

Mass in C minor, *Great Mass*, K.427 / 417a

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

The celebration of sacred services was held in very high regard in Salzburg when Mozart was growing up. The head of the city's government was not just a Prince but a Prince-Archbishop who had to answer to the Roman Catholic hierarchy leading ultimately to Rome, even while navigating a political balance that included the Archduke of Austria (who was also Holy Roman Emperor). The Salzburg Cathedral was in constant use, resounding not only with Masses but also with the sounds of other liturgical celebrations. About the time Mozart was born, the Salzburg Court-Chapel employed nearly a hundred musicians, who kept busy with the composing and performing of sacred music for Salzburg's faithful.

Mozart produced a freshet of liturgical music during his Salzburg years, including 15 complete cycles of the Ordinary of the Mass (the backbone of daily worship), and also Vespers, Litanies, and motets for assorted occasions. These works are in every case competent, and on many occasions they rise above that level. But Mozart was not at heart a church musician — or at least circumstances turned out in such a way that sacred music was not usually his principal interest.

In 1781 he escaped Salzburg and settled in Vienna, where he focused almost exclusively on secular works like symphonies, concertos, chamber music, and operas. His most notable sacred compositions from his Vienna decade are this C-minor Mass and his Requiem, both of which are towering but unfinished masterpieces.

The story of the C-minor Mass begins, in a sense, with Mozart's marriage to Constanze Weber in August 1782, without having first received the blessing of his father, Leopold. The newly wedded Mozart appears to have dreaded the unavoidable confrontation with

his father and kept delaying visits home to Salzburg. To ease the situation, he decided to appeal to Leopold's staunchly Catholic instincts and started writing letters about how much he and Constanze were going to church. Then he reported that he was writing a Mass, not on commission from anyone but rather out of thankfulness over his marriage (or, according to one account, in thanksgiving for Constanze's recovery from an illness), and that it would be ready to be performed when he and Constanze came to visit Leopold in Salzburg. In January 1783 he reported that the Mass was half finished.

They finally traveled to Salzburg in October 1783 — more than a year after they were married — and it seems that Leopold and Mozart's sister, Nannerl, at least behaved

In Short

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna

Work composed: late 1782 to early 1783

World premiere: The Kyrie, Gloria, and Sanctus / Benedictus were perhaps first performed on October 26, 1783, at St. Peter's Abbey in Salzburg.

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 20, 1979, James Levine, conductor, with Kathleen Battle, soprano, Maria Ewing, mezzo-soprano, Philip Creech, tenor, John Cheek, bass, and New York Choral Artists

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 27, 2012, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Alan Gilbert, conductor, with Jennifer Zetlan, soprano, Jennifer Johnson Cano, mezzo-soprano, Paul Appleby, tenor, Joshua Hopkins, baritone, and the Colorado Symphony Chorus

Estimated duration: ca. 56 minutes

cordially, if somewhat coolly by Mozart family standards, which could tend toward the raucous. Mozart had still completed only part of his Mass. Still missing were part of the Credo, the entire Agnus Dei, and part of the Sanctus. During that visit — on October 26, 1783 — some Mass of Mozart’s was performed in Salzburg, with Constanze appearing as a soprano soloist. That may refer to the completed sections of the C-minor Mass, perhaps eked out by pre-existing Mass movements, or it may not refer to this work at all.

Mozart never returned to work on that Mass. He was always busy with other things and either it was a luxury he couldn’t afford or else, with Leopold appeased, it would serve no useful purpose — perhaps a bit of both. The gaps in the score have kept scholars and editors busy ever since. Among the musicologists who have put forth solutions to this score are Joseph Drechsler (in 1847), Alois

Schmitt (in conjunction with Ernst Lewicki, 1901), H.C. Robbins Landon (1956), Franz Beyer (1979), Richard Maunder (1989), Robert Levin (1994 / 2005) and Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs (2010). The version used here is that published in 1983 by the New Mozart Edition (Neue Mozart Ausgabe), edited by Monica Holl, assisted by Karl-Heinz Köhler. This version does not attempt to turn the existing score into a complete Mass (say, by grafting in movements from other Mozart scores). Instead, it maintains the structure as Mozart left it, and the Austrian composer Helmut Eder filled in musical lines that Mozart had left unwritten.

Instrumentation: flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, organ (continuo), and strings, plus four soloists (two sopranos, tenor, and bass-baritone), and mixed chorus.

A Life Beyond

Since Mozart never completed his C-minor Mass, it could not have been put to use in a liturgical celebration unless other Mass movements were employed to fill in the unfinished parts. In any case, the magnificence, virtuosic demands, and luxurious length of the portions he did complete would have mandated against its performance apart from some celebratory occasion budgeted with opulence in mind. In fact, Emperor Joseph II had recently instituted rules aimed at reining in the length and sumptuousness of church music; in 1783 he cut in half the financial allocation for church music in Vienna. The prospects for a piece like the C-minor Mass were not good.

In 1785, however, the Vienna Composers Society commissioned Mozart to compose a cantata for a Lenten pension-fund benefit. Mozart seized on the opportunity to repurpose the Kyrie and Gloria from his incomplete Mass into the new piece. Fitted with an Italian text throughout (presumably by Mozart’s future opera librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte) plus two newly composed arias, the work re-emerged under the title *Davidde penitente* [K.469]. Apparently Mozart was upfront about his recycling, since the Society advertised the piece as “a new cantata adapted to the occasion by Sig. Amadeo Mozart.”



Detail of a Mozart portrait by his brother-in-law, Joseph Lange, 1782

Text and Translation

Mozart's Mass in C minor, Great, K.427 / 417a

KYRIE (Chorus and Soprano)

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 (Chorus)

Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.

Glory to God in the highest.

and on earth peace to all those of good will.

Laudamus te (Soprano)

Laudamus te

Benedicimus te.

Adoramus te.

Glorificamus te.

We praise You,

We bless You,

We adore You,

We glorify You.

Gratias agimus tibi (Chorus)

*Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam
gloriam tuam.*

We give thanks to You, according to Your
great glory.

Domine Deus (Sopranos)

Domine Deus, Rex caelestis,

Deus Pater omnipotens.

Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe.

Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris

Lord God, king of heaven,

God the almighty Father.

Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son.

Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father.

Qui tollis (Chorus)

*Qui tollis peccata mundi,
miserere nobis.*

*Qui tollis peccata mundi,
suscipe deprecationem nostram.*

*Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris,
miserere nobis.*

You who remove the sins of the world,
have mercy on us.

You who remove the sins of the world,
receive our prayer.

You who sit at the right hand of the Father,
have mercy on us.

Quoniam tu solus (Sopranos and Tenor)

Quoniam tu solus Sanctus.

Tu solus Dominus.

Tu solus Altissimus ...

Because You alone are holy.

You alone are the Lord.

You alone are the highest ...

Jesu Christe (Chorus)

... Jesu Christe.

*Cum sancto Spiritu in gloria
Dei Patris,*

Amen.

... Jesus Christ.

With the Holy Ghost in the glory of

God the Father,

Amen.

CREDO

Credo in unum Deum (Chorus)

*Credo in unum Deum
Patrem omnipotentem,
factorem caeli et terrae,
visibillum omnium, et invisibillum.
Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum,
Filium Dei unigenitum,
et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula.*

*Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine,
Deum verum de Deo vero.
Genitum, non factum, consubstantialiam
Patri:
per quem omnia facta sunt.
Qui propter nos homines,
et propter nostram salutem
descendit de caelis.*

Et incarnatus est (Soprano)

*Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto
ex Maria Virgine. Et homo factus est.*

SANCTUS (Chorus)

*Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus,
Domine Deus Sabaoth,
pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.
Osanna in excelsis!*

BENEDICTUS (Sopranos, Tenor, Bass-Baritone, and Chorus)

*Benedictus qui venit in nomine
Domini.
Osanna in excelsis!*

I believe in one God,
the Almighty Father,
maker of heaven and earth,
and all things visible and invisible.
And I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only begotton Son of God,
and born of the Father before all ages.

God from God, light from light
true God from true God.
Begotten, not made, of one substance with
the Father:
by whom all things were made.
Who, for us
and for our salvation,
descended from the heavens.

And was made flesh by the Holy Ghost
from the Virgin Mary, and was made human.

Holy, Holy, Holy,
Lord God of hosts,
the heavens and earth are filled with Your glory.
Hosanna in the highest

Blessed is he who comes in the name of
the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest!