means the distinction between the violins, for example, and the flutes is brought out in a way which is impossible with more raucous modern instruments and pitches, which are slightly metallic.

Herreweghe's version is superior on some important points. The distinct voicing and, significantly, the phrasing of the different *choirs*—the string choir, the wind-brass choirs, and the vocal choir—a major subject of Mozart's study (**Figure 2**), are often not heard with the necessary differentiation in Abbado's version due to the rushed tempi. Herreweghe makes excellent distinction among the three orchestral and vocal choirs.

As with most modern recordings, however, the quick tempi of both these weaken another important factor—the phrasing of the orchestral and choral *bass* voices.

While loathe to recommend British conductors, I admit Colin Davis's 1975 Philips LP 6500235 (not yet on CD), remains the best recording, even compared to 1950s German editions. Davis's tempo is more appropriately broad, and the *phrasing* is poetic throughout, which highlights in a special way Mozart's singing bass line (**Figure 2**). The string and brass basses are miked heavily, a problem where it drowns the chorus, but Davis's phrasing of those bass voices gives the necessary power to the whole.

Raymond Leppard's 1974 LP, reissued as EMI Angel CDC 473-85, comes in second. For those who like "slow," as I do, Leppard takes an even broader tempo than Davis,

FIGURE 1
Mass in C Minor K. 427, Kyrie

“Haydn motivführung” showing the first choral measures of the Kyrie. It repeats the basic three notes of the C minor arpeggio in all four choral voices.

Shaded boxes represent each voice’s lowest or first register. Open boxed notes are the highest or third register.

which allows all the orchestral and choral voices to be heard with unusual clarity. Much of it, however, including the Kyrie, is too slow for Leppard’s phrasing, which can become too note by note. It sometimes falls apart.

Haydn’s ‘motivführung’

Mozart’s “Great” C Minor Mass is one of a set of *revolutionary* advances made by Mozart relative to Bach. While Mozart’s study of Bach in the early 1780s is often mentioned, Mozart was also intensively studying Haydn at this time. Haydn created a new form of totally integrated music, based on his development of what Norbert Brainin of the Amadeus Quartet calls Haydn’s *motivführung*.

Haydn developed the sonata forms, the string quartet, and the derivation of the entire thematic structure of a sonata or symphony, from a statement of three or four notes, as Brainin puts it. Everything is derived from the opening several tones, and this is done throughout; not only the first movement, but all movements, are derived from it. The best-known example is Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, which became famous for its Haydn *motivführung*, the dramatic opening four notes.

Motivführung is best translated “leading principle” or “seed concept.” A true Haydn *motivführung* contains the seed crystal, the germ of an already-growing idea, which generates new ideas at an ever-increasing rate of develop-

FIGURE 2
Mass in C Minor K. 427, Kyrie: voicing of three choirs

Three different choirs in the Kyrie. Violins, above, play a different theme from the choral sopranos, center. A third figure is “sung” by string basses, below.

ment. A literal translation, "leading motif," is not to be confused with Wagner's banal *leitmotiv*, an unrelated, fixed-note pattern which just repeats, as in a TV "tag" jingle. Thus, the singular quality of the opening of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 is not to be understood as later bowdlerized in TV commercials: "Stron-ger than dirt!"

Haydn's *motivführung* is better understood from the standpoint of Georg Cantor's transfinite numbers, by viewing the opening notes of a composition as a direct articulation of the *cardinality* of that work. Cantor (d. 1918), in founding modern mathematics, criticized previous theory's inability to express a density of complex ideas, much as was said of the philosopher Spinoza (d. 1677) that "he died of consumption, of which he had suffered for some time—consonant with his system, in which all specificity and singularity is consumed by the One substance" (G.F.W. Hegel).

This describes a major limitation of the "seamless" quality of music before Haydn's discovery.

Cantor created a series of ordinal transfinite numbers, which represent the *process of generation* of an entire set of lower numbers such as the counting numbers. He used a cardinal transfinite number to represent the generating "power," as he called it, of an entire array of such ordinal transfinities.

In music, Haydn and Mozart sought to create compositions which generate an ever denser rate of such singularities, or individual musical thoughts, the analogue to Cantor's transfinite ordinal numbers. To form the work into a unit-idea in one long musical line, that rate of generation of individual concepts had to itself be ordered, by a single *cardinal* transfinite idea.

Mozart's transformation

Mozart's stark, short opening statement of the words "Kyrie eleison," may be understood as the Haydn *motivführung* "seed crystal" of the "Great" C Minor Mass. Set off clearly from the rest of the movement, it is a statement of the bare elements of C minor-major, the three notes needed for the C minor arpeggio: C, E-flat, and G.

This passage is a direct quote from the opening C minor arpeggio of Bach's "Ricercar" from the "Musical Offering." Bach's work, which was the first study in the idea that C minor-major is a unified concept rather than two "keys," begins with the rising pattern C, E-flat, G.

Mozart repeats Bach's motif for unmistakable emphasis in all four voices of the chorus, in almost all possible human registers. The singers are virtually a cappella, save for brass and winds doubling the chorus, restricted to the same three notes (Figure 1).

Note that the four different singing voices here have a surprisingly similar pattern of voice registration when limited to these three notes. Bach's "Ricercar" emphasized that *universal* quality of these intervals, and also the fact that such a passage creates an initial ambiguity, which the composer may later resolve with surprising new voices entering.

Mozart, more than quoting Bach, has transformed his material into a demonstration of Haydn's *motivführung*. This passage, set off clearly from everything which precedes and follows it, contains the material necessary to generate the rest of the mass. For example, the opening treble string introduction to the Mass (not shown) is an inversion of this Haydn motif, falling from C to G.

The soprano voice in the next passage (Figure 2) is also an inversion of the opening "Kyrie eleison," falling over the space from C to G. This section shows the new orchestra which Haydn and Mozart created to carry their new idea. It depended upon a developed difference in sound between orchestral *choirs*, strings versus winds versus brass, and the ability of each choir to execute a distinct singing line, with or against choral voices.

The development of these choirs necessary for the distinct voices to be heard here, as a triune concept, would have been impossible without Haydn's work on the string quartet. The string section which became the core of that orchestra was developed in Haydn's groundbreaking 1781 "Russian" string quartets Op. 33. Mozart, who had not written a string quartet in the nine years since 1773, suddenly, in December 1782, began the series of six quartets starting with K. 387 which he dedicated to Haydn, to show his concept of Haydn's new principle.

In Figure 2, for example, the violins repeat their opening theme as one choir, which is an inversion of the original C to G motif in Figure 1. The choral sopranos are another choir, singing a different inversion from C to G. Yet a third choir is sung by the string basses and bassoons, which have an entirely new figure rising from C to G. The violin choir and the string bass choir "sing" rhythmical patterns clearly derived from the Greek words "Ky-r-i-e e-le-i-son."

Books Received

Khrushchev and the First Russian Spring, The Era of Khrushchev through the Eyes of His Advisor, by Fedor Burlatsky, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1992, 286 pages, hardbound, \$24

The Virtuoso Flute-Player, by Johann George Tromlitz, translated by Ardal Powell, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, 338 pages, hardbound, \$59.50

The Bach Manuscripts of Johann Peter Kellner and His Circle, by Russell Stinson, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 1992, 184 pages, hardbound, \$37.50