# Transgression, Transcendence and Metaphor – the 'Other Meanings' of the B-Minor Mass

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## Introduction

Music, unlike ordinary language, can 'make sense' or have 'meaning' even when it does not refer to anything in particular (other than music). Although we often think of music as a kind of language, on the whole we do not regard it as a 'translatable' language, the inherent meaning of which could be sufficiently expressed in a different form. If you strip away the ornaments and metaphors of a poetic text, to discover the straight message ('degree zero' language), nothing may remain. Music, too, usually 'refers only to itself'; it has no ordinary referents other than musical ones. If it could be compared to anything at all, it would be to abstract painting or to a verbal text that is poetic, metaphoric, rhetorical. It has meaning, possibly even a clear meaning, through its artistic configuration.

Meaning and reference are complementary functions of language: meaning is what we understand, reference is what makes us aware of something (i.e. of a 'referent'). Paul Ricoeur, in his book *La métaphore vive* (1975), has developed a theory of reference in poetry which might illuminate the status of references and meanings in music.[1] On ground prepared by Jakobson, Frye and Goodman, Ricoeur integrates the concept of poetic metaphor with referentiality. One condition of his 'generalised theory of denotation' is that poetic language operates with 'split references' – its references are not straightforward, like those of ordinary language, but ambiguous. This condition may seem to allow music, which is similarly devoid of unambiguous referents, to participate in a generalised ambiguous type of referentiality, similar to that of poetry.

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[1] Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive* (1975), trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello as *The Rule of Metaphor: the Creation of Meaning in Language* (SJ, London and New York: Routledge, 1978), see esp. pp. 161-68 ('Deviation and Rhetoric Degree Zero'), and pp. 255-302 ('Metaphor and Reference').

Ricoeur's second condition is that the relationship of poetry with the world and with truth is metaphorical; but this 'metaphorised reference' operates not on the level of the word nor even the sentence, but on the level of the *work as a whole*.[2] This narrows the scope of poetic referentiality to a work-like constitution of discourse:

> Here the question of reference is located not at the level of each sentence, but at the level of the 'poem' considered on the lines of the three criteria of the work: 'arrangement', subordination to a 'genre', and production of a 'singular' entity.[3]

It is striking how easily musical works in the western tradition fulfil this condition. The 'meanings' of a composition such as Bach's B-Minor Mass (BWV 232), reconstructed by scholarship, are in fact concerned with the criteria of 'arrangement', subordination to a 'genre', and the production of a 'singular' entity (which implies both 'unity' and 'uniqueness').[4] Their application to Bach's composition is obviously not without ambiguities; for example, we must question the 'singularity' of much of the music within the B-Minor Mass, the unity of its arrangement and its subordination to 'a' genre. The notion of 'arrangement' has occupied most analytical minds concerned with Bach's music, not least when its very physical stretches are read as metaphoric outreaches (symmetry, circularity of form, proportion, number symbolism and so forth).[5] 'Subordination to a genre' is a question at the very heart of the interpretations, for example with regard to the work's apparent drifting between confessional and ritual destinations, or to the importation of extraneous genre intuitions through parody and borrowing.

Ricoeur's two-layered scheme – 'split references' on the basic level, 'metaphorised references' on the level of the work – has much to offer for a theory of meaning in music.[6] It considers the ambiguous referentiality of poetic language – a particularly tempting analogy with music – and emphasises the subordination of single expressions to the poetic structure as a whole, which seems an apt description of a musical composition. It describes metaphor as a kind of *farther-reaching language that constitutes meaning through interaction*. While

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[2]  *ibid.* p. 273.

[3]  *ibid.* p. 262.

[4]  Research on BWV 232 is summarised in John Butt, *Bach: Mass in B Minor* (Cambridge Music Handbooks, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. chs. 2, 3, 4 and 6, and George B. Stauffer, *The Mass in B Minor: The Great Catholic Mass* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2003). See also Robin A. Leaver, 'The Mature Vocal Works and their Theological and Liturgical Context', in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, John Butt (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 86-122; Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach – the Learned Musician* (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 437-42; Martin Geck, *Bach. Leben und Werk* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2000), pp. 477-92.

[5]  See Ruth Tatlow, *Bach and the Riddle of the Number Alphabet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[6]  I use the terms 'meaning' and 'understanding' here in the traditional sense of functions of language and communication in general. Ricoeur, *The Rule Of Metaphor*, p. 57, accepts 'meaning' and 'signification' as main functions ascribed to language, although he then integrates them with his new definition of referentiality.

these insights, however, seem potentially relevant to musical meaning, their specific conditions as set by Ricoeur appear too narrow for this purpose.

Although music behaves like poetry even on the level of its most 'ordinary discourse' (which is what we might call its use of cadences, keys, melodies, rhythms, instruments, and so forth, using them 'ambiguously'), it is not exactly the same as poetry, where a poet can use and twist metaphors. 'Split references' in poetry can also refer to the ordinary referents of the words in common language, whereas in music, such ordinary referents may not exist. Thus when a poem speaks of 'the stars', a play can be made between the primary referent and the metaphorical use of the word, whereas a composer cannot do the same with keys because there is no primary referent; at best, there is an ambiguous, metaphorical tradition established by other musicians who have used these keys.

The second condition set by Ricoeur, a work-like constitution of discourse, is also problematic when it comes to music. Not only do we understand metaphors in music that is not constituted as a work (for example in film music); the relationship of musical works with the outside world seems altogether different from that of poetry and the other arts. Meanings that arise from internal references within a work seem criss-crossed by meanings coming from the outside, whether an extra-musical or a metaphysical outside, or simply from other musical works.

The way in which musical meaning is conventionally constructed in scholarship and criticism does involve potential relationships with the outside. To start with, it involves listeners and not just composers. It may imply, especially in self-contained musical works, that the listener can understand stylistic and linguistic decisions. It may presuppose a particular flow of thought, the applicability of rhetoric and genre, the presence of unity and balanced arrangement and the existence of a developed discourse of authorial intention, or at least of a musical performing style with known types of structures. The meanings of a composition may arise from the composer's proximate as well as ultimate goals, or from a work's particular relationship to the outside world, for example its philosophical, political, social, theological, aesthetic messages. If a verbal text is set, musical meaning is usually co-determined by it. Scholars and critics will construct meanings – whether metaphorical, allegorical or analogical – when they establish the historical intention, function, belonging (e.g. genre classification) and effect of a composition.

Are there any 'other meanings'? Alternative interpretations are sometimes proposed which claim to be going *beyond a consensus*, or transgressing the set of criteria upon which all other interpretations, despite their internal differences, seem to have agreed. The intellectual stance of arguing from beyond a platform is sometimes already applied to the genesis and purpose of the work itself. For example, there may be a meaning which the author did *not* intend, a metaphorical relationship which the work entered into 'unwittingly', by force of nature or culture. Or the music may form symbolic and metaphoric relationships with otherness and absence. Or there may be collective or discursive meanings shared with other music: meanings that arise from the interrelationships between

different pieces of music. One of the last-named meanings could be, for example, the role that a piece of music has come to occupy in a canon or musical tradition.

In this essay, I examine two proposals of alternative meanings in art and music, made (by Edward W. Said and Karsten Harries, respectively) under the respective keywords of 'transgression', which emphasises the meaning of a musical work arising from its 'extra-musical' relationships, and 'transcendence', which posits a metaphysical environment to the work of art. Said's and Harries' actual interpretations are not at stake so much as their respective claims that they yield 'other' meanings. Both of these proposals are related to the example of the B-Minor Mass, although only the first explicitly refers to it. I then turn to the relationship of the work with other works – this relationship is also a 'transgression' or 'transcendence' which may constitute an extra meaning – and survey some of the musical 'outreaches' of Bach's composition and its metaphoric relationship with other music. The essential question is how all these different layers of meaning can best be structured.

## Socio-political allegory and transgression

In a 1989 article entitled 'On the Transgressive Elements in Music', the Palestinian/American critic and political columnist Edward W. Said considers the B-Minor Mass along with much other western music.[7] He emphasises how music is not in itself denotative and thus seemingly aloof from social or intellectual developments; how western musical practice of the last three centuries has focused on an 'insiderish' perfection, denying itself to purposes such as politics or ideologies. And yet music is often ready to transgress the aesthetic autonomy which we are used to ascribing to it. When this happens, a strange transformation or conversion takes place: not the encroachment of political or other external purposes on to the musical art but rather the reverse, a transgression of music into realms we do not expect it to enter. Said describes the case of Bach's work as follows:

> The ceremonies of power and reverence enabling Bach's choral works, for instance, are entirely provided beforehand; his music was to fill in, to contribute to, the enhancements of adulation due to princes and bishops, who were easily seen not only as worldly patrons but as earthly representatives of the divine. A work like the B-Minor Mass is an astonishing demonstration of piety and invention, but for all the intensity and skill of its various parts – unprecedented before 1733, the year of its performance – it must also be read as an extended act of homage to the Elector of Saxony, to whom Bach addressed the most fawning letters imaginable. Thus the unclassical length of the piece derives not just from Bach's genuinely extraordinary authorial productivity, which has been too easily reified and romanticised by generations of humanists and musicologists, but from the ambition to

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7   Edward W. Said, *Musical Elaborations* (London: Vintage, 1992).

win a place of noticeable importance in the entourage of a prince. Music therefore quite literally fills a social space, and it does so by elaborating the ideas of authority and social hierarchy directly connected to a dominant establishment imagined as culturally presiding over the work. The awe we feel in the Credo, for example, reinforces the separation between ruler and ruled, and this in turn is made to feel 'right' in great outbursts of joy ('et resurrexit' – and 'hosanna'). Not enough of this has been studied as giving a particular social presence to Bach's music, since what is generally current in writing about music today is tied to (when it is not actually constituted by) the idea that music has an apolitical and asocial autonomy.[8]

Said's methodology of constructing analogies or allegories linking art and society goes back to Theodor W. Adorno. In addition, Said advocates 'transgression' as part of a critical agenda, a going beyond traditional interpretations which perpetuate the view of artistic autonomy. At the same time, however, he maintains the Adornian impetus by ascribing a transgressive act to the work and author themselves: it is a transgressive quality of the B-Minor Mass itself that it is different from what we usually think it to be.[9]

As regards the transgressivity of his own interpretation, it is a little surprising that Said proposes an alternative reading of the music ('it must also be read as...') that would arise from considering exactly those socio-political and biographical factors which Bach scholarship has traditionally investigated. As a matter of fact, the inclination to discern in Bach's works reflections of the social and political practices of their time is much more traditional than Said suggests.[10] His acknowledgement of the composer's social ambitions is shared by most biographers today. Bach scholars have recovered the social and political ingredients (or perhaps 'transgredients') of the composer's professional agenda in later life – ambitions to increase his social status at Dresden, the constraints of Leipzig's hierarchy and conventions, conflicts between civic and courtly patronage, and so forth.[11] They have described the oscillating nature of the Mass as a work in progress (with a composition history spanning almost twenty-five

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[8]  *ibid*. pp. 64-65.

[9]  This betrays a romantic identification with the work as a quasi-human agent, but also as *différence*. In his 'Introduction' to *Musical Elaborations*, xv-xvi, Said admits to a 'romantic view' in attributing to music a 'separate status and place... that is occasionally revealed but more often withheld'.

[10] In Susan McClary, 'The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During Bach Year', in Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (eds.) *Music and Society: the Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 13-62, the question is narrowed down to general political allegories as applied to individual works or musical techniques; an approach ostensibly based on Theodor W. Adorno but conflicting with his theory of the increasing historical differentiation of circulation spheres, according to which artistic practice as a whole, not the individual artwork, would have been capable of reflecting society. A similar caution applies to the better researched study of Michael Marissen, *The Social and Religious Designs of J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos* (Princeton University Press, 1995).

[11] A focused study of Bach's personal relationship with regional politics is Ulrich Siegele, 'Bach and the Domestic Politics of Electoral Saxony', in Butt (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, pp. 17-34.

years), and a ritual drifting between different confessional traditions. Moreover, scholars have recovered the 'parodies', the ingredients borrowed from other musical works, the songs in other tongues that may have broadened the horizon of the work's meanings right from its inception.[12] This process of recovery has probably transformed the reception of the B-Minor Mass today: the progress of its creation – newly understood as ambiguous – seems to have foreshadowed the variety of meanings now available to performer and listener alike.

The claim that traditional scholarship has ignored the work's 'social presence' can perhaps be upheld to the extent that critics have tended to look only for a conventional, individualised meaning, a meaning within the author's imagination, and within the orbit of its scholarly reconstruction. Said attempts to transgress this orbit. He outlines, for example, secular alternatives to hearing the awesomeness of the Credo as transcendental, to understanding the work's devotional gestures as religious. Given the assumption that Bach only intended the music as a religious statement, the secular perception of it may count as an alternative hearing. Moreover, the critic sets up a new ambiguity or ambivalence of meaning: the work's 'social presence' somehow connects with its 'unclassical length', with the composer's 'genuinely extraordinary authorial productivity', and with his 'intensity and skill' that were 'unprecedented before 1733' – characterisations which recall conventional readings of the work as autonomous art. Precisely by being extraordinary and autonomous, however, the work fills a social space. It is intended to fulfil social expectations and comply with decorum; but it does its social job (of pleasing the Elector and providing its composer with a court *predicate*) so successfully that it transgresses it at the same time.

Which direction, however, does transgression take – from the socially constrained to the extraordinary and unprecedented, or from the authorial to the political? Since the metaphor of 'social space' is used by Said in such a way as to suggest Bach did *not* transgress it (he 'literally filled' it), the reader is tempted to conclude that by 'transgression' Said really means the ability of music to conquer autonomous space outside the socio-political world, rather than the opposite. Is this what Said intends to say? Elsewhere, he again explains his concept of transgression as music's ability 'to travel, cross over, drift from place to place in a society, even though many institutions and orthodoxies have sought to confine it'.[13] The meaning or intention from which departures could then be made and perceived as transgressions, remains in any case the meaning ascribed to the work by traditional, orthodox interpretations, whatever they may be. An alternative meaning would be captured in acknowledging ambiguity, the drift between intention and interpretation.

## Metaphor and transcendence

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[12]  For examples, see Butt, *Bach: Mass in B Minor*, esp. ch. 4.

[13]  *ibid.* 'Introduction', xv.

The second proposal comes from a very different writer, the American philosophy professor Karsten Harries. He has not written on music (to my knowledge), but on literature and art, for example on the Bavarian rococo churches of Bach's time.[14] These rather wonderful artistic creations provide pertinent parallels to the musical, ceremonial work under discussion here. Harries, like Said, attempts to place the work in a contemporary context, although not so much in a context of social practice as of aesthetic mentality. He describes how the exuberant artistry of these churches increased from one building project to the next, subverting more and more the religious messages for which, according to him, the churches were intended. Accepting an anchorage of meaning in religion, the author sees a process of de-semanticisation ('the death of ornament'), at the end of which mere aesthetic formulas survived. This judgement is theoretically underpinned in Harries' essay on poetry, entitled 'Metaphor and transcendence'.[15] It is argued here that aesthetic unity and self-referentiality of the literary work, as heralded in 1735 by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Reflections on Poetry*, find their conflicting limitations in metaphor and transcending meanings. Baumgarten, a founder of the concept of philosophical aesthetics, first conceived the idea that the work of art should be a world in itself, not an imitation of another world; accordingly, modern critics such as Susan Sontag or Michael Fried speak of the ideals of transparence or 'presentness' of art. The maxim 'A poem should not mean, but be' typifies the aesthetic approach of modern times, which hopes to purge all art from meaning and metaphor. Harries, however, opens up a whole range of conflicts between mimesis and ornament on the one hand, and self-referentiality on the other, to demonstrate the unfulfilled 'transcendence' of art. According to him, 'metaphors speak of what remains absent'.[16] Without metaphors (or ornament), despite all efforts to the contrary, poetry cannot live. It is impure by destiny.

How this may be related to Bach can easily be seen. Harries could come to the support of Said by demonstrating the indispensability of references to other worlds in music – metaphoric references, necessarily. The alternative meanings of the B-Minor Mass are comparable to ornaments, which in Harries' view prevent mere self-referentiality by pointing to the thing that is ornamented as the major purpose of the work. Conversely, the work's transgressions into political and social spheres, asserted by Said, could be as constitutive to its character as art as the religious awesomeness of the Credo. In either view, the *Symbolum Nicenum* would 'speak of something that remains absent'.

The alternative meanings proposed by Harries and Said are not stable definitions but arguments for change. The argument that art cannot live without transcendence or transgression is like a Derridean *contretemps*. Its value is what *we* will gain if we can make up our minds to think of the other meaning. The B-

[14]  Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church: between Faith and Aestheticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

[15]  Karsten Harries, 'Metaphor and Transcendence', in Sheldon Stacks (ed.), *On Metaphor* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 71-88.

[16]  *ibid*. p. 82.

Minor Mass should function for us as a catalyst, a transmitter of alternative messages.  To quote the concluding words of Harries' essay:

> A conception of poetry emerges that takes leave from aestheticism and its ideal of self-sufficiency and completeness, a conception that seeks to recover the traditional view of genuine discourse as a more or less inadequate and fragmentary repetition of that speech in which nature, or perhaps God, addresses us.[17]

To be sure, whereas Harries deplores the aestheticism of modern times because it strives to eliminate given, traditional meanings offered by faith and nature, Said locates this same aestheticism in the idealist past from which he longs to escape.  Both agree that we should look beyond the conventional meaning of art as an autonomous masterwork; but for Harries, the work is alive through its metaphoric gestures towards something that is absent, and its meaning is there, in that absence.  The referent is not actually reached; it may even be metaphysical, 'transcendent'.  Said's anti-idealist critique, on the other hand, seems to imply that meaning is not given a priori, but is only acquired through transgression into and between social contexts.  This transgression actually reaches its referents, which are located in the material world, outside the work or outside music.  There seems to be a shared hypothesis, nevertheless, that the meanings of the work are partly based on its metaphoric relationship with the world, whether mundane or transcendent.  What are the chances of applying such a hypothesis to music?

If Harries were writing about music, its non-referentiality would probably not worry him, because in his view the meaning of all art makes incomplete references towards an absence: the musical medium within itself may have meaning as a metaphor.  (The aestheticism which he criticises denies this metaphoric character of art.)  For Said, the composer's notes acquire their meaning by interaction with the world outside – 'by elaborating the ideas of authority and social hierarchy', for example.  (The idealism which he criticises denies the meaningfulness of that 'outside world' for music.)  In other respects, the two approaches are more similar.  Both critics, for example, would derive serious arguments from the words set, from the biographical circumstances, from the composition process and the evidence of borrowed musical material in the score.  A critic following in their footsteps might use the 'transcendent' definition of art to interpret musical parody as a variant of *literary metaphor*, while someone adopting the 'transgressive' interpretation could look for alternative meanings imported by the vehicle of 'other' music.  In either case, other meanings would be sought in something that is outside the 'work itself'.  Quite often, such other meanings would be found along the path of the work's reception in different situations.

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[17]  *ibid*. p. 88.

## Meanings of some other music in the B-Minor Mass

The pragmatic relationship between the B-Minor Mass (BWV 232) and other music is threefold: the work uses other music by the composer himself, it uses music or musical ideas found in particular works by other composers, and it uses general musical ideas embedded in the tradition of craftsmanship.  The first type is usually referred to as 'parody', the second as 'borrowing' or perhaps 'influence'.  The third type, which overlaps with the other two, may have to do with subconscious influence, conscious modelling, routine, stylistic preferences, and so forth.  These types do not have fixed meanings as such.  It adds to the difficulty that parodies and borrowings may be made both *from* a work and *into* a work.  There is one work which Bach derived *from* the *Missa*, the Latin cantata 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' (BWV 191).[18]  Does its creation in any way affect the meaning of the parent composition, or even add new meaning to it?  Music borrowed from other composers, or *by* other composers, often served as a mere vehicle of general craftsmanship; conversely, melodic-rhythmic stereotypes (*moduli*) sometimes become newly meaningful in their adaptations.  Parody is sometimes despised as it seems to limit originality; but can it occasionally suggest metaphorical depth, or produce new meaning?  The parody procedure in Bach's vocal works is usually considered as a limitation, either of their religious meanings, or of Bach's 'creative genius'.[19]  Where the composer's immediate intentions and audiences are paramount, parody has to be 'overcome' by interpretation.  We have developed a habit of crediting the composer with great skills of integration, individualisation, new semanticisation and accumulation of meanings.  To the modern critical mind, Bach's music is predicated upon the idea of fusion and of the *summa*; it is a point of no return; it creates meaning while submerging reference.[20]

Dialogues with non-Bachian music and collective musical traditions, on the other hand, are more likely to yield alternative meanings that can be understood by more remote audiences and readers.  The question of an artistic dialogue, whether between different pieces by the same author or between authors or texts (the so-called 'intertextuality'), the question of what the listeners know or remember, or how different people may diverge in their recognitions: these questions are more usually investigated with other composers and styles.

Let us probe into an example of a parody.  What does the music of the 'Gratias agimus tibi' and the 'Dona nobis pacem' in the Mass really owe to the cantata

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[18]  For Christmas Day, 1745, according to Gregory Butler: see Butt, *Bach: Mass in B Minor*, pp. 12-14.  That the 'Gloria' verse is followed by a Doxology may seem strange: the 'Gloria' in this case is the Benedictus-antiphon for Lauds on Christmas Day in the Roman Rite.

[19]  Both questions are raised by Leaver, 'The Mature Vocal Works', pp. 90-91 ('Parodied creativity or creative parody?'), but only the question relating to religion is followed up.  For an influential study of parody, see Ludwig Finscher, 'Zum Parodieproblem bei Bach' in Martin eck (ed.), *Bach-Interpretationen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), pp. 94-105.
The seemingly opposed procedure of decoding Bach's music for hidden 'references', whether they carry metaphysical messages or trivial ones, may be part of the same tendency, particularly when it is claimed that to uncover these extra references is a precondition for understanding the work.

chorus 'Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir' from which it is derived?[21] Perhaps much, if it addresses listeners who already know the cantata chorus (performed in Leipzig for the council change in 1731, and perhaps earlier), and who might admire the appropriateness of this particular setting for the two new but similar texts, recalling the original chorus as a *tertium comparationis*. It should be mentioned in passing that such listeners do exist today. Listeners unaware of the cantata chorus will probably judge the two Mass sections on their own merits, acknowledging their solemnity and the vast, expansive motion of the music as a metaphor of devotion and heavenly peace. Two different contemporary listeners of the Mass, if there were such listeners, could have constructed two opposing meanings: one would have concluded that, 'whatever this music refers to, it persuasively expresses the ideas of gratitude and magnificence, and it is a good final *peroratio*', the other, 'whatever this music expresses, it was last heard at the Leipzig council change'. Bach himself might have accepted this ambiguity between literal reference (to the Leipzig chorus) and metaphoric reference (to thanksgiving and peace). The result is quite comparable to the situation in poetry, where it is often unknown whether the literal or metaphoric meaning of a word is relevant to understanding, or whether both are. In the present musical case, however, the ambiguity is enhanced by the fact that the literal reference of the chorus points to another *particular* work and performance, not just an element of common language. Such a particular reference, which usually arises from parody procedures, seems more worrying than assuring. Can we really speak uninhibitedly of the music for the 'Gratias agimus' and 'Dona nobis' as an expression of the words? The potential reference to earlier civic cantatas of Leipzig 'should' have been submerged. It connects with something that is not part of the creative process, it imports extraneous meaning. There is a transgression, perhaps towards the political sphere (the peace requested by 'Dona nobis pacem' appears as secular, civic peace), and there may be otherness (secular enemies?). For contemporary listeners who, not unlike Bach himself, may have been wishing to forget the Leipzig chores, the genesis of the chorus will not go away, it will remain an absent presence. For the modern interpreter to recognise the relevance of models, derivations, parodies and parerga in Bach's music will be to confirm the absent presence of possible other meanings.[22]

The fact that the parody models of the B-Minor Mass must be sought in precise artistic circumstances, where they are already endowed with their own metaphoric meaning (as well as social function), can lead to confusion. Kyrie I, for example, is a parody movement according to Joshua Rifkin.[23] The model, which would pre-date 1733, was an extreme piece of musical rhetoric, a bold semanticisation of standard emblems, an ambiguous metaphor of grandiloquent

21  Extant in BWV 29: see Butt, *Bach: Mass in B Minor*, pp. 47-48. To make matters more complex, the 'Gratias agimus' was known (in Dresden) already in 1733, the 'Dona nobis' probably not before 1748.
22  By 'absent presence' I understand something that is felt to be present although it is not materially there. Conversely, a 'present absence' would be an absence that is felt although nothing seems to be materially missing.
23  See Butt, *Bach: Mass in B Minor*, pp. 44-45.

humility.  It was perhaps influenced by Masses of Zelenka; its contrapuntal and
harmonic complexity was counterbalanced by a clear ritornello layout.[24]  It also
contained intuitions of a 'galant' idiom, for example the inherent syncopation of
the main theme.  Its melodic contour was decorated with sighing appoggiaturas
on the second and sixth quaver of the bar, but if these upper-semitone
appoggiaturas were equated with the main note, forming a crotchet with it, a
fairly popular syncopated rhythm would result (Example 1).



Example 1: J. S. Bach, *Missa* (BWV 232) , Kyrie, b. 5-7[25]

Thus the music was not so distant in attitude from the openly 'galant' traits of the
soloistic sections 'Laudamus te' and 'Domine Deus'.  It also featured a
mysterious, somehow nostalgic pedal point, a superfluous bar of music which
always precedes and delays the main cadence (b. 13-14, 56-7, 71, 110-11 and 125:
Example 2).[26]
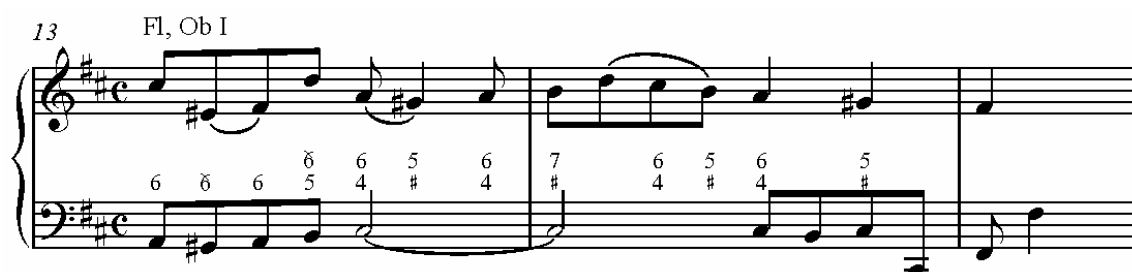


Example 2: J. S. Bach, *Missa* (BWV 232) , Kyrie, b. 13-15

The most fitting social space for this musical model would have been the sacred
ritual of the Dresden court chapel: the same as for the Kyrie itself.  Bach,
however, would not have submitted the same music twice to the same patrons,
nor would he have allowed his Elector to know to which other prince or patron
he had previously dedicated the same music.  We have a shadow model, an
absent presence that colours the understanding of the Kyrie.

   BWV 232 not only creates ambiguous meanings through the parody process, it
also reflects the music of other composers and craftsmanship traditions (the

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[24]  *ibid.* respectively, p. 22 and pp. 68-70.

[25]  Ed. F. Smend, Leipzig: Dt. Verlag für Musik (1954), p. 4.  This edition is used
      throughout for the music examples of the J. S. Bach Missa (BWV 232).

[26]  More generally on these 'galant' leanings, see Robert Marshall, 'Bach the
      Progressive: Observations on his Later Works', *Musical Quarterly* 62 (1976), 313-57.

second and third type of relationships mentioned above) in a way we do not yet entirely understand.  How significant, for example, was the tradition of Catholic church music that became a virtual working environment for Bach since his Dresden petition of 1733 (if not before)?  Unlike the cantata parodies where musical models are extant, the allusions to contemporary or near-contemporary Catholic sacred works in the Mass irritate because their relative musical meaning is often unclear.  Bach alluded to, or was influenced by, Mass compositions by Johann Hugo von Wilderer, Giovanni Battista Bassani, Jan Dismas Zelenka; but these may only be tips of the iceberg of a vast modern Catholic repertory studied by Bach that included other Dresden, Viennese and Italian composers (Heinichen, Ristori? Hasse? Fux, Caldara, Lotti, Scarlatti, Vivaldi and Pergolesi).[27]

The opening of Kyrie I has been shown by Christoph Wolff to be influenced by a Mass in G Minor by Johann Hugo von Wilderer (1670-1724), which Bach copied in c.1730-33.[28]  The extent to which this musical model was relevant for Bach's imagination is debatable; it probably is itself a stereotype.  I would emphasise in Wilderer's Kyrie the feeling of a solemn, processional motion, conveyed by the repeated quavers and dotted rhythm in the 'adagio' in the opening bars.  After the Phrygian cadence, the dotted motif reappears in 'vivace' tempo (less fast than 'allegro' in the Italianate convention) for the fugue, unfolding a well-known Corellian and Handelian type of 'adagio-allegro' opening with allegro fugato (Example 3).[29]  Such an 'adagio-allegro'-opening sounds like a highly rhetorical address to an (absent) authority or audience, followed by busy activity ('let's get down to work').  In the B-Minor Mass, too, we hear that 'work is starting' after bar 4; the maintained slow tempo for the fugue, however, suggests that the whole Kyrie I is now the grand opening of the Mass, an even larger canvas.  Bach has excised the dotted quaver-rhythm from the opening bars, making it the thematic focus of the fugal subject, while conversely he has spread languid semitone-appoggiaturas and other soloistic gestures already through the opening chords, perhaps alluding to individuals praying within the community, and softening the stiff gestures of Wilderer's

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[27]   See Christoph Wolff, *Der stile antico in der Musik Johann Sebastian Bachs. Studien zu Bachs Spätwerk* (Wiesbaden, 1968); Wolff, 'Zur musikalischen Vorgeschichte des Kyrie aus Johann Sebastian Bachs Messe in h-Moll' in Martin Ruhnke (ed.), *Festschrift für Bruno Stäblein zum 70. Geburtstag* (Kassel, 1967), pp. 316-26; Wolfgang Osthoff, 'Das Credo der h-moll-Messe: italienische Vorbilder und Anregungen' in W. Osthoff and Reinhard Wiesend (eds.), *Bach und die italienische Musik* (Venice: Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, 1987), pp. 109-38.
On Dresden, see esp. Wolfgang Horn, *Die Dresdener Hofkirchenmusik 1720-1745: Studien zu ihren Voraussetzungen und ihrem Repertoire* (Stuttgart-Kassel), p. 1987.

[28]   Wolff, 'Zur musikalischen Vorgeschichte'; see also Butt, *Bach: Mass in B Minor*, pp. 44-45.

[29]   On Handel's early uses of such openings and on some of his borrowings of Italian music, see Reinhard Strohm, 'Händel in Italien – ein intellektuelles Abenteuer', *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* 5 (1993), 5-43.

Example 3: Johann Hugo von Wilderer, Kyrie, D-B Mus. ms. 23116/10, Abb. 1 in Wolff, 'Zur musikalischen Vorgeschichte', p. 317.

*prohemium* (no appoggiaturas). Wilderer served as *maestro di capella* at the Catholic Electoral court of the Palatinate at Düsseldorf; he was responsible for the Elector's court chapel ritual as well as for operatic and chamber music: probably a valid status model for Bach. Edward Said's formula that Bach's music had to fill a pre-determined social space would be equally suitable for Wilderer's; from the few points made here in comparing the music, it seems that Wilderer would have filled this space even better. The individualistic traits, the 'galant' appoggiaturas of Kyrie I were nowhere called for – unless perhaps the new Saxon Elector, Friedrich August II, appreciated those deviations from status and stereotype for which Bach's music had been noted. Would he have found Wilderer stiff and boring? Alternatively, he may never have listened to such detail anyway: its meaning remains ambiguous.

Wolfgang Osthoff's ingenious proposal that BWV 232 could have been intended for the inauguration of the new Catholic Hofkirche at Dresden (founded in 1739, consecrated in 1751), is worryingly supported by a demonstration of the similarities between Bach's Credo, and the Credo which Johann Adolf Hasse composed for the consecration of that church on 29 June 1751.[30] Worryingly, because Hasse's composition definitely 'transcended' Bach's creation and can 'therefore' not contribute to its meaning. But of course it can. Osthoff argues that both Bach and Hasse were enveloped in the longer-lasting craftsmanship

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[30] Osthoff, 'Das Credo der h-moll-Messe', pp. 110-11 and pp. 132-34; see also Butt, *Bach: Mass in B Minor*, pp. 22-23.

traditions of Catholic sacred music which also interested Michael Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.  Previous Bach biographers may not have thought of Osthoff's hypothesis because they were not looking beyond 28 July 1750.  Bach, for his part, certainly was.

The adaptations of other music to the Mass are often described as integrations or cumulations.  Which audience would hear them as such is questionable. Osthoff shows in rich detail how the Credo combines various musical ingredients found in Bassani's Mass in F Major, which Bach transcribed around 1740, and in other works of the genre.[31]  By assembling these ingredients – Gregorian intonations, interjected repetitions of the word 'Credo', stile antico-counterpoint, basso ostinato, accompaniment of two violin parts – in his Credo, Bach conveyed a rich array of traditional elements to a virtual listener who was familiar with that general tradition.[32]  Although these elements taken singly could be acknowledged as ordinary references to Catholic Mass music, for example by an Italian church musician, their cumulative effect is to remove or submerge reference.  The compound references rarified the product, ultimately requiring omniscient listeners to appreciate them in full; the meaning transcended that of 'a Credo setting of its time'.  We know this de-familiarising effect of Bach's most complex works and tend to ascribe it to his greatness, his transcendence of traditions, his universality.  History has certainly endorsed these musical procedures: since Bach, the complexity of techniques, styles and links to the past in western music has continued to increase.  Much western poetry seems to work similarly – de-familiarisation through accumulated meaningfulness.

I wonder, however, whether this 'overcooking' of references has alternative meanings.  Bach might simply have wished to make sure that listeners from different backgrounds could understand the piece, even if they were likely to pick up only some of the stylistic tags.  According to the principle of 'Wer vieles bringt, wird manchem etwas bringen',[33] he might have packed into the work more than could be meaningful to one mind; his aim would not have been to compound his meaning but to distribute it in a way that would make it more widely comprehensible.  This 'alternative' strategy would have made sense for an intellectual in cosmopolitan and encyclopedic Leipzig, where travelling opera and theatre troupes, who had to try to please everybody, were the talk of the town.

The assimilation of genre and style traditions in Bach's Mass is as important as it is anywhere else in his art.  The presence of dance, concerto, fugue, aria, ritornello, motet and chant has been noted.  Some of these presences are also absences: there is neither 'a concerto',[34] nor 'a motet', nor 'a dance' in the sense of a discrete section of the music that might fulfil this definition.  Where the composer has drawn into his work what I call 'genre intuitions', he has also excluded fully-fledged examples of such pieces.  There is 'reference', however,

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[31]  *ibid.* pp. 121-38.

[32]  Or, again, to a modern musicologist who has studied those repertoires.

[33]  'Who offers much, will offer something to many' (Goethe, *Faust I*, 'Prolog auf dem Theater', v. 97).

[34]  Bach's own use of 'concerto' as a genre name for his cantatas is not relevant here.

and it is often more easily captured than meaning.  In the 'Qui sedes' we hear a minuet;[35] the Sanctus (first performed in 1724) is related to the general idea of the Ouverture.  The Crucifixus is built upon a pattern that had long been associated with the Chaconne and previously used by Bach and others as a metaphoric dance/lament.  Insofar as the dance association is meaningful to the listener, it diverts the tragic meaning of the composition, acting as a 'split reference' in the same way as a typical literary metaphor.



Example 4: George Frideric Handel, *Il pastor fido* (1712), ed. F. Chrysander, *Georg Friedrich Händels Werke*, Bd. 59, aria Eurilla, 'Secondaste alfine oh stelle', Act III, scene 6.

The Et resurrexit moves like a Courante/Polonaise, but its form is a concerto movement with a clear ritornello layout; the abrupt return from the mediant to the tonic ritornello in b. 85 recalls *Brandenburg Concerto* No. 2/I and Vivaldi concertos.  This is perhaps a parody of 'Entfernet euch, ihr heit'ren Sterne' (BWV Anh. 9), a chorus for a royal Polish celebration.[36]  Thus the reference to instrumental forms was already submerged in the model.  The choral tutti outburst which interrupts the context of the Credo, and the excited solo narration for 'Et iterum venturus est', intimate that suddenly the performers are *dramatis personae* who enthusiastically report the resurrection and ascension.  Saint Peter

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35  Butt, *Bach: Mass in B Minor*, pp. 72-76.
36  Klaus Häfner, *Aspekte des Parodieverfahrens bei Johann Sebastian Bach* (Laaber, 1987), pp. 328-29.

(Bass) seems to affirm personally – transgressing the biblical narration – that Christ will return to judge and reign.  To offer Christian dogma like exciting news in a dramatic scene, rather than as a ritual text, is a deviation (a characteristic of metaphors) towards the imitation of human affections, and a theatrical genre intuition.  In fact, a variant of the theme was a favourite of Handel's.  He used it, mostly as a song of rejoicing, in the cantatas 'Fra pensieri quel pensiero' and 'Io languisco fra le gioie', in the operas *Rodrigo* (aria 'Io son vostro, o luci belle'), *Il Pastor fido* (aria 'Secondaste al fine o stelle'; see Example 4) and *Tamerlano* (added aria 'Cerco in vano di placare'), and finally in the oratorio *Semele* ('Above measure is the pleasure', Juno's revenge aria).

Christoph Wolff has observed a connection between the 'Et incarnatus est' of the Mass and the *Stabat mater* by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (c.1736), a composition which Bach transcribed c.1744-46 with the words 'Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden', a paraphrase of Psalm 51, probably for performance at Leipzig (BWV 1083).[37]  The fact of this transcription alone affects the meaning of the 'Et incarnatus est': if the link with BWV 1083 was heard, it created a 'split-reference' involving the 'Miserere', the penitential psalm often set by Catholic composers for Holy Week services.  The Pergolesi connection, in turn, deserves a closer scrutiny.  The expressive violin figure of the duet 'Quis est homo, qui non fleret?' (Example 5) is perhaps a stereotype, but also an obsessive presence, repeated nine times in seven successive bars of music, while the voices hover over a dominant pedal with occasional half-cadences, insistently repeating the rhetorical questions of this stanza.  The German text here ('Wer wird seine Schuld verneinen oder gar gerecht erscheinen?') maintains this questioning, and further alludes to the self-questioning words of the *Dies irae*: 'Quid sum miser tunc dicturus … cum vix justus sit securus?'.  The 49-bar 'Et incarnatus' repeats the stereotype figure 49 times.  It ends, just like Pergolesi's question 'Quis est homo?' with a half-cadence (#IV$^7$ – V, for a tonicised E Minor), despite the fact that the Mass text does not provide a question here at all: 'et homo factus est'.



Example 5: Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, *Stabat mater*, 'Quis est homo', b. 13-14.[38]

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[37]  See Butt, *Bach: Mass in B Minor*, 53-4; for further comments by Yoshitake Kobyashi, see Geck, *Bach. Leben und Werk*, p. 483.  BWV 1083 is discussed by Francesco Degrada, 'Lo Stabat Mater di Pergolesi e la parodia di Bach' in W. Osthoff (ed.), *Bach und die italienische Musik* pp. 141-69.

[38]  Ed. A. Einstein, London etc.: Edition Eulenburg, 1927, p. 4. This edition is used throughout.

The recourse to Pergolesi's rhetorical figure seems to bring into the Mass the meaning that the incarnation is a 'question'. Just as the concluding B Major chord is immediately answered by the E Minor of the Crucifixus, thus the crucifixion and redemption appear as the *goal* of the incarnation.

Thus the Pergolesi figure is by no means an occasional *modulus*, but a meaningful ornament in its own metaphoric context. The ramifications of the *Stabat Mater* in BWV 232, likewise, go further than the 'Et incarnatus est'. The half-cadence $\#IV^7$-V, a stereotype of the eighteenth-century sentimental style, can often be heard in Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* duets 'Quis est homo', 'O quam tristis', and particularly in the opening 'Stabat mater' duet, where the quaver-repercussion may allude to physical pain (compare Example 6 with 'Et incarnatus', b. 48-49).

Example 6: Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, *Stabat mater*, duet 'Stabat mater', b.31-2.

This influence especially affects the soprano-alto duet 'Et in unum dominum', from which Bach had separated the 'Et incarnatus' as a self-contained section.[39] This G-Major duet is believed to be a parody of a secular love-duet (from before 1733), its opening unisono-imitation being a well-known operatic allegory of unity and love.[40] By 1746, Bach was aware of the textural similarity of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, a soprano-alto duet with interspersed solos, to his own previously composed love-duet, which is perhaps why he decided to explore it further in his Credo. In the originally-texted version of 'Et in unum', the final cadence (to E) before the return of the tonic ritornello is sung to the words 'propter nostram salutem descendit de coelis' (b. 59-62): it is here that an unprecedented embracing gesture descends from high heaven, repeated at b. 73-74 – a new parallel with Pergolesi (Examples 7a and 7b). There, the gesture follows a half-cadence of the $\#IV^7$-V type just described. The harmonic motion in Bach's cadence notably differs from all previous cadences, involving a $\#IV^7$ chord (b. 61, repeated in b. 75). To the 'embracing gesture from high heaven' is added in the final ritornello,

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[39] On the structural and theological significance of that operation, see Leaver, 'The mature vocal works', pp. 118-19.

[40] Häfner, *Aspekte des Parodieverfahrens*, pp. 305-24.

b. 77-9, a descending motion of three quavers – another embrace – from the same Pergolesi passage ('dum pendebat'): compare Example 7a, b. 38-9 and Example 7b, b. 77.  Both gestures are also prominent



Example 7a: Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, *Stabat mater*, duet 'Stabat mater', b.37-9.

Example 7b: J. S. Bach, *Symbolum Nicenum* (BWV 232), duet 'Et in unum' (first version), b. 73-8.

In Pergolesi's duet 'O quam tristis'.  I believe that the music of 'Et in unum' from b.59 to the end no longer reflects the secular model, but was rewritten after Bach had studied the *Stabat Mater*.  The incredible transformation of Bach's final section and ritornello, with its extravagant outreach to G Minor and the two embracing gestures, which had never occurred before in the piece, was surely an added meaning.  That the three-quaver gesture in the final ritornello is rhythmically prepared by the three-quaver upbeat for 'Et incarna-tus' (b. 64 etc), suggests that the outreach to Pergolesi's Marian Sequence is intimately connected with the (original) setting of the words 'Et incarnatus est'.

## Conclusion

We may recall that Said's 'transgressions' were always relative to a supposedly conventional platform of interpretations, and thus were meant to be deviations, shifting alternatives; and that Harries' 'absence' of which the music speaks to us, remained metaphysical and undescribed.  Bach scholars and critics cannot seriously be charged with neglecting the 'social presences' in Bach's compositions, nor indeed with being unaware of a numinous Other which addresses us in his music.  We may, however, be insufficiently conscious of the metaphoric character of the work's relationship to *other music*.

According to Ricoeur, the poetic artefact shares words and sentences with ordinary spoken discourse, the referents of which are, however, ignored or made ambiguous.  Music, by contrast, can only share 'words' and 'sentences' (i.e. cadences, keys, melodies, rhythms, instruments, and so forth) with other music, that is other artefacts where these elements of common discourse are already metaphors, made ambiguous and meaningful by tradition.  Music, regardless of whether or not it is constituted as a musical work, is not like language.  Rather, it is like poetry.  Even an improvised trumpet fanfare already carries a 'split reference' to the world.

Ambiguity is the type of legitimacy which Ricoeur accords to poetry on its referential level, that of ordinary language; on the 'level of the "poem"', these ambiguous metaphors consolidate their meaning.  In music, this relationship could equally well be shifted to higher levels, involving other music.[41]  The 'level of the "poem"' in music becomes the level of *all music* much more easily than in literature, because music does not operate as an ordinary meaningful language to which the musical poem can default.  Musical composition is concerned with 'other meanings' (not just references) from the start.  Insofar as the individual, unified work in music creates a 'world of its own', this world can only be

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[41]  Going 'beyond the work' is proposed here not because the unified work-concept has further lost prestige since Ricoeur's book, but because the dynamic of his interpretation, which seeks the meaning of metaphors at progressively higher levels of discourse, is virtually unstoppable.

constructed upon the ambiguities of meaning inherent in the art of music itself. These ambiguities enable the contribution of 'other meanings' not only to BWV 232 but to any music.

Therefore, even in a singular work such as the B-Minor Mass, Bach is not the sole originator of 'other meanings', nor does he transgress or transcend meanings in one individual effort, as a poet might in a particular poem. The meaning of his musical work floats among the meanings of other musical works and practices which mutually transcend and transgress into each other.