

Grosse Messe (1739) für Bach und Luther

a transcription for singers and baroque orchestra
based on the 'Dritter Teil der Clavierübung' of J.S. Bach

by

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Dritter Teil der Clavierübung

The year is 1739. Leipzig is bustling with festivities. It was exactly 200 years ago, in 1539, that Martin Luther gave one of his most important sermons there, in St Thomas Church.

J.S. Bach, the Cantor at St Thomas Church, had immense admiration for the ideas of Luther. He carefully collected many of his theological works, often with personal notes, in his library.

It was not by chance that Bach published his *Dritter Teil der Clavierübung*, composed for organ, in 1739: the collection of chorale preludes is a summary of Luther's theological and musical themes – many are unaware that Luther himself was also a composer. It contains a Lutheran mass (Kyrie, Gloria), a 3-part Lutheran profession of faith (based on the 10 Commandments, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer), 2 sacraments (of baptism and the altar) and the Confession. This ensemble concludes with a monumental, celebratory prelude to a triple fugue at the end of the work.

The *Dritter Teil der Clavierübung* also presents a powerful overview of European musical styles in vogue before and during Bach's time: stile antico (referring to 16th century polyphony and Frescobaldi's *Fiori Musicali*) and stile moderno. We also find this same alternation of styles in the h-moll Messe. Bach adopted French styles (referring to the French overture, the galante style and the French organ writing style of Nicolas de Grigny), influences of the Northern German organ school through use of the double pedal technique where both of the organist's feet play an independent voice (Buxtehude, Weckmann, ...), and lastly influences of the Southern German organ school using manualiter fughettas as chorale preludes (Pachelbel).

One final common thread throughout the composition is the number symbolism so specific to Bach: the work is full of numbers with Biblical significance. The number 3 for example refers to the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Ghost). The first statement of faith of the Augsburg Confession concerns this ("Lutherans believe in the Holy Trinity"), and it is not by chance that both the opening prelude and closing fugue of the work contain 3 themes.

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Of all of Bach's *Clavierübungen* (which also include the *Italian Concerto* and *Goldberg Variations*), the *Dritter Teil* is the least well known to the general public. Only organists occasionally include excerpts from the work in their concert programmes.

Wouter Dekoninck took it on himself to give the *Dritter Teil der Clavierübung* life and soul for today's audiences, but still using Bach's authentic language. He translated the organ score into the melodic sound of Bach's baroque orchestra, added the original Lutheran chorale texts on top and built vocal scores based on the text and music. The result is a monumental mass in German for singers and baroque orchestra called *Grosse Messe (1739) für Bach und Luther*. The work has never been performed before. The orchestral setting consists of strings (with viola d'amore and viola de gamba in addition), flutes, oboes (including oboe d'amore and oboe da caccia), bassoons, trumpets, cornettos, trombones, timpani and organ.

A great deal of care and study was put into making sure that the transcription preserved the spirit and musical style of J.S. Bach: Wouter Dekoninck first studied the *Dritter Teil der Clavierübung* himself with all of its styles, as well as countless cantatas, masses, instrumental works and transcriptions by J.S. Bach. This gave him an intimate understanding of Bach's orchestration principles, text settings and use of instruments, with all of their possibilities and limitations. At the same time, he studied the life of Luther who is key to the very architecture underlying the work and the spirit in which Bach composed it.

The title *Grosse Messe (1739) für Bach und Luther* refers to a mass, simply because the work contains sections also included in a mass, but also because the *Dritter Teil der Clavierübung* came to be known historically as the 'German mass' or 'organ mass'. The title also makes reference to the *Hohe-messe* or *H-moll Messe* from which a few clear conventions were taken: for example, the *H-moll Messe* also uses the *stile antico* and *stile moderno* and was written for a large ensemble, both in its size and in the variety of instruments used.

In sharp contrast, the *Grosse Messe (1739) für Bach und Luther* is built on Lutheran chorales and uses the corresponding chorale texts. Each section is based on a chorale taken from the Lutheran ordinariate or Lutheran catechism. This explains immediately why Dekoninck set this mass in German, whereas Bach's other masses are in Latin. While Bach made a very strict choice to give each section a *cantus firmus* (except for the opening prelude and the closing chorus), the alternation of different styles and techniques gives the mass a very rich, colourful feel. Dekoninck also included a few instrumental *sinfonias* that harken back to the chorale, making the work very joyful. By its very specific structure, the *Grosse Messe* is something of a counterpart to the *H-Moll Messe*. As a result, the *Grosse Messe (1739) für Bach und Luther* is destined to occupy a special position in the works and genre of Bach: it is one of a kind, like the *H-Moll Messe*, the St John Passion or St Matthew Passion, and is so fascinating for precisely this reason.