

---

# MEMBRA JESU NOSTRI PATIENTIS SANCTISSIMA

## Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707): *Membra Jesu Nostri* (1680) BUXWV75

Buxtehude was born in Helsingborg but was probably educated at the Latin school in Elsinore, where his father, from whom he received his musical education, was organist at St. Olai Kirke. After becoming organist at his father's former church in Helsingborg in 1657-8, he moved back to Elsinore as organist of the Marien Kirche. The congregation was German-speaking, and this may have helped him to secure the position of organist and Werkmeister at the Marien Kirche in Lübeck in 1668, where he remained until his death.

In addition to the normal range of his duties as organist, Buxtehude was also responsible for directing the *Abendmusiken* concert series at the Marien Kirche. Although the term has come to refer to concerts in churches in a general sense, its initial meaning was quite specific. Lübeck was one of the Hanseatic League of Baltic sea-board towns, which were as important to the development of mercantile capitalism and political republicanism in Europe as were the city states of northern Italy. The concerts had been instituted by his predecessor, Franz Tunder, as organ recitals to entertain businessmen awaiting the opening of the Lübeck stock exchange at noon on Thursdays, and were known informally as 'stock exchange' concerts. The businessmen began sponsoring the concerts, following the practice of municipal sponsorship of organ recitals that had developed in the Netherlands, where the asceticism of the Reformed Church prohibited altogether playing of the organ during services. Buxtehude brought the concerts much closer to the centre of the Marien Kirche's musical activities, detaching them from the opening of the stock exchange on weekdays and moving them to four o'clock in the afternoon on five specific Sundays in the church calendar – the last two in Trin-

ity, and the second, third and fourth in Advent. Tunder had begun to include vocal and instrumental soloists, but Buxtehude went further, initially by introducing mixed programmes of choral and solo vocal music and, in 1678 – coinciding with the opening of the Hamburg Opera - dramatic sacred oratoria, requiring both orchestra and chorus. The business community responded from the outset by becoming the main source of funding for the concerts through patronage and commissions, enabling, in 1669, the building of four additional balconies at the Marien Kirche, to accommodate up to forty performers. Admission to the concerts was free to the townspeople, and donors were rewarded with printed copies of the libretti. Competition was reportedly fierce for the better seats at performances and resulting disorderly conduct amongst the audience seems to have been a recurrent problem. The concerts continued, nevertheless, into the nineteenth century and were brought to an end finally by the upheaval of the Napoleonic wars.

Buxtehude's compositions for the *Abendmusiken* enabled him to escape the constraints imposed on his compositions for the pietist Lutheran congregation of the Marien Kirche. Pietist practice was set against Latin texts and Italianate concertal style, as well as artful organ and festive communion music. Even cantatas, in 17th century German music, were regarded as appropriate primarily for secular performance, and Buxtehude's compositions for church services were required to be set to German texts from the Lutheran bible. His ability to manoeuvre around these constraints in producing works reflecting a range of contemporary styles had become a feature of Buxtehude's considerable reputation, which had attracted a visit from Handel in 1705. The already

internationally famous composer was feted by the town council of Lübeck, in the hope that he would agree to become Buxtehude's successor. The offer was declined, possibly because of the contractual requirement that he should marry Buxtehude's eldest surviving daughter, whose mother had been Tunder's younger daughter and had borne Buxtehude seven daughters, of whom four had survived into adulthood. More important for the subsequent development of German musical style, the mantle of responsibility for which Buxtehude had inherited from Heinrich Schutz (1585-1672), was a visit, later in the same year, from the twenty-year-old J S Bach, who had taken a leave of four weeks from his post as organist and choirmaster at the Neue Kirche in Arnstadt to see Buxtehude at work. Bach walked the two hundred and fifty miles from Thuringia to Lübeck, drawn by Buxtehude's status as a virtuoso in the 'art of the organ' – specifically, his mastery of the freewheeling stylus phantasticus toccata. But Bach also had been recently reprimanded by the consistory of the Arnstadt council for his role in a dispute with one of his instrumentalists, Geyserbach, a bassoonist whose playing he had likened to the bleating of a goat. Geyserbach is alleged to have attacked Bach in public with a stick shortly afterwards, at which Bach apparently drew his ornamental dagger. A brawl ensued until Geyserbach's drinking companions separated them, but not before the affray had been reported to the town authorities. Bach's leave may have been granted, in part, as a period in which he might cool off and consider how to work more constructively with his musicians and choristers – a problem that would recur famously when he moved to his final position at Leipzig some years later. Since Buxtehude's post of Werkmeister at the

---

---

Marien Kirche had involved secretarial and fiscal as well as musical responsibilities, Bach might well have thought that his long experience as the effective director of all music in Lübeck except staged opera, could help him to do so. To the consternation of his employers, though with no apparent remorse on his own part, claiming nonchalantly that he had been able “to learn one thing and another...”, Bach extended his stay to some four months. This may well have been so that he could witness at first hand the spectacular culmination of Buxtehude’s myriad talents displayed in the splendid Abendmusik performances of the 2nd and 3rd December, 1705, commemorating the death of Emperor Leopold I and the accession of Joseph I. The works were both sacred and secular and involved several orchestras, including two bands of timpani and trumpets, two horn and oboe ensembles and twenty five violins which played some passages in unison. Though the scores have not survived, contemporary reports indicate that they reflected the full range of influences that Buxtehude had incorporated into his music: Italianate arias, harpsichord suites in the French manner of Lebegue, passages for viola da gamba in the English style and choral movements fashioned like those of Lully.

Although an earlier and altogether more modest work, *Membra Jesu nostri patientis sanctissima* (Most Holy Members of our Suffering Jesus) displays at several points the strong influences of this range of musical forms and styles. It was composed in 1680 and dedicated to “a foremost man... most noble and honourable friend, Director of Music to his Most Serene Majesty, the King of Sweden”. This was the influential musical connoisseur, Gustav Duben, in whose considerable collection over a hundred

of Buxtehude’s works have survived. *Membra Jesu* is a seven part passion meditation consisting of concerto-aria cantatas, focused on seven different parts of Christ’s body as he suffered on the cross: feet, knees, hands, side, breast, heart and face. It is the only one of Buxtehude’s sacred cantatas which breaks with pietist requirements in being set to a Latin text, almost certainly condoned by the Pastor of the Marien Kirche, Bernhard Krechting. The text is drawn from the *Rhythmica oratio*, a devotional poem attributed to the twelfth century Cistercian, St Bernard of Clairvaux. Krechting cherished a particular familiarity with the Latin original, though it had been translated into German almost fifty years earlier, and had become popular among pietists for the metaphysical significance it attached to Christ’s crucifixional wounds. Pietism found a deeply sensual meaning in the physical agony and fortitude of Christ’s passion and His resurrectional triumph over the terrible bodily humiliations involved in the manner of His death. Buxtehude matches the intense, almost erotic quality of a form of devotion focused on dialectical synthesis of the bitterness of mortal pain and the sweetness of its redemptive transcendence, to music of a delicate, detached and sorrowful calm in this cycle of cantatas.

Musically, the cantatas make up a tonal circuit which begins and ends with the intensity of C minor, moving in succession through the related flat keys of E flat minor, G minor, D minor, A minor and E minor. All of the sections of each cantata are in the same key and follow much the same sequence: an opening sonata is followed by a chorus, a number of verses sung either as solos or a small group of voices, all above the same, strophic bass, before a concluding chorus. All but the last open and close with texts from the Latin Vulgate which allude

metaphorically to the devotional significance of the part of Christ’s dying body to be contemplated. The final cantata opens, like the others, with a biblical text but concludes the cycle as a whole with an Amen in a graceful five-part choral fugue.

Three of the cantatas will be performed this evening. The opening cantata, *Ad Pedes* (Upon the Feet) begins with a sonata for three violins and continuo, the central ascending motif of which is taken up by the chorus in the optimistic injunction *ecce super montes*. Soli and choral soprani and bass solo, each followed by an orchestral *ritornello*, then soberly evoke the fearful symbolism of sacrifice in the grievous wounds of Christ’s nailed feet, before the initial text is reprised in the closing chorus.

The sonata which opens the third cantata, *Ad Manus* (Upon the Hands) is orchestrated for the same instruments as the first and leads into a choral setting for five soloists of a rhetorical text from Zechariah 13:6: “What are these wounds on your hands?”, which is repeated at the close. Two soprano arias are followed by a trio of alto, tenor and bass, continuing the redemptive theme of the previous cantata with meditations on the sacred blood emanating from the nail wounds on Christ’s hands stretched out on the cross.

This is reinforced in the fourth cantata, *Ad Latus* (Upon the Side) after an opening sonata in a dance-like rhythm, with an anticipatory glimpse of redemption as the chorus sing verses from the Song of Solomon 2:13-14 with confident joy (“*Arise, my dear, beautiful friend, and come with me*”). Lively arias from both soprano soloists surround a chorus in saluting the saviour’s wounded side “in which lies hidden the honey of sweetness in which lies open the power of love, from which gushes the fount of blood, where foul hearts are washed”.

---

---

# MASS IN F MAJOR

## Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750): Mass in F major (1737) BWV 233

Bach composed four short masses – so called because they consisted only of the Kyrie and Gloria – for liturgical use during the 1730s, at the same time that he had begun the assembly and composition of his great Mass in B minor (BWV 232). Parts of these – the Kyrie in this work – were composed originally during Bach's employment as organist and chamber musician at the Weimar court of Duke Ernst August between 1708 and 1714 to be used in the new, distinctively Lutheran and hence vernacular liturgical order of divine service that had been introduced in 1707. Latin polyphony continued to be widely used for some time, however, and this is the earliest surviving work to show Bach's interest in it as a particular feature of *stile antico*. By the mid-1730's, however, Bach had begun to immerse himself in work on the mass of earlier composers and contemporaries. As well as adding cornettos, trombones and continuo to performances of Palestrina's six-voice *Missa sine nomine* and Lotti's *Missa sapientiae*, he had added a plainsong intonation of the Credo to a Mass by Bassani and a contrapuntal expansion of the *Suscepit Israel* to a setting of the Magnificat by Caldara. The results of these studies are reflected in the B Minor mass, and can be heard also in two other of his short masses of the period (in A and G). Bach followed the parodic conventions shared by most baroque composers and included in his later compositions much of what he might have considered the most satisfying of his own earlier work, as well as some of the best of his predecessors and contemporaries. He was by this time writing at the very peak of his powers, and was quite sure in his judgments on which works to adapt for, and include in, new compositions.

Thus the Kyrie of the F major mass is based on the cantus firmus "Christe, du Lamm Gottes" (BWV 233a) for 5 voices and continuo and carries from it an almost didactic quality, noticeably

different from the more ritual character often considered appropriate to settings of the opening movement of the ordinary mass. Bach effectively divides the movement into three sections. The opening statement of 'Kyrie eleison' comes from the tenors without any orchestral preamble, and is followed in a simple fugal sequence by the other parts. The altos end this and launch immediately into a more complex fugal exploration of 'Christe eleison' in which the female parts sustain variations, in consort with the upper strings, whilst tenors and basses interact with the deeper rhythms of their lower counterparts. The basses maintain this strong rhythmic presence throughout the restatement of the 'Kyrie' in the movement's final section, but the other three parts all sustain recurrent runs on 'eleison' in a more complex musical exploration which anticipates the structure of the Gloria to follow. This consists of five discrete movements: Gloria, Domine Deus, Qui tollis, Quoniam and Cum Sancto Spiritu.

Strings, horns and wind combine assertively to open the first in a cheerful, dancing theme with variations, which introduce the opening runs of 'Gloria' from basses and tenors, establishing thus the lively rhythms of the sustained choral fugue which follows throughout the movement. Bach achieves here a remarkable complementarity between verbal and musical texts, exploring in detail the developing and differentiated senses of praise and glorification as each passage of words is brought to its climax, before eliding into a clarifying statement of the succeeding section – for example, on 'excelsis Deo. Et in terra pax...' At times, the process is punctuated by a brief orchestral interval, the longest of which is between 'benedicimus te' and 'adoramus te', where the rhythm is stretched a little and which serves to reassert the ecstatic sense of joy which is clearly present for Bach in this part of the liturgy as it ascends towards its

conclusion from 'gloriam tuam' to 'gratias agimus tibi'.

The 'Domine Deus' is given to the bass soloist, with the strings providing a link to the liveliness of the opening Gloria, whilst underlining the calmer, more reflective text. This contrast in tone is taken still further by the soprano soloist in the 'Qui tollis', which is based on an aria from the cantata "Herr, deine Augen sehen nach dem Glauben". The expressive qualities of the aria are focussed in its opening cry of 'Weh' (Woe); here, though, they are simplified and sustained, to deeply moving effect, from the gentle instrumental introduction, refining the structure of the music in order to reinforce the liturgical text, as in the Gloria, but with utterly different rhythm and dynamics. The 'Quoniam', given to the alto soloist, is marked *vivace* in contrast to the *adagio* of the Qui tollis, and marks a return to the rhythms of the Domine Deus in the strong, continuo-linked dialogue between violin and vocal soloists, whilst retaining through this the deeply contemplative focus of the previous movement.

As if sobered by the three preceding solo movements, the chorus returns with a more considered sense of joy for the concluding 'Cum Sancto Spiritu'. After an introductory orchestral fanfare, tenors lead the chorus at a brisk, almost hearty *andante* to open the Gloria's final, joyous recognition of the glory of the Trinity, which immediately precedes the Credo in the full mass. Marked *presto* at the outset, the music gathers pace as it seems to bring the full resources of the chorus into supportive harmonies which culminate in a brief, muted reprise of the opening fanfare before the statement of wonder and mystery: 'cum sancto spiritu'. Again, Bach weds music to text to give an utterly clear sense to the liturgical phrase as it proceeds to the complex, closing exaltations of 'in Gloria Dei Patris, amen'.

---

---

# ORGAN CONCERTO IN F “The Cuckoo and the Nightingale”

## DIXIT DOMINUS

### Georg Friedrich Handel (1685-1759): Organ Concerto in F Major 2nd set No 1 “The Cuckoo and the Nightingale”

1 Larghetto • 2 Allegro • 3 Larghetto • 4 Allegro

Keyboard concertos were a relative novelty in Handel’s time, but his own reputation as an organ virtuoso meant that his three sets of concertos for the instrument, fourteen works in all, generated several imitations among his contemporaries. He composed the concertos for theatre performance, since they were an added attraction for the audiences of his oratorios, and the Concerto in F was completed on April 2, 1739 specifically to be played at the premiere of *Israel in Egypt* two days later, at the King’s Theatre in London. It is scored, for accompaniment by bassoon, two oboes, strings and continuo, in four movements. The first Larghetto and the closing Allegro are based on movements from his Trio Sonata (Op. 5, No. 6), composed in 1738, and the Larghetto which comprises the third movement is set in the siciliano rhythm so often favoured by Handel. But it is the second movement, also an Allegro, which gives the concerto its nickname, with its joyful birdsong motifs surrounding imitative echoes of the cuckoo’s insouciant call and the sweetness of the nightingale’s song.

### Georg Friedrich Handel (1685-1759): Dixit Dominus – Three Vesper Psalms, No 1

Handel spent the years 1706-10 in Italy, initially at the invitation of Prince Ferdinand de’ Medici, whom he had met during the latter’s visit to Hamburg in 1705. Despite his censures on Italian music during their conversations, Ferdinand was sufficiently impressed by Handel’s musicality to suggest he return with him to Florence. According to his first biographer, the Rev John Mainwaring, however, Handel “resolved to go to Italy on his own bottom, as soon as he could make a purse for that occasion”, duly arriving in Florence in the autumn of the following year, where he spent some time with the Medici family before travelling to Rome early in 1707. His first patron there was Cardinal Ottoboni, at whose Palazzo della Cancellaria Archangelo Corelli had been directing weekly concerts since 1690.

Handel’s time in Italy was decisive in the development of his career. It was the home of opera, oratorio, chamber cantata and the principal instrumental forms of concerto and sonata. Germany, by comparison, was relatively provincial and the experience of meeting and working with Italian composers and musicians enabled him to develop full command of all the range of musical genres in which he chose subsequently to compose. Corelli’s influence on

Handel was immediate, softening his vocal style and deepening the sonority of his writing for strings, and almost certainly led to Ottoboni commissioning the composition of the first of his Italian liturgical works, the dramatic setting of the 110th psalm “Dixit Dominus”, which was completed in April, 1707, possibly for a first performance at Easter Vespers. It shows clearly the extent to which he had already absorbed and begun to develop the expressionist church style of the dominant contemporary Italian composers, Carissimi and Stradella, as well as the music of both Scarlatti, Alessandro and Domenico.

The nine separate movements into which the work is organised vary widely in mood and texture, yet have in common an already confident sense of exploration of the potential of the forms and interrelations of orchestral and vocal composition newly encountered by Handel, and are held together by a strong, unifying structure. The opening and closing movements, together with the two at the centre, are given to the chorus; three are given to soloists and chorus, and two to soloists alone. From the outset, however, Handel writes for the voice almost as if it were an orchestral feature of the composition, pushing it for soloists and chorus alike to the limits,

and beyond, of existing conventions of performance. Whether or not this was part of his intention, one of the consequences was to extend the range and techniques of the singing voice in ways that would enable the innovations of Handel’s later operatic and choral work.

The first movement begins with a misleadingly steady, allegro orchestral introduction before the altos, followed by sopranos (*divisi* throughout the work), tenors and basses, vocalise the title phrase for ten bars until soprano and tenor soloists soar, one after another, into exuberant runs on ‘*sede a dextris meis*’. These are picked up by the chorus, phrased by the sopranos as other parts embroider the melody, until, after the briefest of orchestral interludes, a sequences of passages launch each part serially into a sombre plainsong melody of long notes for ‘*donec ponam, scabellum pedum tuorum*’, against which the other parts chant in fast, imitative counterpoint – a structure which recurs throughout the work, and anticipates that of the Hallelujah chorus in *Messiah*. The movement closes to the relative calm of a reprise of the orchestral introduction and is followed by calmer solo movements from alto (*Virgam virtutis*) and soprano (*Tecum principium*).

‘*Juravit Dominus*’, the fourth movement, opens with a disconcerting

---

chordal statement whose almost atonal gravity is countered by the lightly intervalled phrasing of 'et non poenitebit'. A second statement of the opening phrase heightens the initial suggestion of atonality with its strange, almost unnatural harmonic progression as it moves into a structure similar to that of the first movement, with long statements of the text punctuated by more rapid, semi-fugal iterations, before fading quietly to a conclusion in which voices fade into a light brush of pianissimo strings. Almost immediately, however, the basses' sonorous opening of the next movement, 'Tu es sacerdos', is countered by the rapid counterpoint, from other parts, of 'secundum ordinem Melchisidech', and the structure of fugal contrast between slower dominant and faster subordinate exchanges of dazzling runs is reasserted, without interruption, until it slows slightly to the precarious harmony of its conclusion. Handel's experimentation here is reworked much later, and again to considerable effect,

as the chorus: 'He led them through the deep' in the first part of Israel in Egypt.

The chorus is given some respite as the soloists open the sixth movement, 'Dominus a dextris tuis', displaying virtuosic, free-ranging explorations of the text, underwritten by continuo and lower strings, until second sopranos lead the chorus, at the same *allegro* pace, into their own energetic explorations. A concluding passage from the orchestra links to its fast, complex dialogue with the chorus in the next movement, 'Judicabit in nationibus'. The opening statement ends with a rapidly undulating declaration of intent from the strings, echoed by the chorus in a series of intervalled runs on 'implebit ruinas', before basses introduce the heavy, unpredictably punctuated rhythms of 'conquassabit' which gradually quicken to the concluding runs of 'capita in terra multorum'.

A complete change of both mood and pace occurs as the *adagio* cello introduces the glorious solo soprano opening of 'De torrente in via bibet',

quietly underlined by tenors and basses (falsetto!) on 'Propterea exaltabit caput'. For all its brevity and quiet restfulness, requiring both soloists to embody angelic calm, this movement requires soloists and choral basses to move with agility around the tops of their ranges – in anticipation, perhaps, of the robust choral energy of the concluding 'Gloria Patri'. A deceptively gentle introductory rhythm, which will provide the melody for the subordinate phrase 'et Spiritui Sancto', precedes the first sopranos' run on the movement's title. This sets the time and dynamic for what will follow: there are brief passages, on 'sicut erat in principio' and 'Et in saecula saeculorum', where the time slows sufficiently for the choir to gather before the onslaught of the next section, but even in these, all parts are required to move up and down scales and across octaves in successive runs, at speeds which require taking breath variously where possible until the *rallentando* of the final sequence of 'Amen'.

---