

Bach's *Magnificat* emerged over the course of a decade, beginning with an initial version in E-flat major (now referred to as BWV 243.1) composed for the Feast of the Visitation in the summer of 1723, his first year at Leipzig's Thomaskirche. Several Christmas-themed movements were then added to the work, probably for a service in December of that same year. In 1733, he transposed the piece to D major, eliminated the Christmas inserts, and burnished the orchestration, adding flutes and clarifying harmonies throughout.

It is the 1733 version (now referred to as BWV 243.2), dating from roughly the same time as the Kyrie-Gloria section of the *Mass in B minor*, that is most performed today. Although BWV 243.2 bears surface similarities to the *Mass*—the five-part choral texture, lack of *da capo* arias, careful balancing of structure and affect, use of the Latin text—it is in every way less imposing and more vivacious. The text holds the key to the directness of the *Magnificat*'s appeal. Where the *Mass Ordinary* was stitched together from prayers and creeds that spanned centuries and genres, the *Canticle of Mary* is a single, spontaneous effusion of the spirit—purposefully sung, not spoken, so that we, too, might sing it down the generations.

Hearing the beginning of the *Magnificat* is rather like opening the door and walking into a lively party, very much in progress. In Martin Luther's 1521 exegesis on the *Magnificat*, well known to Bach, he writes that at this moment "our whole life and soul must be *set in motion*, as though all

that lived within us wanted to break forth into praise and singing." After this festive opening, two arias for soprano voice express Mary's thankfulness and humility, culminating in a chorus on the text "omnes generationes"—a reflection of the expectant mother on the meaning of this new life not just for her, but for all humankind. As the Bach scholar Wendy Heller writes, in her rich and compelling analysis of the *Magnificat*, Reformed churches grappled a bit with the treatment of Mary, still a beloved and central figure, but no longer on the throne of heaven. In Bach's reimagining, what Mary loses in divinity, she gains many times over in humanity.

A succession of solo movements, framing a chorus on the text "fecit potentiam", form the central section of the work, which is devoted to Mary's recitation of God's manifold miracles. The text emphasizes the theme of power drawn from humility, which is seen as the root of Mary's deep wisdom. Bach's setting of the text "dispersit superbos mente cordes sui" is particularly delicious, even sardonic: he uses a regal flourish of trumpets and drums to mock, in Luther's words, "the proud in the imagination of their hearts, that is, those who delight in their opinions, thoughts, and reason, which not God but their heart inspires, and who suppose that these are right and good and wise above all others." Those who are consumed by self-regard; the hypocrites; the so-called legends in their own mind.

The final section of the work considers God's ancient promise of redemption, the fulfillment of that promise, and its

meaning for the future. Bach dramatizes the narrative with a steady accretion of musical forces: First, a spare, mystical trio (*Suscepit Israel*) for the soprano and alto soloists, associated with the *Magnificat* in music of the early church. The chorus then bursts in with a jaunty fugue (*Sicut locutus est*), joined by the full complement

Magnificat anima mea Dominum,

Et exsultavit spiritus meus in
Deo salutari meo,

Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae
suae; ecce enim ex hoc beatam me
dicent omnes generationes;

Quia fecit mihi magna, qui potens est,
et sanctum nomen eius.

Et misericordia eius a progenie in
progenies timentibus eum;

Fecit potentiam in brachio suo,
dispersit superbos mente cordis sui;

Deposuit potentes de sede,
et exaltavit humiles;

Esurientes implevit bonis,
et divites dimisit inanes.

Suscepit Israel puerum suum,
recordatus misericordiae suae,

Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros,
Abraham et semini eius in saecula.

Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui
Sancto, sicut erat in principio,
et nunc, et semper, et in saecula
saeculorum. Amen.

of continuo instruments. Strings and woodwinds join on the text "Gloria Patri", with flamboyant, improvisational writing for the chorus. At last, the trumpets and timpani blaze forth, and the music circles back to opening—"as it was in the beginning."

My soul doth magnify the Lord,

*And my spirit hath rejoiced in
God my Savior,*

*For He hath regarded the lowliness of his
handmaiden; for behold, from henceforth shall
all generations 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.*