

BACH 701-702 - J.S. BACH: The Four Shorter Masses

Why was Johann Sebastian Bach, a devout confirmed Lutheran working in a Lutheran city for a Lutheran Church and City Council... why was he writing Masses in Latin – and why were these Shorter Masses created almost entirely out of previous compositions? The scores for these four Masses were in the possession of a Bohemian Count Anton von Sporck of Lysa-on-the-Elbe, some 20 miles east of Prague. Von Sporck was the Bohemian High Commissioner at the Electoral Saxon Court in Dresden and a frequent visitor to Leipzig. As the Masses were liturgically unsuitable for use in Leipzig it seems likely that they were composed expressly for the Count, which would explain the use of the Catholic (as opposed to the Lutheran) liturgy. But why would Bach take the trouble to assemble some of his best movements in order to create four Masses? There is no evidence to suppose that Bach was seeking a position of employment at the Count's Residence in Bohemia. And in any case, if composed at the behest of a nobleman, Bach would surely have produced an original work, rather than “assemblages” of his previous compositions. The answer to this question may lie in the fascinating story of the Count himself, and the religious/political conditions in Bohemia under which he had to live.

Count Frantisek Antonin von Sporck was born on March 9, 1662. When his father Jan Sporck died in 1679 he was not yet of age, and it was in 1684 that he took over a part of his patrimony. This consisted of the Lysa-nad-Labem, Malesov, Konojedy and Choustnikovo Hradiste Estates. On the last-named estate, lying in northeast Bohemia, he later built the Kuks Spa. He also inherited the family palace in Prague and a significant amount of money.

Prior to this, in 1680 and 1681 he had already "done the Grand Tour of Europe", as was customary for young noblemen of that time, including Rome, Turin, through southern France to Madrid then north to Paris, returning to Bohemia via London, the Hague and Brussels. He went back to Paris in spring 1682 when at the Court at Versailles he made the acquaintance of the Valve Horn and had two of his musicians learn to play the instrument. Back in Bohemia they passed on their skills, and their instruments were soon copied by Nurnberg instrument makers.

In 1694 a source of therapeutic waters was discovered at Kuks, one of the Sporck estates; here Sporck was to build a Spa, with imposing buildings, a castle, and a hospice with the Church of the Holy Trinity for retired servicemen for which he set up a foundation. The cultural activities of Count von Sporck were unusually multifaceted. Few noblemen of their time could take pride in the publication of almost 150 books of a religious and philosophical content, often translations from German or French. Sporck had his own engraving workshop. He conducted a rich social life, several prominent German men of letters visited him at Kuks.

He maintained a permanent operatic company, which played at Kuks and at his Prague palace. This ensemble, made up predominantly of Italian musicians, performed the premieres of several Vivaldi Operas. However there was a dark cloud overshadowing the Count's life, and especially his wide theological and religious interests: censorship, rigorously enforced.

After the Czechs lost to the Catholic Habsburgs at the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620, the Czechs lived under a strict, absolutist regime; censorship was all-pervasive, and books were smuggled into Bohemia from abroad. In the early 1700s enforcement may have been weakening, but in 1715 a government order was issued, banning the publication and dissemination of all satirical books, tracts and pictures. Unofficial printing offices were to be closed down. Printing presses were allowed to operate only in university towns and towns with higher authorities. Nevertheless, large amounts of unauthorized titles mostly religious publications both in Czech and in German were smuggled into Bohemia.

Count von Sporck was deeply interested in non-orthodoxy and in the teachings of non-Catholic theologians, and himself published numerous theological works. He financed the printing of theses in theology, philosophy, medicine and physics. Sporck's printing office in Lysa was closed by the Jesuits in 1712, so he had most of his titles printed outside Bohemia. These were then smuggled into the country in various ingenious ways. In 1725 he had a whole non-Catholic library smuggled in from Silesia, although the import of such banned literature was punishable by death. On July 26, 1729 however, Kuks was occupied by a military division of the Carrar Regiment and Sporck was handed an Imperial Decree authorizing the sequestration of all of his books. Sporck was arrested and deported to Prague to be interrogated by the authorities. His library, containing 30,000 volumes, was seized and examined. Sporck was finally accused of heresy and its propagation, with threatened punishment of loss of land-rights, estates, a fine of 100,000 gold pieces, the burning of his books and life imprisonment under strict guard. However, he was eventually spared the worst: on March 13, 1733 he was convicted only for printing books without having them pass through censorship, and fined 6,000 gold pieces.

While the verdict and fine may have been relatively lenient in comparison to the more drastic alternatives, it must nevertheless have weighed on his artistic, cultured and inquiring mind. Leipzig was but a short journey, and this pleasant cultured lively city would have been attractive to von Sporck, not only as a haven of liberty and free thought, but more practically as a source of literature. At the beginning of the 18th century Saxony was by far the most developed German territorial state with Leipzig as its economic capital.

The city's tri-annual fairs brought a cosmopolitan atmosphere and a breadth of vision as merchants gathered from all over Europe. Leipzig was the center of book publishing in Germany and the inhabitants had extensive intellectual and cultural interests; their cultivation of literature and the fine arts, as well as the setting-up of libraries and rich art collections evinced a wide-ranging pursuit of entertainment and education, and the city enjoyed a rich musical life. For Count von Sporck, visits to Leipzig must have been a welcome relief from the stifled atmosphere in Bohemia as well as intellectually stimulating, the tri-annual Leipzig fairs providing an opportunity to review the latest literature - perhaps for purchase and illicit import into Bohemia.

Thus it was that the Count appears to have been a well-known figure in Leipzig as a lover of literature, art and music. Picander had introduced his first collection of poems in 1725 with an Ode addressed to the Count. In addition, there must have been many culture- and music-based friendships formed in Leipzig.

Given the Count's love of music and his considerable endowment of music in Bohemia, surely it is also quite conceivable that he could have been a frequent, and admiring visitor at the Bach household. Indeed Bach and von Sporck most probably became acquainted when both visited Carlsbad in 1718 and 1720. There must, too, have been an underlying sentiment of sympathy among his Leipzig friends for the constricted atmosphere under which the Count had to live.

The Count might well have attended Services at St. Thomas' Church, or at least heard some of Bach's Cantata choruses in rehearsal. It only remained for the Count to drop a friendly hint, and for the inventive Bach to sidestep any possibility of Bohemian censorship by presenting the Count with some of his best Cantata movements cleverly disguised as Catholic liturgical music. Thus these "Shorter" or (wrongly named) "Lutheran" Masses might well be entitled "Bach's Bohemian Masses". Whatever their title, it is generally believed that these splendid "anthologies" date from around 1735/6. Count von Sporck would have had but a few short years to enjoy them in his Chapel at Lysa; he died in Lysa on March 30, 1738, not long after his 76th birthday.

For more information on Sporck and Lysa, with several photos, check; <http://www.baroquemusic.org/bqxsporck.html>.

MASS IN F MAJOR, BWV 233

1. KYRIE: probably an original composition. / 2. GLORIA: a) *Gloria*: probably an original composition. b) *Domine Deus*: **Cantata BWV Anh. 18**, Aria 6. c) *Qui tollis*: **Cantata 102**, Aria 6. d) *Quoniam*: **Cantata 102**, Aria 5. e) *Cum sancto spiritu*: **Cantata 40**, first Chorus.

MASS IN A MAJOR, BWV 234 1. KYRIE: probably a reconstruction, source not yet identified. 2. GLORIA: a) *Gloria*: **Cantata 67**, Aria 6. b) *Domine Deus*: probably a reconstruction, source not identified. c) *Qui tollis*: **Cantata 179**, Aria 5. d) *Quoniam*: **Cantata 79**, Aria 2. e) *Cum sancto spiritu*: **Cantata 136**, first Chorus.

MASS IN G MINOR, BWV 235 1. KYRIE: **Cantata 102**, first Chorus. 2. GLORIA: a) *Gloria*: **Cantata 72**, first Chorus. b) *Gratias agimus*: **Cantata 187**, Aria 4. c) *Domine Filie*: **Cantata 187**, Aria 3. d) *Qui tollis peccata*: **Cantata 187**, Aria 5. e) *Cum sancto spiritu*: **Cantata 187**: first Chorus.

MASS IN G MAJOR, BWV 236

1. KYRIE: **Cantata 179**, first Chorus. 2. GLORIA: a) *Gloria*: **Cantata 79**, first Chorus. b) *Gratias agimus*: **Cantata 138**, Aria 5. c) *Domine Deus*: **Cantata 79**, Aria 5. d) *Quoniam*: **Cantata 179**, Aria 3. e) *Cum sancto spiritu*: **Cantata 17**.

KYRIE: *Kyrie eleison! Christe eleison! Kyrie eleison! Lord, have mercy upon us! Christ, have mercy upon us! Lord, have mercy upon us!*

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.*

Glory be to God in the Heavens, and on earth peace among men of goodwill. We praise Thee, we bless Thee. We adore Thee, we glorify Thee. We give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory.

Domine Deus, rex coelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens. Domine filie unigenite Jesu Christe. Domine Deus, agnus Dei, filius Patris.
Oh Lord God, King of Heaven, God the Father all-powerful. Oh Lord, only begotten Son Jesus Christ.
Oh Lord, God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father.

Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis, suscipe deprecationem nostram. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis.

Thou who bears the sins of the world, have pity on us, have mercy on our lowly state. Thou who sittest at the right hand of the Father, have pity on us.

Quoniam tu solus sanctus, tu solus Dominus, tu solus altissimus Jesu Christe.

For only Thou art holy, only Thou art Lord, Thou Most High, Jesus Christ.

Cum sancto spiritu in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

With the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

We have used the remaining time on these discs to give you some of the very fine **Lutheran Church Chorales**, harmonized here by J.S. Bach, which formed an integral part of church services in Germany. Bach would harmonize these traditional Chorales in many different and intricate ways, as Buxtehude had done before him, cleverly embellishing their simple but very beautiful melodies. Included here are the three **Christmas Verses** which formed a part of the 1723 first version of the Magnificat, BWV 243.