

Frank Martin's Mass for Double Choir

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The popular *Mass for Double Choir* was consigned to a drawer for some forty years. Why did Frank Martin keep this work to himself for so long? Things he said over the years give us some hints and cast light on his changing attitude towards religious music. His setting of the *Mass* is a celebration of compositional freedom.

If it had been up to Frank Martin, his *Mass for Double Choir* would never have reached the ears of audiences at large. For decades he considered this composition, dating from 1922-1926, as a private matter, or more precisely, as something between God and himself, which partly explains why he made no effort at all to have it performed. It was not until 1963 that the work was premiered, after a Hamburg choral conductor had requested a copy of the manuscript 'for study purposes'. The person in question, Franz Brunnert, wasted no time in performing the piece with his Bugenhagen choir, and others followed. After it was sung by the NCRV Vocal Ensemble in 1970 (a Dutch radio choir based in Hilversum, near Martin's abode in Naarden), the composer finally agreed to its publication.

'Instinctive modesty'

The existence of the manuscript had been known for a long time. The composer referred to the *Mass for Double Choir* during a lecture in Basel in 1946, also mentioning another early and likewise hidden work on a religious text, the unfinished *Cantate sur la Nativité*, dating from 1929. He said of the two pieces, 'Through a sort of instinctive modesty I have done nothing to have these pieces performed. It sufficed me entirely to have written them (...)'.

In the same lecture, Frank Martin went on to say that he had been afraid that performance would be detrimental to 'the expression of very intimate feelings'. He was particularly wary of drawing attention to himself in this manner. The only acceptable performance would have been 'in a church, without the author's name and as part of the liturgy'.

Besides humbleness there was apparently a personal reason for Martin's lasting 'modesty' regarding sacred music. Towards the end of his life, he confided to the *Zodiaque* journal that he had for a long time been unable to fathom his own religious feelings. He was the son of a calvinist minister and had first come to terms with the faith he had been brought up with in his own way. He had always sensed a religious feeling, he said, but he had felt obliged to himself 'to momentarily suppress its intellectual expression'. Composition of the *Mass* enabled him to connect once again with religion and express the faith within him.

The finest memories

Martin's prolonged reticence with regard to religious music disappeared once and for all in 1944, when he was commissioned by Radio Geneva to write a cantata relating to the impending armistice. The solemnity of the occasion, he believed, made a religious subject imperative. The 'short oratorio' *In terra pax* was premiered on 7 May 1945. Thus, the ban was broken. Freed from his restraints, Frank Martin occasionally went on to write religious pieces for performance and publication, the most familiar example of which is the passion oratorio *Golgotha* (1948).

In composing sacred music, Martin continued to struggle to reconcile his own artistic ideals with the presumed expectations of the public. An ideal solution was to compose without a commission. In responding to an inner urge to commence *Golgotha*, for example, a public performance was not anticipated. The hard work he put into this oratorio – on his

own conditions – was to remain one of the finest memories of his life.

Subtle balance

A similarly high degree of compositional freedom is evident in the *Mass for Double Choir*. First, is that in the 1920s Frank Martin had not yet established his own musical language (which he claimed to have achieved much later in the secular oratorio *Le vin herbé* dating from 1938-1941). In the *Mass*, therefore, all compositional-technical options lay wide open. A second reason is that originality was not a prerequisite, since the work was intended only for God and himself, and public opinion did not matter. Characteristic of the *Mass* is the pursuit of a subtle balance between age-old tradition and a more contemporary idiom.

One's first impression of the *Mass for Double Choir* is of a homage to the vocal polyphony of the Renaissance. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that many illustrious settings of the *Mass* – from Josquin to Palestrina – date from that period. The connection is made clear by Martin's *a cappella* approach, the imitation technique, meticulous treatment of the text, and particularly the flowing movement without a metrical straitjacket. Besides such general features, occasional specific traits evoke the spirit of early music: halfway through the *Gloria* Martin brings the music almost to a standstill, lending extra emphasis to the name of Jesus Christ.

Martin's *Mass* also offers evidence of the great inspiration which he drew from Johann Sebastian Bach, so that the latter may in a certain sense be viewed as the conclusion – though more than a century later – of that same polyphonic Renaissance tradition. The youthful Frank Martin underwent a transformative experience when, at the age of twelve, he was enthralled upon hearing Bach's *St Matthew Passion* for the very first time.

At the end of Martin's *Gloria* there is a particular reference to Bach, when at the words '*patris*' and 'amen' the two soprano voices abandon themselves in turn to the rapid notes of an ecstatic, rotating melody. This rhetorical figure, known as *circulatio*, was frequently employed in German Baroque music to depict everlasting life and the power of the Holy Spirit. In a similar fashion, the bitter motif in the *Credo* at the word '*crucifixus*' is strongly reminiscent of Bach; all voices subsequently descend symbolically to their lowest range at the words '*et sepultus est*' (and [Jesus Christ] was buried), just as in the *B Minor Mass*.

Expressive invention

The melodic lines of Martin's *Mass* deserve special mention. A general feeling of modality even suggests the influence of Gregorian chant (of which he probably widened his knowledge during a period of study in Rome in 1921). But certain chromatic turns of phrase nevertheless unmistakably belong to more recent times. Already in bar 10 of the *Kyrie*, the shift in the second alto from E to E flat has an undermining effect. Such an apparently innocent detail is comparable to the unexpected C sharp in the cellos by which Beethoven, at the beginning of the *Eroica Symphony*, makes it immediately clear that he intends to emerge from the shadow of Haydn and Mozart.

Following this local 'lapse' at the beginning of the *Kyrie*, in the *Gloria* in particular Frank Martin demonstrates that the *Mass for Double Choir* is solidly anchored in the twentieth century. The subdued opening of this hymn of praise, combined with an accumulation of intervals of the second in the first three entries of the second choir (B in the tenor, C sharp in the alto, D in the soprano) makes a somewhat recalcitrant impression. A little later, in the extensive *Domine Deus* section, there is a striking passage in which Martin has the second choir maintain an archaic sounding open fifth, while the first choir heightens the tension with a unison melody; the latter, near the climax at '*Qui sedes*', makes way for two-

and then four-part writing. A similar distribution of roles occurs later in the *Benedictus* and at the opening of the *Agnus Dei*. Such expressive invention makes the *Mass* especially attractive for singers and listeners alike, as does the introduction of a pentatonic scale to emphasise the exuberant joy of the faithful at the Resurrection ('*et resurrexit*' in the *Credo*).

Although this early composition is essentially different from the works of his more mature period, in 1922 the perfectionist Frank Martin must have found some satisfaction in the *Mass*, though it was yet incomplete. It would otherwise be difficult to explain that four years later, he added the *Agnus Dei* in a style that precisely corresponds with the earlier movements.

The belated success of the *Mass for Double Choir* is inseparably related to the sincere attitude which lies at its basis. Martin's quest for musical means to lend renewed form to his own faith found resonance in the text of the *Ordinary*. As he put it himself in the journal *Zodiaque*: 'what attracted me to the *Mass*, like so many other musicians too, was first the text and also the form, which in itself is admirable, both aesthetically and psychologically'. Without external constraint, and therefore without the obligation to be original, he was able to create a setting of this text which hovers between a bygone age and the world of his own time.

Frank Martin was convinced that the foremost mission of the artist is to bestow beauty upon humanity. To this end he believed it was neither necessary nor desirable to lend expression to the spirit of the time. His enduring *Mass* was the fulfilment of his self-imposed requirements.

References

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