

# The Bach Magnificat

Performance Practice, Symbolism, Text and Historical Relevance of the Work

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Music Historiography I

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Johann Sebastian Bach's Magnificat epitomizes the Magnificat setting. The intricacies, symbolism and subtext throughout the piece serve to exalt and magnify God to the highest degree. Bach's life, the world at the time, and baroque custom influenced his writing and have brought us one of the most inventive settings of the Magnificat.

Bach was born in Eisenach, Germany, to Johann Ambrosius Bach and Maria Elisabeth Lämmerhirt. During his early years, Bach attended the Lateinschule, where he was taught theology, along with other subjects. Later, in his studies at the Michaelisschule, he "embraced orthodox Lutheranism, logic, rhetoric, Latin and Greek, arithmetic, history, geography and German poetry."<sup>1</sup> Bach's devotion to Lutheranism and religion as a whole is evident in his compositions throughout his entire career. He wrote the Magnificat for his first Christmas season at Leipzig on Christmas Day, 1723.<sup>2</sup> At this time, Bach was thirty-seven and had been working as a composer and organist throughout Germany for some time. This was the prime of Bach's compositional career, as this is the same year his famous passion of St. John was composed. The original Magnificat was sung for over ten years until Bach revised it for an Easter season.<sup>3</sup> Originally written in E-Flat Major, the piece contains interpolated Christmas movements. According to Terry, "It was Leipzig custom to punctuate the performance of the Christmas Magnificat with stanzas of congregational hymns, and movements of similar character."<sup>4</sup> These

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<sup>1</sup> Christoph Wolff and Walter Emery, "Bach, Johann Sebastian," Oxford Music Online, 2001, , accessed November 15, 2018, doi:10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.6002278195.

<sup>2</sup> Don V. Moses, Robert W. Demaree, and Allen F. Ohmes, *Face to Face with Orchestra and Chorus: A Handbook for Choral Conductors* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Don V. Moses, Robert W. Demaree, and Allen F. Ohmes, *Face to Face with Orchestra and Chorus: A Handbook for Choral Conductors* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Sanford Terry, *Bach: The Cantatas and Oratorios; The Passions; The Magnificat, Lutheran Masses and Motets: Five Volumes in One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

were redacted for the revised Easter version. In addition to this redaction, Bach also lowered the Key to the more regal-sounding key of D Major, bringing even more emphasis on the Magnificence of God. The second version was also re-orchestrated, but the reason for this is unknown. Bach had been known to write for his needs at the time, (i.e. he wrote for the performers he had that particular day), which could have been the reason for the re-orchestration. It is worth noting that the Magnificat score is one of the only scores in which Bach orchestrated more than one bassoon. "On rare occasions, Bach had two Bassoons at his disposal." Since the Magnificat was a High Mass and such an important day in the liturgy, it is logical for Bach to have employed additional players for this celebration. Some sources say that the original E-flat score of the Magnificat did not survive in its entirety; however, some publishers, including Barenreiter, have included these movements in the appendix of the full score.

The Magnificat is very concise compared to some of Bach's other choral works. The entire piece contains less than six-hundred bars, and it is considerably shorter than the Credo, a single movement from the B-minor Mass. None of the choruses are particularly lengthy, and the arias are not in *da capo* form. For one of Bach's earliest large choral works, it is impressive how efficient, yet expressive he is in his writing.

The Magnificat text originates from the Gospel of Luke in the Canticum of the Virgin Mary (Luke 1: 46-55). According to *Text and Annotations of Choral Repertoire, Sacred Latin Texts* by Jeffers, the Magnificat text is "A personal expression of joy and thanksgiving and, symbolically, thanksgiving prayer and praise of all Israel for the Incarnation's fulfillment of God's promise of redemption." Since the Rule of St. Benedictus (525 A.D), the Magnificat text was an integral part of the traditional liturgy, serving as the pinnacle moment of the office of Vespers. The nature of the text is quite proclamatory. The text is as follows:

My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded: the lowliness of his handmaiden: For behold, from henceforth: all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me: and holy is his Name. And his mercy is on them that fear him: throughout all generations. He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away. He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel: As he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed forever. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son: and to the Holy Ghost; As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen.<sup>5</sup>

The declarative affect of the text is represented in the first movement with fanfare of horns and a virtuosic proclamation. Bach strongly emphasizes the word Magnificat, to the degree that it is only excluded from two vocal bars. This movement has been described by scholars as an “ecstatic clamor of jubilation.”

Bach’s rendition divides the Magnificat text throughout the twelve movements. Each movement fixates on one or two sentences of the Canticle, each with contrasting compositional styles. An example of this can be found in the seventh movement, “Fecit Poténtiam,” which refers to God showing strength with his arm and dispersing the proud and arrogant. On the word “dispérsit,” or disperse, Bach literally disperses this word throughout the choir from top voice to bottom. This signifies the proud and the arrogant being ejected from their place of egotism.<sup>6</sup>

Bach employs a similar use of symbolism in the eighth movement, “Deposit potentes”, which is verse fifty-two and translates to, “He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek.” Bach not only displays the affect of the text through harmony, but also through various compositional tools, such as text painting. In this movement, Bach

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<sup>5</sup> Ron Jeffers, *Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire* (Corvallis, Or.: Earthsongs, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Magnificat D Major BWV 243 2nd Version with the 4 Inserts from the E-flat Major Version (transposed)*, BA 5103 ed., vol. BÄRENREITER URTEXT (Germany: Barenreiter, 2017).

represents the mighty, or pharisees, being violently cast down from their seats through virtuosic descending lines. By contrast, the exaltation of the humble and meek is represented with ascending musical lines, which serve to emphasize the lifting up the common people.<sup>7</sup>

Bach also iterates the text inventively in the second half of the Magnificat's final movement. The twelfth movement, *Gloria Patri*, has two distinct sections. In the first section of the movement, Bach uses the text "Glory be to the father and to the son and to the holy ghost." During the second section, the text "Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper" is sung, which translates to, "As it was in the beginning, is now." Bach cleverly reiterates the opening musical theme from the first movement as a sort of pun on the sacred Latin text.<sup>8</sup>

In the eighteenth century, Bach was not recognized in the way that he is today. Most of his work was not discovered or discussed until performed by Felix Mendelssohn. This is what makes performance practice for Bach's music so interesting. He composed and achieved compositional virtuosity unlike any other musician of his time. With a revolutionary mind of his caliber, it is fair to assume that his personal choice in regards to performance practice may have differed from what we know of typical Baroque performing practice. Since all of our sources are secondary, it is impossible to know what his interpretation of adagio was, yet scholars have clear opinions on what is right. The Baroque period is thought to have thinner-sounding violins and a more prevalent use of woodwinds. The string section had bows that were shaped differently than modern bows, which creates a natural *Messa di voce*. Aside from the knowledge of how Baroque instruments were constructed, one could argue that it is impossible to be certain that Bach's

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<sup>7</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Magnificat D Major BWV 243 2nd Version with the 4 Inserts from the E-flat Major Version (transposed)*, BA 5103 ed., vol. BÄRENREITER URTEXT (Germany: Barenreiter, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Magnificat D Major BWV 243 2nd Version with the 4 Inserts from the E-flat Major Version (transposed)*, BA 5103 ed., vol. BÄRENREITER URTEXT (Germany: Barenreiter, 2017).

performance practice and typical Baroque performance practice are one in the same. Scholars agree with this notion, stating, “Mendelssohn’s performances of Bach’s oratorios were a completely new beginning after many decades of silence. Romanticism, the style of his age, was vigorous and spirited, and there was no dutiful feeling that Bach’s work should be performed as he had intended.”<sup>9</sup> Aside from the scores, we have little to no resources from Bach on how his music should be performed. Because of this, in order to deliver what could be perceived as an authentic performance, one must observe historical evidence and typical Baroque performance practice.

Throughout his life, Bach was influenced by French culture. Due to the fact that Germany was a lower-class country, Germans looked to the French for artistic guidance. The French style of composing would have been perceived by Germans as particularly noble. It is for this reason that some composers, including Bach, may have used these practices for something as holistic as a Magnificat. One French practice that composers may have chosen to incorporate is *Notes Inégale*. In relatively simple terms, this is the practice of playing altered, uneven and almost “swung” rhythms on a notated straight passage.<sup>10</sup> The reasoning behind this is not known, but historically speaking, dotted rhythms were perceived as more regal-sounding than straight rhythms.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of inspiration, Bach borrowed from and observed several “Greats” of the time. Oxford Music Online states:

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<sup>9</sup> Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Mary O’Neill, and Reinhard G. Pauly, *The Musical Dialogue: Thoughts on Monteverdi, Bach, and Mozart* (Portland, Or.: Amadeus Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Judy Tarling, *Baroque String Playing for Ingenious Learners* (St. Albans, Hertfordshire: Corda Music, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Newman, *Bach and the Baroque: A Performing Guide to Baroque Music with Special Emphasis on the Music of J.S. Bach* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Pr., 1986).

As composers who influenced the young Bach, C.P.E. Bach cited (in 1775, in letters to Forkel) Froberger, Kerll, Pachelbel, Frescobaldi, Fischer, Strungk, certain French composers, Bruhns, Buxtehude, Reincken and Böhm – almost exclusively keyboard composers; C.P.E. Bach also said that Bach formed his style through his own efforts and developed his fugal technique basically through private study and reflection...As later influences, C.P.E. Bach named Fux, Caldara, Handel, Keiser, Hasse, the two Grauns, Telemann, Zelenka and Benda. This list, though certainly less representative than the earlier one, suggests that Bach's main interests still lay in his great contemporaries, whose music he not only heard but also studied in transcripts. With them he abandoned his one-sided attention to the organists among older composers, but his interest in the retrospective style represented by Fux and Caldara, complemented by his enthusiasm (mentioned by Birnbaum, 1737) for Palestrina and Lotti, is notable, and is borne out by tendencies in his music from the mid-1730s.<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting that Bach observed so many accomplished keyboard composers, and it is evident in his compositions that, even for his choral works, he borrowed from the style that they were employing. Bach was known to compose very difficult organ works, not only because he was often writing for himself, but also because his influence by keyboard composers lent him the knowledge to be so prolific in this genre. The keyboard part of the Magnificat is typical in the sense that it is notated as a *basso continuo*, and in Bach's major choral works he rarely wrote as difficult of keyboard parts as those which appeared in his solo organ pieces.

Bach's Magnificat epitomizes regality and courtliness throughout the entire work. For a piece that is as complex as the Magnificat is, it is remarkably concise. His use of text painting and symbolism musically demonstrates the sacred text and provides drama and excitement in every moment of the piece. Additionally, Bach's use of French compositional style provides an augmented sense of regality throughout the work. Bach's masterful ability to convey meaning through compositional style is paralleled by no other. However, it is worth noting that much of the modern perception of acceptable Bach performance practice is due to Mendelsohn's

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<sup>12</sup> Christoph Wolff and Walter Emery, "Bach, Johann Sebastian," Oxford Music Online, 2001, , accessed November 15, 2018, doi:10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.6002278195.

revitalization of Bach's works. Bach's compositions are masterful, but musicians will never be certain of true Bach performance practice as he would have intended.

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