

Mini-Project 105 Gratias Agimus

This Mini-Project is about challenging your listening skills, noticing as much as you can. You've got the option of practising score reading – following the written music as you listen. There's a little bit of terminology and you may discover some major works you'd like to hear more of.

This is the only pdf in this Mini-Project. No writing is required so you don't have to have a hard copy. You do need access to Youtube for the recordings.

You're going to listen to different settings of the same words by three well known classical composers. It won't take much time – the longest is 3 minutes. It's just 7 words from the Mass, from the Gloria section. “Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam” means “We give you thanks because of thy great glory”.

These extracts are from major works in the classical choral repertoire. Vivaldi's “Gloria” is a very popular piece. It isn't ever so long, because it is only the Gloria section – but that has a lot of words so there is plenty for Vivaldi to get to grips with. He wrote it in about 1715 when he was employed at an girls' orphanage in Venice. The girls were trained to very high levels in singing and instrumental playing.

Considered one of the greatest works ever composed, Bach's “Mass in B Minor” was completed in 1749, a year before he died. It's big in every way, using large forces to perform it and lasting about 2 hours.

Two of Mozart's masses are particularly well known. His “Requiem Mass” remained unfinished at his death. The other one that is often performed is the “Great Mass in C minor”, composed in 1782/3, and that's the one you are going to meet here.

Vivaldi's “Gloria”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afTDs2ajPI0>

Vivaldi takes 27 seconds to set the first 3 words: “Gratias agimus tibi”. He uses chords, having all the singers making the words at the same time. This texture is called **homophonic**, all the sounds as one – most hymns are homophonic. The notes of the highest part gradually rise and there's some extra intensity because he changes the key (modulates). He goes through the words twice. It's like an announcement.

Then he moves onto the final 4 words: “Propter magnam gloriam tuam”. He changes both the texture and the busyness of the music. The tune starts with the same note 4 times over for “prop-ter mag-nam” before jumping up for a longish note at the start of “glo-” followed by a lot of quavers. All very glorious. This isn't homophonic. Instead the parts come in one after the other, imitating each other. It's a fugue – like a complicated round. A term for a music texture when different things are going on at the same time is **polyphonic**.

You may notice that the orchestra doubles the voices – the first violins play the same as the sopranos, and so on down the choir and orchestra. Notice the trumpeters sitting silent. They are reserved to add excitement in other places in the work.

Bach wrote in the same musical style as Vivaldi – called the Baroque, but he went on honing and developing the techniques.

He gives you three intense minutes in his **B Minor Mass**.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4x4gj1fqSE>

Bach's approach is to create two contrasting melodies, one for "Gratias agimus tibi" and the other for "Propter magnam gloriam tuam". The first starts with 4 steady rising notes, curves around a bit and then comes down to the starting one. The second starts with a longish note and then has lots of quavers for "glo-". You've heard that idea before.

Whereas Vivaldi put his two bits of music sequentially, Bach combines them, and all the music is polyphonic. He makes a texture from the two melodies, overlapping and combining them. Over the course of the piece, the pitch gradually rises – well, it could hardly fall and if it hovered around in the same place that would be a bit disappointing.

If you like the piece and have time to listen again, focus on the sound of the orchestra. Like Vivaldi, Bach doubles the vocal parts, and the trumpets are silent. About 2 minutes in you really notice them, not only playing but independently of the voices, bringing in yet another layer of the first time, ever higher. A single trumpet does play a couple of times earlier, doubling the sopranos but it's discreet. Maybe Bach was being very wise, giving the player of a tricky instrument the chance to get warmed into playing before a very exposed entry.

Mozart's setting of the section in his **Great C minor Mass** is the briefest of the three, just over a minute. His version starts boldly with the singers entering part by part and going through all the words. Although their entries are staggered, the texture is mainly homophonic. After the strong opening it all goes quiet and the singers repeat their words, pleadingly, but becoming loud again for "propter magnam gloriam tuam".

You probably can't have missed that the orchestra is not just doubling the voices. The wind players. Their sounds blending well, but the strings play quite an agitated, dotted rhythm, making arpeggios out of the chords the singers are making. What do you think about the effect? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sR3ZDulz4W8>

If you are enjoying this listening project, you can listen to two recordings of the piece while you watch the score. It's a piano reduction of the score, but you can still see a lot. Here are the links:

Bach <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Belbi3tSQw>

Mozart https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97Twh_q8lQs go to marker 14.26

I can't find a video with score of our bit of the **Vivaldi**. But here is the score <https://ks4.imslp.net/files/imglnks/usimg/c/c0/IMSLP89126-PMLP29257-Vivaldi-GloriaVSlr.pdf>

You need to start at page 30.

It isn't a competition, but did you prefer any one of the versions? Why?

After all that intense listening try two later settings both by Italian composers mainly known for their operas.

Rossini wrote his Petite Messe Solomnelle in 1863. He was and is mainly known for his operas – which had been so successful that he retired from writing them, three decades before this piece. He hadn't lost his touch though. The “Petite” aspect is because it is for only 12 singers and the accompaniment originally was for 2 pianos and a harmonium. Rossini later scored it for orchestra and that's what you hear here. The Gratias Agimus Tibi section is for 3 solo singers, bass, alto and tenor – they enter in that order. Rossini's trio lasts for a bit over 4 minutes, all using the same 7 words over and over again.

Listen out for the three voices coming in one after the other with the same musical material. Then there's a dramatic bit starting with some loud Propter Magnams (1.51). They initiate some dramatic stuff, then the orchestra winds down the emotion and the music returns to the opening idea (2.22) for a bit. There's some new music for Propter Magnam, then it all gradually relaxes again.

Notice how the orchestra is more of an equal partner in this setting. It plays quite a bit on its own.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqJufzsqA8Y>

Puccini's Mass was a student work – written for his graduation in 1880 when he was just 22. The whole piece is for tenor and bass soloists, choir and orchestra. Puccini set the “Gratias Agimus” section as a tenor solo accompanied by the orchestra. This aria is just a little longer than Bach's setting. At 3.22 it runs straight into the next section – some loud choral Gorias.

Have a listen – or two. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FSJixGmc9s>

I like the fact that it's recorded by the soloist.

What do you think? What sort of thanking is Puccini thinking off, and what is his sort of glory? What's the relationship between the singer and the orchestra?

Curious to hear more settings? You'll find them in the Gloria section of any mass, and there are thousands of those, but you'll have to hunt your way through the Kyrie and the rest of the Gloria first.

Here are a couple of earlier ones that may or may not have been performed originally with instruments doubling the voices. Homophonic or polyphonic?

Lassus, 1532 – 1594 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq5LQ1pmeCU&vl=en>

Hans Leo Has(s)ler 1564 - 1612 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2H1hdNnufrg>

And finally two 20th century pieces – both have the score on the video

Igor Stravinsky “Mass” for voices and wind instruments

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRi_MDy_ks0 3.30 to 3.54 on the counter

Benjamin Britten “Missa Brevis in D” for a three part boys' choir and organ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNQv2DYLUL0> 2.15 to 2.24