

Unlocking the Mozart Code

Robert Levin fills in the gaps of the *C minor Mass*.

BY JOHN GINN



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Robert Levin

This summer, while movie audiences flock to see Tom Hanks unravel the mystery of *The Da Vinci Code*, visitors to the Oregon Bach Festival can participate in the solving of another ancient mystery. The case before audiences at OBF involves the creation and completion of Mozart's *Mass in C minor*. Until the beginning of the 20th century, it was somewhat of a lost masterwork. Now it's regarded as one of Mozart's finest creations though its origins are sketchy.

What is known: In January of 1783, a newly married Mozart wrote to his father telling him of a half-finished mass, a work in progress. Later that summer, Mozart and his wife traveled to Salzburg and the work was performed in October of that year. Parts of the concert performance were bequeathed by Mozart's sister into the keeping of the Church of the Holy Cross, where choirmaster Pater Matthius Fischer assembled them into an incomplete and patchwork score.

Over 200 years later, enter Robert Levin, a Harvard musicologist commissioned by the Carnegie Institute to complete Mozart's fragmented *Mass*; "a torso," as Levin called it, missing several of the most important parts of the liturgy. That Mozart would have left the *Mass* as is, Levin said, is inconceivable.

The trail took Levin deep into archives, diaries, letters and other Mozart scores. Like many composers, Mozart was not above occasionally quoting or borrowing from one piece to fill out another. Combing through Mozart's other scores of the time, Levin discovered a sketch here, a musical theme there and other subtle clues that seemed to indicate that certain sketches were intended to be part of the *Mass*.

Not only were certain liturgical parts missing, but the Fischer scores themselves were often incomplete, with some instrumentation suggested in the original but not included. Levin compared the scores with other Mozart church pieces to deduce what he might have intended for his *Mass*. "I have tried to understand how he thinks, how he composes, his approaches to local and mid-range and larger content ... rhythm, melody, counterpoint, etc.," Levin said.

But in the end, all that scholarship had to give way to a decision and a commitment to carry it through. No matter how elemental a sketch he discovered, Levin had to augment it into a viable piece of music. "Mozart's style is dependent upon rigorous structural proportions and the balance of a number of different musical ideas," Levin said. "Just finishing a sketch in a way that sounds OK could make it sound like Rachmaninoff, Brahms, Dvorak or a television advertisement. The challenge is to make it sound entirely like Mozart so that an intelligent listener unaware of the history of the piece would not be likely to realize that the work was not fully composed by Mozart. I am not saying that this is necessarily possible, or that I have succeeded, but that was the task I set for myself."

Audiences at the OBF will hear a mass with the missing orchestration completed and seven new movements added, making it about half again longer than previous incarnations. Whether Mozart would approve of the new sections is debatable, of course, but to my ear the merger of old and new is seamless. ■

Mass in C minor will be performed 8 pm Friday, June 30 at the Hult Center.

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