

# Michael Haydn the Atheist?

## How the St. Francis Mass illuminates Bruckner's God-given symphonic mission

by Alonso del Arte

Religious devotion can't be measured numerically, even if we limit the parameters of evidence. But we can take two composers, whose religious devotion or lack thereof is not in doubt, and compare their settings of the Roman Catholic Mass to Haydn's. On one end, we have Anton Bruckner, who may have had the occasional crisis of faith but whose devotion overall is beyond doubt. On the other end we have Havergal Brian, but to my knowledge he never set the Mass ordinary.

For this study, I will be comparing Michael Haydn's *Missa Sancti Francisci Seraphici* (hereafter "St. Francis Mass") to Anton Bruckner's Mass in F minor. The only recording of the St. Francis Mass that I'm aware of is on the Hungaroton label but at least it's available as an MP3 download. There are quite a few more recordings of Bruckner's Mass to choose from.

It is well known that the Cecilians objected to the use of musical instruments in church music. But they also had rules for textual repetitions. The Cecilians asserted that the Church forbids all those repetitions that "interrupt the liturgical functions at the altar, or ... [that] emphasize words or passages which are of no prominent meaning, or ... [that] change the meaning of the text entirely." The Cecilians faulted composers like Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart "who in the use of the words are guided by the technical structure of the composition rather than by the meaning of the text and the liturgical functions at the altar. Herein lies their mistake. They do not accommodate themselves to the liturgy, but they force the liturgy to accommodate itself to them."<sup>1</sup>

The sentiments of the Cecilians certainly existed during Haydn's time, but were not fully articulated until Bruckner's time. Bruckner may have regarded the Cecilians as extremists, though he would have had the tact or humility never to make a public statement to that effect. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence that Bruckner cared for the liturgical function of his church music.

There is not much opportunity for doctrinal emphasis in the short Kyrie text, so I'm not going to read much into Haydn switching to D major and a faster tempo for the second "Kyrie eleison", and then switching back to D minor and the first tempo for more "Kyrie eleison". (For the recording on the Hungaroton label conducted by Helmuth Rilling, it seems that either the conductor or the recording producers chose to omit that closing D minor section).

The Gloria and the Credo is where displacement of textual repetitions can really create doctrinal emphasis contrary to church dogma. This is a concert mass, in which the choir, rather than the celebrant (priest), sing "Gloria in excelsis Deo" and "Credo in unum Deum". The Gloria begins in a fairly straightforward manner. A solo alto sings "laudamus Te". The the choir responds "Te! Te! Te laudamus!" This would have been a very subtle displacement (switching the order of two consecutive words but keeping them consecutive) if it weren't for the fact that Haydn dwells on one of the words in order to draw attention to the displacement.

But maybe that displacement is not so problematic. The next one definitely is: a solo tenor sings "benedicimus Te" as the music very clearly veers towards B minor. The choir responds "Te! Te benedicimus." It's as if Haydn has a problem with the idea of us blessing God. Now veering towards A major, a solo bass sings "adoramus Te," suggesting that adoring God is less problematic than blessing Him. The choir responds "Te! Te adoramus!" The alto, tenor and bass soloists sing "glorificamus Te" with many mellismatic embellishments. The choir responds "Te laudamus, benedicimus, adoramus, glorificamus."

The doctrinal emphasis is very clear: this is a catalog of action *we do to* God: we praise Him, we

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1 *Catholic World*, Volume 49, by the Paulist Fathers, p. 351.

bless Him, we adore Him and we glorify Him. We praise Him because He's all-powerful, right? And we praise Him even if He doesn't care whether we praise Him or not? But who gave *us* the power to bless Him? Who are we to bless Him anyway? With this pattern of emphasis, Haydn is saying that God is an invention of our mind, and as such, His power comes from us praising, blessing, adoring and glorifying Him.

Similar examples are to be found in Joseph Haydn's masses. In the Nelson Mass, for example, we find the words "Laudamus Te, benedicimus Te" set with a definite minor key feel, accompanied by an eerily Brucknerian ostinato. But Joseph doesn't make as big a deal of these words as Michael does, and we could argue that Joseph was just more concerned with creating musical variety than with using the music to create any sort of doctrinal emphasis.

For all the talk of Bruckner being long winded, Bruckner goes through these words very quickly. Bruckner was influenced by Michael Haydn, but only in musical, not doctrinal matters. And so we observe that while Bruckner learned from Haydn's counterpoint, Bruckner has vastly different doctrinal emphases in his settings of the mass. In the Mass in F minor, Bruckner essentially glosses over "benedicimus Te" but emphasizes "adoramus Te" by dropping the dynamics to piano and using much longer note values. Here is the top soprano line:

Lau - da - - - mus Te, be-ne - di - - - ci-mus Te.

Ad - - - o - ra - - - mus Te. Glo-ri - fi - ca - mus Te, glo - ri - fi -

The way Haydn closes out the first section of the Gloria, resolutely going to a minor key, seems to be more appropriate for an Act I scene in an opera than in a mass setting. But I choose not to read much into the "haunting" intervals (intervals greater than a sixth except perfect octaves) for "Qui tollis peccata mundi" (I quote this here for later reference):

Qui tol - lis pec - ca - ta

It seems to have been tradition to set the last words of the Gloria, "Cum Sancto Spiritu, in gloria Dei Patris", in a fugue, presumably to allude to the idea of the Holy Spirit causing people to speak in tongues. Haydn's counterpoint is masterful. Here is a musical example with the lyrics omitted:





Cello

# St. Francis Mass

## III. Credo – Incarnatus

Michael Haydn

Edited by Alonso del Arte

Largo  $\text{♩} = 40$   
Solo

The musical score is written for a cello solo in a single system. It begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a common time signature (C). The tempo is marked 'Largo' with a quarter note equal to 40 beats per minute. The piece is a solo. The notation is highly detailed, featuring numerous slurs, ornaments (trills and mordents), and dynamic markings such as 'tr' (trill) and 'f' (forte). The melody is intricate, with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The score consists of seven staves of music, with the first staff starting with a repeat sign and ending with a double bar line. The subsequent staves continue the melodic line, with some changes in clef and key signature. The final staff ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.