



Jonathan Dove

Köthener Messe

During his years in Köthen, Bach had no official duties in church or chapel. At St Agnus Kirche he had to listen to the efforts of inferior musicians, and doubtless instantly composed in his mind the music they should have written.

Perhaps, one day, he falls asleep during the sermon. As he dreams, fragments of his instrumental pieces (from the Köthen period: the Brandenburg Concertos and the First Book of *The Well-tempered Clavier*) form themselves into a mass: a dream-mass in which certain musical ideas are recognizable, but their powerful logic has gone – they have detached from their surroundings and float in free association. As the great man's head nods, incomplete phrases of the E minor prelude repeat fretfully and become the accompaniment for a Kyrie; a passage from the slow movement of the 4th Brandenburg Concerto drifts waywardly into 'Christe eleison'; the prelude returns in augmentations that Bach would forbid, if only he could wake up.

Now the Gloria: the prelude and fugue in G major mingle with snatches of the 3rd and 4th Brandenburg concertos. The Sanctus is a dreamlike meeting between the 6th concerto and the C major prelude. It leads seamlessly into the Benedictus - a pupil is playing the B flat major prelude, but his left hand has started on the wrong note. Finally, in the Agnus Dei, the (transposed) opening of the B flat minor prelude repeats itself over the subject and answer of the B minor fugue, and eventually over the closing bars of the fugue – but Bach is still fast asleep, and his music plays in slow-motion.

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