

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."¹

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

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.

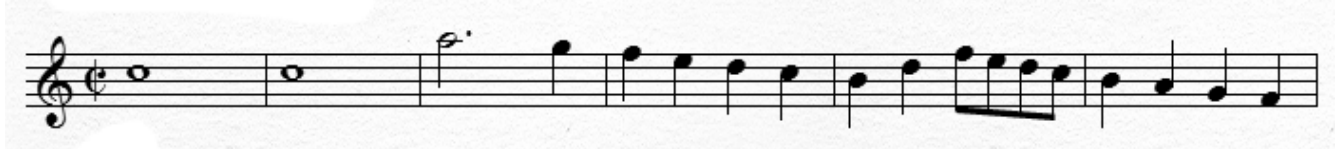
Ad - - - o - ra - - - mus Te. Glo - ri - fi - ca - mus Te, glo - ri - fi -

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:

If the fugue theme (shown above in the soprano part) sounds familiar, that’s probably because you’ve heard Michael Haydn’s Symphony in C major, Perger 31, Sherman 39, which influenced Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart for his own final Symphony in C major, K. 551.



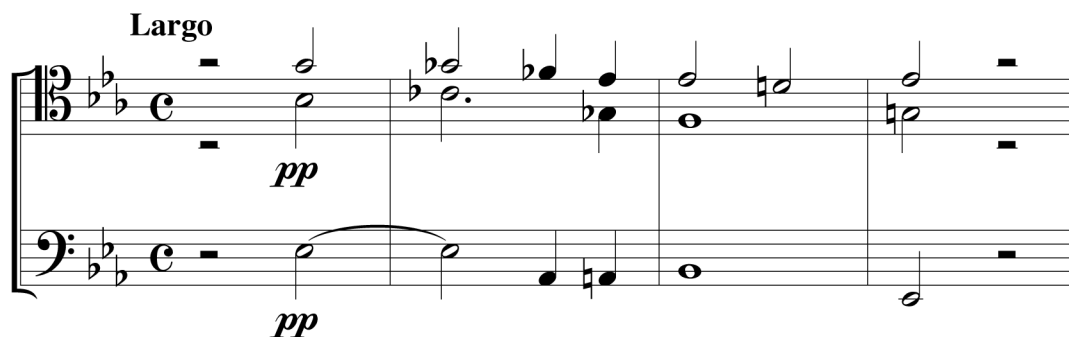
Haydn lived a couple decades more after Mozart, and thus alluded to one of his own Symphonies in a Mass, the opposite of Bruckner quoting his Masses in his Symphonies.

But rather than glory, Haydn’s display of contrapuntal dexterity produces tension and a sense of world-weariness, and this is quite by design by a master of music who is completely in control of everything. But before those listening can question this gloriously unglorious fugue, Haydn resolves the tension, goes through a stretto and ends with the expectedly unequivocal Amen.

Of course the lyrics are important because Haydn uses the whole phrase “Cum sancto Spiritu in gloria Dei Patris” for the fugue, whereas Bruckner chooses to focus on just “in gloria Dei Patris” interspersed with “amen.” Bruckner’s fugue is contrapuntally masterful like Haydn’s, but also serves to express a sense of God’s glory.

Going by the theory that Haydn was an atheist who could not show his true colors in those less tolerant days, one would think that he would be on guard in the Credo, careful not to contradict the text of this crucial assertion of faith. But even here there are signs if we look under the surface. The Credo starts out in a straightforward D major. For the Incarnatus, Haydn switches to F major for a pastoral feel, suggesting sensitivity to the idea of Jesus having been born in a manger. But this section is built around a beautiful cello solo (quoted in full as an appendix) rather than around the text. Haydn continues the pastoral mood through the words “crucifixus” and “passus”, and it isn’t until “sepultus” that he finally has the cello go from the tenor clef to a chilly D minor in the bass clef.

Bruckner was perhaps inspired by Haydn’s example to use a solo violin and a solo viola in his own Incarnatus, but the music is built around the text, the singing of which is led by a tenor soloist. Bruckner makes us feel anguish at Christ’s crucifixion (with an explicit change of key and tempo) and sadness at His death. It should be noted, however, that the most profound utterance about Christ’s death comes not from the tenor soloist nor anyone in the choir, but from the horns doubled by tenor trombones, with a bass trombone for the bass line (shown here from the trombones’ parts; the horns are of course in treble clef transposed up a fifth):



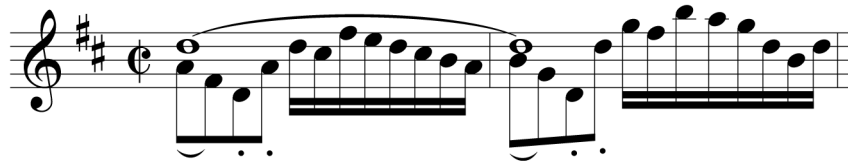
And His resurrection is a moment of cinematic awe in Bruckner’s hands, whereas Haydn does what feels like a routine recapitulation, going so far as to deliberately suggest monotony rather than awe at “non erit finis”. Furthermore, Haydn’s use of echo-like effects to sing of the one church and the one baptism undermine this doctrinal principle to an extent that Bruckner’s unexpectedly stern treatment of these words does not.

For Haydn, the word “mortuos” is hardly cause for pause, nor is “mortuorum,” as the choir gets

barely a breath as the strings roll on at a breakneck pace. By contrast, Bruckner treats these words by essentially slamming on the brakes.² The knee-jerk explanation, drawing on certain biographical anecdotes, is as pat as it is shallow, and is not worth stating here. The better explanation is that Bruckner takes death seriously and believes in the promise of salvation and resurrection in Jesus Christ.

To conclude the Credo, Bruckner displaces textual repetitions of the word “credo” much farther than Haydn displaces any textual repetitions, interspersing “credo, credo” among statements of “vitam venturi saeculi.” This is not just a structural framing device, it’s about emphasizing faith in the Holy Trinity. Bruckner’s displaced textual repetitions emphasize faith, Haydn’s sow the seeds of doubt.

For the Sanctus, I wonder if Rilling has chosen to ignore Haydn’s indication of *Andante maestoso*:



Or perhaps he wanted the contrast between the sustained notes for the singers and the chugging string accompaniments to be sharper. The following Benedictus refers to the Sanctus with these sustained notes, but has more the feel of a minuet.

The Agnus Dei might sound like Haydn copied from the *Lachrymosa* of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Requiem* in D minor, but for that piece Mozart copied from Haydn’s *Requiem* in C minor. The *Dona nobis* connects back to “*Qui tollis*” with different “haunting” intervals:



But peace is not attained just because we ask God for it. Haydn very subtly alludes to the tension in the *Gloria* fugue, as if to suggest that peace is something we must work for rather than expect some God we’ve created to grant to us. But Haydn’s concern is mainly a structural cyclic principle, and this decades before Franck. The *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* are very subtly alluded to by means of sustained notes.

Bruckner also connects from *Kyrie* to *Benedictus* in the *Agnus Dei*, but these connections underscore a progression from anxiety to atonement to serenity, something that Robert Simpson observed in the *Symphonies* and termed “*pacification*.” The theory of Bruckner’s declining devotion after moving to Vienna has already been debunked.

But it also needs to be said that it wasn’t just passages from his *Masses* that Bruckner carried over to his *Symphonies*, but also structural principles that bind up the four movements of a *Symphony* into a clearly unified narrative that progresses from conflict to peace with the crucial help of faith in God.

As for Haydn, was he really an atheist or am I reading too much into the work of a composer more interested in using his musical abilities to their fullest potential? I don’t know. One thing I can say for sure, and that is that the *St. Francis Mass* by Michael Haydn is music that needs and deserves further study.

² However do take a listen to Haydn’s *St. Hieronymus* and *St. Ursula Masses* for a treatment of these words just a little bit more like Bruckner’s.

Cello

St. Francis Mass

III. Credo – Incarnatus

Michael Haydn

Edited by Alonso del Arte

Largo $\text{♩} = 40$
Solo

The musical score is written for Cello in 3/4 time, marked Largo with a tempo of 40 beats per minute. It begins with a solo section. The score consists of seven staves of music. The first six staves are in bass clef, and the seventh staff is in treble clef. The music features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are several dynamic markings, including *tr* (trill) and *tr* (trill). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The score is a public domain work from 1803.