

# MISSA BREVIS

**Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) Missa Brevis (1944)**

Kodály believed the human voice to be the noblest instrument and his setting of the short form of the Mass was his personal response to the devastation of World War II, composed as he was sheltering in the basement of the Budapest Opera House. The city was under German occupation and besieged by advancing Russian troops. Under these dreadful conditions, Kodály's achievement in accomplishing this joyous, melodic composition is quite extraordinary and a testament to the strength both of his faith and his fortitude as a musician. Its transcendent ecstasy, most evident in the concluding *dona nobis pacem* (grant us peace), can be understood as an attempt to overcome the awful constraints and suffering of his fellow citizens at the time.

In the autumn of 1944 Hungary was under German occupation and Budapest was in a state of devastation, surrounded by the advancing Russian army. In these intensely difficult conditions, Kodály was working on his *Missa Brevis*, which he subtitled '*In tempore belli*' (perhaps following the example of his compatriot Haydn who had written his *Paukenmesse* in somewhat comparable circumstances a century and a half earlier, as Napoleon's army approached Vienna). The city's collaborationist government had recently refused a Russian invitation to surrender and a siege of several weeks had ensued. Under constant artillery bombardment and frequent air raids, the remaining population, approaching starvation, was driven to live almost permanently underground as the bitter cold of winter set in. Kodály had been forced from his suburban home, first to the air-raid shelter of a nearby convent, then to the basement of the Opera House. It was here that he completed his setting of the mass, and where it was first performed, early in 1945, in a cloakroom converted for the occasion into an impromptu concert hall. The all-embracing quality of the words of the mass always held particular poetic significance for Kodály. That he chose to focus his creative energies on composing a score for them under conditions of such extreme duress certainly reinforces this view, as well as testifying to the power of his continuing religious faith to sustain him through this terrible period. The universalist character of the Mass



makes this the least nationalist of his choral works, and its brevity follows his penchant for short works, born, as he once responded to a German critic's reproach, out of "pure loyalty to the listeners instead of boring them for hours"! Its length, however, serves to reinforce the depth of conviction that seems to pervade the music, which moves between solemnity and joy but without deviating from a religious certainty which suggests both a sensual engagement with the act of belief and an awareness of its transcendent purpose.

Kodály had composed a work for organ, inspired by the Mass, in 1942, adding extracts from the liturgical text to his score in the following years. He completed the transformation of this in 1944, when it became the choral *Missa Brevis* for organ or orchestral accompaniment, dedicated to his wife, Emma: "*Coniugi et consorti carissimae in anniversario XXXV*". Its origins in the 'Organ Mass' remain evident in the solo organ *Introitus* and the original organ version of the Postlude, *Ite missa est*, which will be performed this evening, rather than the later, choral version. The *Ite...* was a characteristic feature of the 14th century Mass, but has rarely been included in settings since then. Kodály added a choral version for no other reason than to fulfil the conventions of concert performance. A fully orchestrated version was finally completed in 1948, for performance at the Worcester Three Choirs Festival. The *Introit* opens majestically and proceeds to introduce

the theme of the *Kyrie*, which begins its development as the recurrent theme of the entire Mass, moving towards the beginning of the movement itself with the entry of altos, followed by basses. Their deep chordal repetitions evoke complementarily higher responses from the sopranos on ‘Christe eleison’ as the lower voices pick up the full phrase through initial repetitions of ‘eleison’, concluding on a statement of the full phrase in three-part form. The *Gloria* commences with the tenor soloist’s incantation of the opening phrase in a Gregorian melody, followed first by tenors, then basses and altos, succeeded by sopranos. Each voice picks up further parts of the following text in a considered, consolidating rhythm which builds to a bright, almost urgent statement of the remaining sequence, following ‘Glorificamus te...’. The soloists change this mood for the middle section in a quiet, slow statement of the ‘Qui tollis...’, until the chorus re-evokes the exultant quality of the first section with the ‘Quoniam...’ concluding with two ‘Amen’s the first in an elaborated descent by all parts, the second a sustained declaration. The Gregorian character of the *Credo* is set initially by the solo chant of the opening statement. This is the central movement of the work and the music follows the text carefully from the entry of altos and basses, *allegro moderato*, on ‘Patrem omnipotentem...’, building intermittently through soaring plainsong elaborations on key words – notably basses on ‘Jesu’, tenors on ‘saecula’, the unison of all parts on ‘consubstantialem’ and the knowingly descending melodic line of ‘descendit de coelis’. The ‘incarnatus...’ is invoked, *adagio*, with a quiet solemnity, towards an inventive harmonic tension on ‘Crucifixus..’ in which the act of crucifixion is metaphorised strongly by the altos’ separated lines, each of which transposes with the other as they move through ‘Crucifixus etiam...’, thus requiring the two voices, quite literally, to cross, before all parts move to a deep, sure-sounding solemnity to end this

#### **Introitus** (Organ solo)

#### **Kyrie**

Kyrie eleison  
Christe eleison  
Kyrie eleison

#### **Gloria**

Gloria in excelsis Deo; et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.  
Laudamus te; benedicimus te; adoramus te; glorificamus te. Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam. Domine Deus, Rex caelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens. Domine Fili unigenite Jesu Christe; Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.  
Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.  
Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram.  
Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis.  
Quoniam tu solus sanctus: tu solus Dominus: tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe, cum Sancto Spiritu, in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

passage. Sopranos and tenors begin the final section, *allegro mosso* with awed announcement of the resurrection, quickly soaring to joy on ‘Et iterum venturus...’ and followed by confident elaborations on ‘simula adoratur et conglorificatur’ towards its conclusion in an exultant, thunderous ‘Amen’.

The *Sanctus* is closely textured musically, echoing later renaissance polyphony, possibly drawing on and certainly suggestive of Palestrina’s settings. It opens with a quiet, devotional succession of voices, beginning with altos, then sopranos. The tenors join for the invocation of ‘Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth’, with basses finally anchoring the phrase through an extensive, descending repetition of ‘Sanctus’. It moves delicately through careful polyphonic explorations of ‘Pleni sunt coeli...’ to conclude in ascending elaborations of ‘Hosanna in excelsis’, and these are repeated at the close of the tranquil polyphony of the *Benedictus* which follows. Here, though, they move finally, *diminuendo*, to a distant ethereality, suggesting an appropriate transformation through benediction. The *Agnus Dei* begins with a deep, almost subterranean bass line, over which the tenor soloist sings ‘qui tollis...’ to a reintroduction of the melody of the *Gloria*, as the movement builds to the sopranos’ soaring introduction of the full chorus, sustaining the ethereality of the previous section, but bringing to it a warmer, closer sound. The ‘dona nobis...’ provides an extended conclusion to the final choral movement, and is sung entirely to a varied, but clearly recognisable form of the music of the *Kyrie*. The musical cohesion that Kodály thus gives the Mass reinforces its relevance to the context in which it was written, as the closing plea for peace echoes musically the one for mercy with which the text begins. The assertive strength of the concluding solo organ movement, the *Ite*, suggests Kodály’s conviction that both will be granted.

Notes by Paul Filmer

Lord, have mercy  
Christ, have mercy  
Lord, have mercy

Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men.  
We praise thee, we bless thee, we worship thee, we glorify thee, we give thanks to thee for thy great glory.  
O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty.  
O Lord, the only begotten son Jesus Christ; O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father.  
That takest away the sins of the world have mercy upon us.  
Thou that takest away the sins of the world, receive our prayer.  
Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the Father, receive our prayer.  
For thou only art holy: thou only art the Lord; thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

**Credo (The Nicene Creed)**

Credo in unum Deum, Patrem Omnipotentem, factorem caeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium.  
 Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum, et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula.  
 Deum de Deo; Lumen de Lumine; Deum verum de Deo vero.  
 Genitum non factum; Consustantiam Patri: Per quem omnia facta sunt.  
 Qui propter nos homines, et propter nostram salutem, descendit de caelis.  
 Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto, ex Maria Virgine: et homo factus est.  
 Crucifixus etiam pro nobis: sub Pontio Pilato passus et sepultus est.

Et resurrexit tertia die secundum Scripturas; et ascendit in caelum, Sedet ad dexteram Patris.  
 Et iterum venturus est cum gloria judicare vivos et mortuos: cuius regni non erit finis.  
 Et in Spiritum Sanctum Dominum et vivificantem, qui ex Patre Filioque procedit.  
 Qui cum Patre et Filio simul adoratur et conglorificatur; qui locutus est per Prophetas.  
 Et in unam sanctam Catholicam et Apostolicam Ecclesiam. Confiteor unum baptismum in remissionem peccatorum.  
 Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum; et vitam venturi saeculi. Amen.

**Sanctus**

Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth.  
 Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua. Hosanna in excelsis.

**Benedictus**

Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini. Hosanna in excelsis.

**Agnus Dei**

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.  
 Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.  
 Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.  
 Amen.

**Ite, missa est** (Organ Solo)

## NEXT CONCERT

### Britten War Requiem

NLC is delighted to be performing this epic work once again, this time in collaboration with the Bury Bach Choir, the St Edmundsbury Cathedral Boys Choir, the Prometheus Orchestra and the London Graduate Orchestra as part of the 2015 Bury St Edmunds Festival.

Janis Kelly - soprano, Nicky Spence - tenor, Marcus Farnsworth - baritone.

Philip Reed, Murray Hipkin & James Thomas – conductors.

NLC have an allocation of tickets to sell so we would encourage you to buy them through us (at a £2 discount per ticket) rather than through the festival box office (at full price). Please speak to a choir member or email us at [tickets@northlondonchorus.org](mailto:tickets@northlondonchorus.org).

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.  
 And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of His Father before all worlds.  
 God of God; Light of Light; Very God of Very God.  
 Begotten not made; Being of one substance with the Father, by Whom all things were made:  
 Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven,  
 and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost, of the Virgin Mary,  
 and was made man,  
 and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried.

And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father.  
 And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: Whose kingdom shall have no end.  
 And I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord and giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son.  
 Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified: Who spake by the Prophets.  
 And I believe in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.  
 I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And I look for the Resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth.  
 Heaven and earth are full of thy glory. Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.  
 Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.  
 Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, grant us thy peace. Amen.

**Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2015 7:30pm**  
**St Edmundsbury Cathedral, Bury St Edmunds**