

## Will Todd : Mass in Blue (jazz mass) Op. 28 (2003)

Written in 2003 in response to a commission by Hertfordshire Chorus, and originally premiered under the title Jazz Mass, Will Todd's Mass in Blue is a brilliant blend of driving jazz grooves and clear, strong, choral writing against which the solo piano and solo soprano voice weave and blend in a delightful aural tapestry. The work reflects not only the composer's love of jazz music and his admiration of jazz performers, but also his own experience as an improviser. It also allows Todd to make use of his extensive choral skills which he deploys so effectively in works such as the oratorios *The Burning Road* (Op 10) and *Saint Cuthbert* (Op 7) or the chorus writing of his opera *The Blackened Man*. It is a confident work by a composer who understands and responds to the jazz idiom, making free use of the 12 bar blues sequence (which has been fundamental in the development of jazz music) as well as more complex harmonic processes.

The **Kyrie** opens with an energetic cadenza for the trio section which builds into the first set tempo of the work. Over this the first vocal entry is heard, a bluesy theme reminiscent of negro spirituals and therefore apt for the text *Kyrie Eleison - Lord have mercy*. Gradually other lines join the initial melody until the full choir is singing. On a move to the sub-dominant B flat the choir ecstatically bursts forth with *Christe Eleison* and as this music subsides we hear the soprano enter on a soulful melody with a strong improvised feel, which builds over the return of the original key of F minor. The music of the *Kyrie Eleison* is repeated with the soloist interwoven around the vocal lines in a virtuosic display. The movement slows and closes on a thrilling F minor 11 chord.

The **Gloria** is set up with a fanfare from the brass which punctuates the whole movement. From the moment the choir enters there is an uplifting rhythmic drive to this setting with the full brass section adding a distinctive colour. In the central section of the *Gloria* a pulsating 5/8 time is set up which gradually builds until a recapitulation of the opening material brings the movement to a close.

The **Credo** features the soprano in a colourful 12 bar blues in 12/8 time. There is a strong gospel feel with the choir repeating lines from the soloist and humming soft backing harmony. Again in three sections, the first blues part gives way to a more sombre section at the *Crucifixus*, and after *Et sepultus est (and he was buried)* a piano solo leads the band into a blazing depiction of the moment of resurrection. The *Et resurrexit* is set with a scorching up-tempo swing which eventually cuts back into the 12/8 as the movement builds to a thrilling climax.

Like the **Gloria** the **Sanctus** is set for the choir and band without the soloist. It is a beautiful, slow ballad set up initially on the piano in which the woodwind players are featured, especially soprano sax. The movement provides a welcome period of tranquility and reflection after the sheer energy of the previous 3 movements.

The **Benedictus** begins with solo double bass over which the choir sings a theme which builds up from the basses through the rest of the voices. This music is gradually invaded by a new, more driving beat and the solo voice begins to weave into the texture once again. This funky riff gradually takes over and the music emerges into a powerful *Hosanna* section with punching brass and a jubilant choral sound.

The **Agnus Dei** grows out of the dying echoes of the *Hosanna* with a haunting soprano ballad accompanied by piano. In the stirring *maestoso* which follows, we hear the main themes of the work on high trumpet fanfares and strong trombone chords. Once again

the strong 12 bar blues harmony underpins the texture. A huge climactic entry from the choir subsides into a gentle A minor section in which intricate choral lines are woven over a simple, repeated chordal structure. After another big build this time with the chorus featured, the music returns to the opening ballad theme, the soprano now accompanied by soft choir and brass. This is a substantial movement and is more than beautiful – it is painful, plaintive, a cry for mercy and a prayer for peace. Traditionally the mass would end here, but in another dramatic master-stroke Will Todd leaves the altos hanging on a soft E after the last chord of the *Agnus Dei*. The air of expectation grows as the sopranos softly recapitulate the *Credo* theme. Gradually the music builds with the soloist entering and then the tenors and basses. Suddenly the driving 12/8 beat of the *Credo* is forcing the music forward as the choir sing *Et expecto resurrectionem (we look for the resurrection)* and the music comes back to the key in which the work began, F minor. The emphatic final chords of the work leave the listener not in quiet contemplation but jerked forward into praise and belief. *Credo Amen!*

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