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Simone Louie
SUNY Geneseo

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Writing a Modern *Missa Brevis*

Simone Louie

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ABSTRACT

Composing a *Missa Brevis*, or short Mass, is a long, collaborative effort. My *Missa Brevis* attempts to convey narrative through music. I use the traditional Greek and Latin text from the Mass Ordinary of the Roman Catholic Church combined with modern harmonies to bring light to the themes of supplication, intercession, glory, holiness, joy, and peace. This piece, which was originally composed on piano, through my own efforts and collaboration with my conductor and advisor, became a four-part choral piece for an a capella choir. The four movements of this particular *Missa Brevis* are the Kyrie, the Sanctus, the Benedictus, and the Agnus Dei. This process is by no means a perfect one, and despite the many successes of the piece there are still elements that can be improved, but overall the music works well to convey the message of the text.

A REFLECTION ON METHOD

To prepare for the composition process, our class compared different missae breves by Mozart, Handel, Haydn, Poulenc, and Fauré, and identified some mass conventions from observing the similarities across the missae breves. One convention is the connection of lyrical themes to musical themes. For example, in one of Mozart's masses, for lyrics that had to do with Jesus Christ's supplication, such as "Kyrie eleison" ("Lord, have mercy") and "Agnus dei" (Lamb of God), he uses minor, augmented, and diminished harmonies—harmonies that carry tension—alluding to the tension in Jesus' supplication as he pleaded for the sins of the world. Another mass convention is the acceleration and dynamic build-up of the Hosanna, which contrasts with the pastoral, peaceful Sanctus and Benedictus sections. Mozart does this in his *Mass in B \flat major* and Haydn in his *Mass No. 7 in B \flat major*. My *Missa brevis* uses some of these mass conventions to be in conversation with these classical mass settings.

Different parts of the *Missa Brevis* echo and contrast with one another not only musically, but also textually, evident in the way lyrical themes use similar musical language. In the Kyrie and the Agnus Dei, themes of supplication are both expressed in the slow, reflective vocal melodies. However, despite these similarities they still contrast with one another, as the Kyrie and the Agnus Dei both speak of supplication with slightly different emphases: one is an explicit plea for mercy; the other identifies Jesus as the lamb of God,

the atonement for sin. Since the latter presents a resolution to sin, this theme is depicted more hopefully within the music through major harmonies and open intervals.

A good portion of the *Missa Brevis* draws from biblical text. The slow, solemn, heavy opening reflects the moments when Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane and when he cried out on the cross, “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” These moments speak strongly to the theme of supplication and Kyrie Eleison. The heaviness of the opening chordal texture, along with the darker, melancholy harmonies, portray this aspect of supplication. Although the Agnus Dei also speaks of the suffering and supplication of Christ, it moves into “Dona nobis pacem” (“God grant us peace”), which places a heavier emphasis on themes of hope and peace, contrasting with Christ’s supplication and suffering that brought about peace and the hope of salvation. The Kyrie begins the piece with second species counterpoint, chordal progressions played in monophony, and it moves into a more intricate, polyphonic texture, while the Agnus Dei begins with polyphony and moves into chordal second species counterpoint to end the piece.

The Sanctus speaks of glory, and of God being the Lord of hosts. The melodic theme shares similar melodic contours and modal harmonies with the Kyrie in Poulenc’s *Mass in G major*. The need for contrast against the slow and solemn Kyrie and the depiction of God’s glory in Isaiah 6:3¹ produced bright harmonies, angular melodies, fast tempo, and heterophony present in the Sanctus.

The Benedictus is about blessing, and it contrasts with the Kyrie and the Sanctus with its pastoral sound, simple harmonies, and waltz-like meter. The key, A \flat major, is the relative major of F minor, the key used for the Kyrie. The blessings in the Benedictus are a result of Christ’s supplication and sacrifice; the cry for mercy (F minor) turns into a blessing (A \flat major). The simple harmonies of the Benedictus portray the harmonious relationship, a reconciliation between a holy God and a sinful person. Christ’s supplication shows a separation between humans and God, but the Benedictus speaks of their reconciliation, made possible by Christ’s intercession. This reconciliation reflects the unity of God and Christ, and the unity of the trinity is depicted in the threes present in the Benedictus: the triple meter, and the use of A \flat major which is a minor third above F minor, the key of the Kyrie.

The Agnus Dei begins with the rising four-note motif, one note for each syllable of “Agnus dei,” with harmonies stacking beneath the melody as each note is sung. Instead of fitting all the text into the same line with a three-note motif, I had the lower voices sing the longer part of the text in response to the short motives in the upper voices. The modulation from the D \flat /A \flat harmonies back to the home key of F goes like this: The enharmonic notes between a D \flat scale and an E major ninth chord (D \sharp /E \flat , F \sharp /G \flat , G \sharp /A \flat) make this transition smooth. The composition process of the Dona Nobis Pacem mainly consisted of improvisation at the piano using hand positions with minimal hand movement.

1 “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” (New International Version)

Rehearsals for performing the *Missa Brevis* revealed some necessary modifications that improved the piece. The conductor, who understood the effect of the piece and the sentiments behind it, and who had experience serving in mass, relayed the complexity of suffering and hope to the singers and worked diligently to bring out the contrast between the musical themes. His work during rehearsals helped to convey the deeper meaning of the text.

Because I had written my *Missa Brevis* on the piano, I was not aware of some of the difficult leaps in the vocal lines and strange interchanging of melodies between certain vocal lines. Lines that felt natural to play on the piano were sometimes unnatural for the voice to sing. There have been slight alterations to the score because of these difficulties. In composing future choral pieces, I would play each vocal line separately before giving it to singers, to ensure feasibility of singing the vocal lines while preserving the same harmonies and general texture of the music.

Another thing I learned was to be more aware of the phonetic conventions of the language I am writing in. Out of all the sections of the mass, the Agnus Dei had the most revisions. As I was not familiar with Latin when I first composed the piece, the Agnus Dei sounded unnatural before my conductor made his suggestions for changing the syllable placement. His edits can be seen in this excerpt of the score (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Conductor's notes on Agnus Dei

Some other changes to the piece include changing the solo parts to group parts and adding notes that act as leading tones to dissonances. The change from solo parts to group parts were applied to the last part of the Kyrie, and a similar edit was made to the call-and-response answer parts of the Sanctus. This change was made because the music would have been too soft with solo singers. Adding leading tones to parts with dissonances made them easier to sing.

All in all, the methods used were to ultimately bring out the true, deeper meaning of the text in the *Missa Brevis*, whether it was through listening to other missae breves, reading the Bible passages that the text alluded to, being intentional in choosing the tonality, texture, and key of the music, or giving rehearsal directions.

AN ANALYSIS OF COMPOSITION

My *Missa Brevis* uses the traditional Greek and Latin text from the Mass Ordinary of the Roman Catholic Church. It is a four-part choral piece with four movements, composed for an a capella choir. The four movements of this particular *Missa Brevis* are the Kyrie, the Sanctus, the Benedictus, and the Agnus Dei. My composition combines traditional text with modern harmonies, and the relationships between the various movements portray the traditional text in a way that brings to life deeper meaning of the text—how the themes of supplication, intercession (Kyrie, Agnus Dei), glory, holiness (Sanctus), blessing, joy (Benedictus), and peace (Agnus Dei) fit into the message of the Christian faith.

The Kyrie speaks of supplication and intercession. The slow tempo, simple rhythm and homophonic texture allow the listener to focus on the harmonies and the meaning of the text, with moments of polyphony pushing the piece forward. The Christe Eleison (“Christ, Have Mercy”) section is in a major key as a contrast to the solemn beginning of the Kyrie, and depicts the hopefulness that comes with begging Christ for mercy—there is hope when we say, “Christe eleison,” because he first said, “Kyrie eleison.” The Kyrie ends on a hopeful, resolved note, in the knowledge that the Lord has had and will have mercy on us because of Jesus’ supplication and intercession. This theme returns in the Agnus Dei, which will be further analyzed.

The Sanctus is the brightest section of my *Missa Brevis*. The Sanctus speaks of glory, of God being the Lord of hosts. The upbeat tempo, the bright harmonies with diatonic dissonances, the angular melodic lines, and the call and answer between voices are to express this gloriously chaotic scene from Isaiah 6:1-4:

I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.” (New International Version)

The cries of “Holy, holy, holy!” in the Sanctus sharply contrast against the solemn supplication in the Kyrie, through bright harmonies, angular melodies, and fast tempo. Calls and responses between the upper and lower voices in the beginning of my Sanctus convey the imagery of praises high and low, in heaven and on Earth, from kings and rulers to the lowliest. The musical theme echos with variations between the voices, layers added as the section nears the climax. The climax is a slow, diatonically

dissonant repetition of the theme that contrasts with the upbeat single melodic lines in the previous call and answer section. All the dynamic and textural build-ups, back-and-forth between voices, and the final homophony of voices place emphasis on God as Lord of hosts (“dominus Deus sabaoth”), praised by individuals and by multitudes.

In a traditional mass setting, the Hosanna first appears after the Sanctus and is repeated after the Benedictus. I follow this tradition in my own *Missa Brevis*. In the Hosanna, the upper voices sing a repetitive accompaniment that sustains the harmony while the lower voices move up and down a scale that is mixture of an F mixolydian and Phrygian scale. The tempo quickens, just as in the Hosannas of Mozart’s and Haydn’s masses. The change of emotions from fear and awe to the joy of praise and welcoming the Messiah is depicted in the harmonies that are less dissonant than that of the Sanctus. The text for the “Hosanna” comes from Jesus’ triumphant entrance on a donkey into Jerusalem, where he is met with people waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”² This is the text that continues from the Hosanna into the Benedictus, the next section of the mass.

The Benedictus has a waltz-like meter, straightforward harmonies, and a mainly homophonic texture to contrast with the more harmonically and rhythmically complex Sanctus. The Benedictus is peaceful because it speaks of blessing, contrasting with the awe and excitement in the Sanctus and Hosanna. The text of the Sanctus calls God “the Lord of hosts,” placing emphasis on a group celebration. The Benedictus is private in contrast, personal. It portrays the harmonious relationship, the reconciliation, between a holy God and a sinful person; a reconciliation made necessary by the holiness in the Sanctus and made possible by the supplication and intercession in the Kyrie and the Agnus Dei: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,[...] He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus.”³ The blessing of Christ’s plea and intercession is only made possible by the agony in the Kyrie that came before it, but it is made sweeter because of the reconciliation it mentions.

The Agnus Dei starts with short ascending melodic phrases echoed by longer lines in the lower voices, that reach an imperfect cadence before arriving at the Dona Nobis Pacem (“God, grant us peace”) section. In the last few measures of the mass, the Kyrie theme is echoed in the melody, affirming that God has and will grant peace in answer to pleas for mercy because Jesus, the Lamb of God, pleaded first.

The Agnus Dei hearkens back to the Kyrie, as the text returns to the theme of Christ’s supplication and intercession. While the Kyrie speaks of Christ’s intercession, the Agnus Dei speaks of the sacrificial intercession carried out through his death on the cross. The stillness of the Agnus Dei reflects the imagery in Isaiah 53: “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the

2 John 12:12-19, New International Version

3 Galatians 3:13-14, New International Version

slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”⁴ The stillness, although associated with Jesus’ undeserved suffering, also foreshadows the peace in the Dona Nobis.

The Dona Nobis mirrors the Kyrie in a number of ways, serving as a resolution for the pain that is expressed in the Kyrie, and answering the hope that is portrayed in the Christe Eleison. The harmonies of the Dona Nobis echo that of the Kyrie, particularly with “Christe eleison.” The triple meter of the Dona Nobis changes into cut time, the time signature of the Kyrie, and the melodic theme of the Kyrie creeps in while maintaining the harmonic language of the Dona Nobis. Supplication and pain are answered with peace.

The *Missa Brevis* is an appropriate piece for revision, because of the vocal difficulties that arose due to the piece being composed at the piano. The main issues are the vocal range of the second soprano and alto voices, measure 13 (in the Kyrie), and interval jumps in the lower voices in the Agnus Dei.

At several points, the melody written for the alto voice is out of range. Some examples are at measures 22 (D5), 25 (E♭5), 82-83, and 160-162. One possible solution was to give those alto parts to the second soprano. The hard part for the *Missa Brevis* performance was that there were only fifteen singers, including four altos and four sopranos. Giving the alto line to the second sopranos would significantly decrease the volume of the soprano line. Ideally, the piece would be sung by a large choir, and the altos could sing a lower part while the second sopranos take the high, out-of-range alto parts. However, because of the small choir, we had to strike a balance between giving certain alto lines to the second sopranos and letting the altos sing the out-of-range parts in a soft voice. Another possible solution would be to write new notes for the altos completely. This was done in the Agnus Dei, where instead of singing the high note at the end of each measure, in 160-162, the altos repeated the second note of each measure, which was always a fifth lower than the high note. There are also parts of the alto voice that could be taken a whole octave down; for example, measures 82-83 in the Sanctus.

Measure 13 is messy because the voices split and come back together quickly. In the upper staff, the music goes from having two vocal lines to four and then to three within the span of three measures; in the lower staff, it goes from two vocal lines to three, back to two, then back to three. Because the piece was written on the piano, the splits felt natural for the hand to play, but the voice splitting was too complicated for a vocally performed piece. In revision, I would make both the upper and lower staff in measure 13 have three lines each.

There are a couple sixth- and seventh-interval jumps in the lower voices of the Agnus Dei, as seen in measures 161, 162, and 166. Since the voices are singing sixteenth notes, the large intervals are sung quickly and the lower notes do not resonate as they would on a piano. The legato effect is different when played on the piano then when sung. On the piano, the large intervals can be played in legato even when the notes

4 Isaiah 53:7, New International Version

are sixteenth notes, whereas for a voice, it is difficult to sing large intervals in legato quickly. Hence, in revision, I may change the lower note to a higher note or have the bass singers sing a lower sustained note on the third beat of those measure.

Another part of the mass that could be revised would be the *Dona Nobis*. At times, the “ch” sound in “pacem” appear in the different voices one after the other (especially in measures 184-187, where “-cem” is sung by a different voice at every half note). The repetition of the strong consonant sound disturbs the peace of the music, so the piece may benefit from rearranging some of the syllables.

Other revisions that have been made to the score include transcribing the score for an SATB choir, rather than for the piano (having four staves instead of two). Because a piano accompaniment was needed for this semester’s performance, it may be good to write an official piano accompaniment score for the piece. Changes would have to be made to the current piano score because some parts, particularly the Hosanna section, have too many notes for two hands to play effectively.

Hearing a performance of my *Missa Brevis* was deeply meaningful. Just as the composition itself contrasts corporate worship with personal worship, the execution of this piece brought together the traditions of many previous generations with personal faith. The composition and rehearsal processes, as well as analyzing the composition, revealed to me the grace Christ offered in answer to the world’s brokenness, pain, and suffering.