

Frank Martin – Mass for Double Choir (1922/26)

- I. Kyrie
- II. Gloria
- III. Credo
- IV. Sanctus
- V. Agnus Dei

“It was written back in 1922, well before Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms made it fashionable for French-speaking composers to strike a monkish pose. It sounds like a Renaissance mass lost in time, aware nonetheless of long centuries passing and new horrors unfolding.”

Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise* (New York: Fourth Estate Press, 2008)

There are many works from the twentieth-century which, perhaps, should not have seen the light of day; perhaps they should have been resigned to the composer's bottom drawer, substandard and reserved for the executor to decide their fate when future royalties were more important than posthumous reputation. A list of these works would be substantial and exhaustive, a hundred and one pieces sully the names of many good composers. Some composers would, in fact, have very little to show for a life's work if they were more discerning with their bottom drawer. However there are a few pieces for which the opposite is definitely true, when a work is far too good to be consigned to a drawer for any length of time, whatever the aesthetic judgement of the composer – Frank Martin's **Mass for Double Choir** is undoubtedly one of those.

It is hard to believe that this work, written in the 1920s, would sit in Martin's drawer for nearly forty years until after heavy persuasion from Franz Brunnert, director of the Bugenhagen Kantorei of Hamburg, he released it for publication and performance in 1963. A work of such searing beauty and luminescence should surely have not sat in a drawer gathering dust along with faded sketches for tuba concerti and comic operas (or whatever else composers keep in the bottom drawer) whilst the world was crying out for more sacred masterpieces to rival Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater*. Why did he choose to exile his only unaccompanied choral work for so long?

The answer one suspects lies in the composer's strong Christian faith, a faith which governed his life, both personal and artistic. Born into a Swiss Calvinist family (his father was a minister) in 1890 his work would be hugely indebted to his faith, and somewhat like Messiaen, his work would never stray too far from Christian themes and issues. To write a work which expresses the very essence of his faith and then have it performed and open for public dissemination appeared to be a step too far for the intensely devoted Martin. As he wrote in the 1960s: “I did not want it to be performed...I consider it...as being a matter between God and myself. I felt then that an expression of religious feelings should remain secret and removed from public opinion.” Not many composers can claim to have such strong beliefs about their work and the relationship between artist and God, certainly not in the more secular-leaning twentieth-century. It brings into mind Igor Stravinsky who dedicated his

own personal declaration of faith, the *Symphony of Psalms*: “to the Glory of God...and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.”

Like many Swiss composers before him Martin felt the twin poles of France and Germany dragging him one way or the other, affecting many of his artistic and musical judgements. On the one hand there is the rigour and discipline of Austro-German music in his work; though strangely not the influence of Schoenberg whose ideas permeated many composers of Martin’s generation; the other is the sensual, feline sonorities of French music, that of Debussy, Ravel and Roussel. Both of these influences can be seen in the Mass, neither one more prominent than the other.

If there was one influence on Martin’s music that perhaps in some way rivalled his faith, it would be the music of J. S. Bach which acted as both a catalyst for the composer’s career and as another obstacle for the publication of the Mass. When Martin was ten he attended a performance of Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* an occasion that affected him so deeply that he decided to devote his life to music from that point onwards. It did, unfortunately, provide a very high benchmark which Martin sought to compare all his work too, it would be understandable if faced with this comparison he decided that his own sacred choral works would never reach the standard of the great master. Bach is a difficult monkey to shake off one’s back.

The work begins with a beguiling, imitative Kyrie with long, lithe phrases twisting between the two choirs in delicate antiphony. The music is undeniably influenced by plainchant (perhaps the ‘Monkish Pose’ that Alex Ross almost sneers) with its long, conjunct melismatic lines but it is not based on chant as a work by Duruflé or Langlais might. Coming from a Calvinist background Martin was not exposed to the Catholic tradition of associated plainchant melodies, his setting is purely a personal response to the text and the ‘mood’ it suggests. A slight change of tempo mid way through the movement introduces a dotted idea which permeates the music from this point onwards, creating a subtle tension which is only really resolved in the penultimate bars and the Tierce de Picardie of the final ‘eleison’.

The opening of the Gloria is perhaps the most sublime moment of the Mass, with antiphonal stretto entries building into two glorious statements of ‘Gloria in excelsis Deo’, the intensity of the first only matched by the sheer power of the second. The rest of the movement perhaps never lives up to this majestic opening, but the impressive polyphonic and rhythmic writing show traces of Bach and traces of Martin’s work away from the choral world where he would teach rhythmic theory for many years in Holland.

The Credo is largely homophonic, providing necessary contrast to the two earlier mass movements and carrying the main weight of the Christian message. Again, there are moments that transcend the beauty of even this most transcendent of pieces; the subtle word-painting on ‘lumen et lumine’ is indeed light-filled and the choral writing shimmers in homophonic richness. Martin continues the word-painting with a passionate, dissonant outburst on ‘Crucifixus’ and ecstatic polyphonic material for the words ‘Et resurrexit’.

The Sanctus begins with a soft accompaniment figure in the tenors and basses before the sopranos enter with an uncharacteristic false relation motive which Martin works throughout the choir. The rapt nature of the polyphony in the Sanctus is somewhat at odds with the almost ‘sleazy’ main theme of the Benedictus which slides in parallel fourths and sevenths in the first choir against

strident fifths in the second. This theme is then passed between the voices culminating in a powerful 'hosanna' and a fortissimo E major chord.

And that chord would have been the end of the Mass if Martin had sought a performance in 1922, but the work was placed in the drawer for its first sojourn, this time for four years before Martin returned to it in 1926 to add an Agnus Dei. Nobody is entirely sure why he took this break, but we shouldn't worry about it too much, for Martin fashioned one of his most sublime and inspirational creations in his finale to the Mass. Similar in scope and design to the Kyrie, with legato plainchant-inspired lines the overriding melodic impulse. Here he has the two choirs as very separate and distinct groups, one with a steady rhythmic tread intoning the text in rich harmonies, the other with the loose-limbed polyphony that began the Kyrie. Both choirs come together in the final bars in an understated benediction on the words 'dona nobis pacem'; togetherness is achieved in a rapturous G major, a suitable sonority to finish this most heartfelt and affecting of works.

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