

Mozart's Church Music: a short introduction with reference to: "Sancta Maria" K273 and "Laudate Dominum" from Vespers K.339

Peter Mullen

Rector of St. Sepulchre-without-Newgate

"**Sancta Maria**" was written for the Octave of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, 8th September. Mozart composed it when he was twenty-one and just before he set out across Europe with his mother to make his way as an independent musician. Very likely it was intended as an intercession before travelling. It is written in F-major in sonata form. This journey was the first of Mozart's two attempts to leave the service of the haughty and unsympathetic Prince Archbishop Hieronymous Colloredo of Salzburg. Mozart wrote a rather wry letter of resignation to Colloredo ending:

"When I asked permission to travel to Vienna three years ago, you graciously declared I had nothing to hope for in Salzburg and would do better to seek my fortune elsewhere..."

Colloredo was a so called "enlightened" Archbishop – which is to say he was probably not very devout or liturgical but a Deist, who regarded God as a distant First Cause or Designer of the universe, much like the Great Architect of the free-thinking Masonic lodges of the time. Mozart died aged thirty-five. Colloredo lasted until he was eighty. Mozart unfortunately did not live to see Colloredo removed when the Diocese of Salzburg was secularised in 1803

Mozart was assistant court composer and court organist at Salzburg cathedral and Colloredo did not like his music. He insisted on one note for one syllable. He thought Mozart's settings were too ornate and too long. And he disapproved of Mozart's frequent applications for leave of absence. But there is also a good reason for the short Mass setting. Choral Masses were High Masses and involved Priest, Deacon and Sub-deacon standing continuously at the altar from the Offertory to the Prayer of Consecration. The **Exsultate Jubilate K.165** – which Mozart wrote in his mid-teens – could be more expansive and elaborate precisely because it was not liturgical.

Archbishop Colloredo would not have liked the **Laudate Dominum** from the **Vesperae solennes de confessore K.339** which Mozart wrote for a saint's day not long after he had been forced – because he couldn't get a job – to return to Salzburg and beg his place back from Colloredo in 1780. The first movements of these Vespers are brief and economical in the style that Colloredo would put up with. Only in the operatic **Laudate Dominum** does Mozart really let himself go. The tune would not have been out of place in an aria in **The Marriage of Figaro** or **Don Giovanni** Alfred Einstein compares it to Schubert's **Serenade for alto and women's chorus**. It obviously takes its origin from Gregorian chant, as well as Italian opera, and it is a fine example of how Mozart could so effectively fuse and develop quite different musical styles

Mozart wrote hundreds of letters but he hardly ever discusses his own compositions. The only reference he makes to these Vespers comes in a letter to his father dated 12th March 1783 when he asks for "My two Vespers compositions" to be sent to him in

Vienna where he is making music with Baron von Swieten. Mozart tells his father: “Swieten sings treble, I sing alto and play at the same time...”

It was Swieten who introduced Mozart to the music of Bach.

Almost the whole of Mozart’s church music was composed before he left Salzburg to make his way as an independent musician in Vienna in 1781. After 1781 there are only two major religious works: **The “Great” C-minor Mass K. 427** and **The Requiem K.626**.

Mozart married Constanze Weber largely against his father’s wishes. Leopold did not like the Weber family, regarding them as little better than gypsies. But Constanze had a fine soprano voice and Mozart wrote the long **Et incarnatus est** of **The Mass in C-minor** for her and she sang it in Salzburg in the hearing of Leopold and it was obviously intended as a showcase for her and to let his father see that she was a woman of considerable talent. Although this **Mass** contains fugues, these are not in the manner of Bach but rather they were influenced by the Italian fugue masters such as Scarlatti. It is Baroque and brilliant in style – Mozart’s preferred style for church music. He said himself he had no liking for religion which burned only “the dim medieval light” Mysteriously, the **Mass** was not completed.

Mozart had a further opportunity to study the music of Bach at first hand when in 1789 – when he had only two more years to live – he visited Leipzig and met Johann Friedrich Doles, then aged 74, who had taken lessons from Bach himself. Johann Friedrich Reichardt was there and wrote about this meeting:

“Mozart played unannounced and without payment on the organ in St Thomas’ Church. He played beautifully and skilfully for about an hour to a large congregation. Doles was completely delighted and thought that his teacher old JSB had been reincarnated”

Friedrich Rochlitz tells us more about this occasion:

“At Doles’ suggestion the choir surprised Mozart by performing Bach’s motet for double choir, **Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied**. When it was over he cried with delight, ‘Now there is something one can learn from!’ he was told that this school possessed a complete collection of Bach’s motets which were preserved like a saint’s relics. Mozart asked to see them. As there was no full score of these pieces, he examined the separate parts and it gave the silent onlooker great pleasure to see how eagerly Mozart distributed the parts round him in both hands, on his knees and on nearby chairs. Oblivious of all else, he did not rise until he had scrutinised all Bach’s available music. He then asked for copies”.

It seems incredible that under Hiller, Bach’s successor at Leipzig, all Bach’s music had been relegated to limbo.

Bach’s great contemporary, Handel, was another profound influence on Mozart who famously orchestrated **Messiah** adding instruments and parts. To this day many prefer **Messiah** in Mozart’s version. He admired Handel and arranged many other of his oratorios and you can hear pre-echoes of Mozart’s own phrases in these arrangements.

Before I come to the **Requiem** it's worth mentioning a brilliant and justly famous miniature which Mozart wrote in one afternoon in Baden (while his wife was taking the waters there) in July 1791 – the last year of his life. This is the motet **Ave Verum K.618**, a serene meditation on the Body of Christ. It is deceptively radical – the musical lines not following the verse form at all

So, then, to Mozart's last composition the **Requiem in D-minor K.626**. This work is shrouded in mystery and superstitious legends have accumulated around it. We now know that it was commissioned by an amateur musician Count Walsegg-Stuppach who wanted a Requiem for his late wife which he could pass off as his own. How much of this work did Mozart actually write and how much was finished after his death by his pupil Franz Sussmayr?

Sussmayr wrote a few years after Mozart's death that he had to compose only the close of the **Lacrimosa**, the whole of the **Sanctus** and **Benedictus**. The **Requiem** is an outstandingly beautiful piece of music and so those who think that it is mainly Sussmayr's work must ask themselves why we find no other music by Sussmayr which is half as good as this.

Among the colossal Mozart literature, I believe the best book is the study simply called *Mozart* by Wolfgang Hildesheimer. Towards the end of this work, Hildesheimer writes,

“The almost continual creative activity of an intellect who towered so far above his society, and yet continually communicated with it and seemed to adapt to it, but who lived in it as a stranger, a condition neither he nor his circle could encompass; who grew ever more deeply estranged, never suspecting it himself until the end of his life, and making light of it until the very end – our imagination cannot accommodate such a phenomenon”.

Peter Mullen, January 2007