

Background on Mass for Choir & Chamber Orchestra

This composition has had a long gestation. Its Sanctus seeds were sown in the 1980s. Some movements date from decades back with a few recorded and left to sit. Ideas for reworking and completing the material have bounced around in my brain for about 25 years. Recently I decided it was time to come to grips with the thing. Here's the history.

Let's look at the major parts — Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei. That's from the traditional Ordinary of the Roman Mass as defined in the 1500s and followed ever since by liturgical Christians. My notes say I sketched the Sanctus draft in 1985. That would have been with a rented piano in a high-rise apartment on the coast of Lima during my time in Peru. I recall playing with that music when I first set up a mini music studio in my New York apartment in 1988. That was just a Mac Plus and Yamaha synth (TX81Z) by my Yamaha Clavinova keyboard, along with a couple small speakers and embryonic software, Performer and Deluxe Music Construction Set, which used a new language called MIDI. I began with pencil and staff paper, typing notes into the computer. All crude and slow by today's standards but exciting in those days.

So intrigued by the technology, I returned to the **Sanctus**. I thought an a cappella choir would inspire with the lyrical lines and modern modulations of its opening A section in triple meter. So you hear that passage three times; form AABA. The B section offered contrast in a fast fughetta and excited syncopation. The Benedictus words then brought a return to the A theme. I was proud of it and with the dot-matrix printer working at a minute or two per page and a cassette recorder to capture the midi sound, I had something to show my musical mentor, Donald Hinkle. Don, bless him, tried it with the choir at Trinity Lutheran Church in Reading, PA in 1989 or 90 I think. He told me they handled the A section pretty well, but never managed the B section, so he cut it for church. If there was a recording, I never heard it. Probably just as well. But a valuable lesson for me.

Still I thought I would set other mass texts, jotting down ideas with organ, strings, and both. (A cappella was clearly not the way to go.) I came back to the Sanctus and saw it was suited for string accompaniment doubling the voices. Later (late 90's & early 2000's) I revised the strings beyond the vocal lines. I expanded the coda for the second set of hosannas reflecting the B-section motif and an echo of the opening phrase. It worked. In 2009 I made string parts and registered my copyright. Nothing happened with it until 2024. Then in conversation with Parma Recordings about an upcoming choral album (Celestial Voices Vol. II) I asked if we could add a piece with strings. It was recorded and released in 2025 to positive reviews. And I thought, "what if people ask about this mass? I need to get busy!" So I finished the rest in three weeks in May 2026, but that's getting ahead of the story.

I'm pretty sure the **Credo** came next, starting in January 1989. Then I was a peacekeeping observer in the Sinai, with time for a big project to start the new year. I conceived this movement from the get-go for both organ and string accompaniment. My imagination heard the choir declaiming "credo" on basically one pitch while instruments play big chords all around them — a musical standing firm against the onslaught. And this brief episode would be a kind of antiphon for the choir to repeat between sections, a unifying element. With all the creed's words, there are five such sections. I decided some would be with strings, some with organ, some with both. I got out my staff paper, entering the notes into the computer subsequently.

I had a long draft and took it with me in 1991 to my posting in Bonn, Germany, where I later added material by improvising at the keyboard and using the computer to capture that, then selecting good bits, cutting and pasting, and editing extensively to suit the text. So I was moving beyond the pencil, using the MIDI sequencer, Performer, while keeping track of the text in my head (more or less) because synthesizers didn't do words. The Credo lived as a MIDI sequence for several years. I liked listening to it, but knew that parts needed refashioning to fit the text. Busy with other music and my day job, I let it lie dormant until 2003. Then, back home in the U.S. and slightly less busy, I entered it into a better program (Finale). By then I had more than 10 years experience with this software, the professional notation standard for most of that time.

At that point I was still thinking organ, but I've mentioned winds. I decided a few weeks ago that a wind quintet should round out the chamber orchestra. Organ remains a performance option in lieu of woodwinds, but I prefer their individual expressive possibilities and tuning finesse. This means my older pieces have had their organ part transcribed for winds. And the newly-written ones were scored directly for flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, and bassoon with organ transcription coming after. So far it's never been performed or heard beyond my computer. At one point this single movement was 9'45"; now it's a little shorter, but still an ambitious composition.

The lyrical **Agnus Dei** dates from about 1992, when I was in Bonn. I had gotten some additional synthesizers filling up a corner of my living room, including a Korg Wavestation with lush, dynamic string sounds. That inspired me and we premiered this movement with the choir of the American Protestant Church there in a concert of my music in June 1994. The main part is tuneful and rich, somewhat restrained in harmony. The B section contrasts with simple motifs and chromatic descending harmony, what one singer called my "going Chinese." It builds big when the theme returns, then there's a quiet "miserere" ending with a haunting solo line that intertwines with high violins. Thanks to director Margo Nisita, organist Hans-Peter Bähr (now a prominent music publisher) and especially soprano Mary Boy for making that happen. Kathryn Chelsen was serving in the U.S. Embassy too and she helped with the concert organization. That performance was with organ, no strings.

It went over well and it's structurally the same piece today. We also performed it in the U.S. in 1997 at Holy Trinity Lutheran in Annandale, VA. That was the North American premiere of this movement, taking place on Maundy Thursday with soprano

Kathleen Makris, violist Ann Elmquist, choir and organ. Their director at the time, Shirley Echard was an early supporter of my compositions, for which I am ever grateful. She played the organ this time as I recall. Since then I've improved the text underlay to bring the rhythm of the words and music into better sync and filled in the orchestration a bit. I hope to hear it live with the full forces one day.

I wrote the **Gloria** in 1995. Well, I wrote a piece over seven minutes long then and it only covered the first few lines of the Gloria text. It contrasted an energetic 7/8 "refrain" against sustained "verses." 30 years later it's still some of my favorite music. We recorded it with a fine group of local singers and organist Paul Skevington in 2009. I knew it was overgrown, out of scale for a mass. But it makes a nice Christmas selection. Over the years I thought about the text, including returning to the refrain's music for a Quoniam section.

Today there are three parts to this Gloria in Excelsis. The first is about 40% of the text and follows my original music more or less. The third part is about 20% of the text and echoes that music in abridged form. It also includes a newly-composed fugue for Cum Sancto Spiritu. The middle movement, Domine Fili Unigenite, came to mind a couple weeks ago with a view toward contrast. It's a sweet tenor solo accompanied by flute, alto clarinet, and bassoon. It complements the outer movements and fits the scoring for winds plus double bass.

A reader keeping track will realize that until recently I had four substantial mass sections (or proto-sections) composed. There were also sketches I discarded and one bit made into a separate song (Laudamus Te). We recorded that with tenor Mark Husey and organist Daniel Elmer in 1997 and it's available as well in transcription for various instruments and organ. When I decided to get busy, I began by converting my old files into the terrific Dorico notation program from Finale, which had aged out of widespread use. But my remaining tasks went way beyond housekeeping.

A complete mass needed its beginning and end — **Kyrie** to open and **Dona Nobis** to close. So I mapped out the landscape of the existing music, its keys and modes and their relationships. I then wrote a main theme for both Kyrie 1 and Dona Nobis Pacem, putting the first movement in F Dorian and the last in C Ionian/Mixolydian. Thus they relate well to their adjacent movements as well as to each other. For the second Kyrie I composed a fugue with a subject reminiscent of Kyrie 1's opening motif. I wrote the Dona Nobis, Kyries and Christe in quick succession. The latter is a quiet duet, in major mode, for the vocal soloists accompanied by a pair of winds and a string quintet. With these four, plus the Cum Sancto and Domine Fili mentioned above, I completed the mass in 16 days of focused effort.

While I found the results good, some leavening was in order. The sections of Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei presented a significant amount of strong music calling for concentrated attention from the listener. Plus I'd been pondering some sort of Lord's Prayer setting. I find it more meaningful and powerful than a Credo. So as points of aural relaxation, I composed three quieter meditations for instruments alone.

And I placed the Pater Noster between the Sanctus-Benedictus and Agnus Dei. It would quote the timeless Gregorian chant while offering a calm choral prayer in unison. This movement and its preceding meditation employ only flute and strings in a tranquil mood. Together with the other meditations, these additions made for, it seemed to me, a well-balanced work with smooth transitions in tonality.

Proofing, tweaking, and making audio demos followed to round out the project. Which is more characteristic of its composition: four decades of visiting the work off and on, or three weeks of intense activity to whip it into shape? I think both. It's satisfying to see how I have grown as a composer but also how I had good instincts years ago, i.e. compositions that didn't need wholesale revision to make the grade. I feel the outcome is cohesive and effective, a rather good sausage. But even more, I hope people will find it inspiring whether or not they know the back story.

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