

Martin: *Mass for Double Choir*

considerations for successful rehearsing

Biographical information

- Frank Martin was born in Geneva, Switzerland on September 15, 1890.
- Youngest of 10 children; their father was a Calvinist pastor. Calvinist spirituality was very important to Martin & impacted the composition of the *Mass*.
- He heard a performance of the Bach *St. Matthew Passion* at the age of 12 (probably one of the earlier performances outside of Germany!) and cites this as the impetus for a career in music.
- Martin composed ten works for choir; many others for orchestra, small ensemble, and one opera. After the *Mass* was composed, Martin shifted to a 12-tone, serialist language. Those looking for *Mass*-like harmonies will not find them in any of his other choral works.

The *Mass for Double Choir*:

- SATB (x2) with occasional divisi.
- Contains all five portions of the Roman Mass Ordinary.
- The Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, and Sanctus were all composed in 1922; the Agnus Dei was added in 1926.
- The work was premiered in 1963 by the Bugenhagen Kantorei of Hamburg (DE) and was first published by [Bärenreiter Verlag](#) shortly thereafter.

A program note written by Martin for a performance of the work in 1970 shows slight discomfort with the popularity of the *Mass* and acknowledges that his compositional output changed significantly before the *Mass* was published:

“Except for the ‘Agnus Dei’ composed in 1926, this mass was written in 1922, and was an absolutely free and disinterested undertaking. At the time of my life I knew no choir director who could have been interested in it. I never presented it to the Association of Swiss Musicians for performance at one of their annual meetings, and as a matter of fact I did not want it to be performed, since I was afraid that it would be judged from a purely esthetic viewpoint: I considered it at the time as being a matter between God and myself. The case was the same later on, for a Christmas oratorio: I felt that an expression of religious feelings should remain secret and removed from public opinion. Hence this work stayed for forty years in a drawer, although for the form it did figure on the list of my works. That is where Mr. Franz W. Brunnert, Director of the Bugenhagen Kantorei in Hamburg, saw it mentioned in 1962, and he asked me to send him the score for study. He presented the first performance of it with his choir in the fall of 1963, 41 years after it was composed. Everything I have just said about this Mass indicates clearly that, even though I used rather great means, this music is of entirely interior expression. Since that time my musical language has evolved considerably. There are cases of clumsiness I would no longer commit (I will make other mistakes – who doesn’t?), but there are also musical elements which are very close to me, proof being that I used again a phrase like ‘et incarnatus est’ in the unpublished Christmas oratorio, underlining the text ‘Comme il avait aime les siens dans le monde, il les aima d’un supreme amour’ [‘As he had loved his own in the world, he loved them with a supreme love’]. Let us hope that one may still find conviction, youth, and some beauty in this Mass which is almost half a century old.”

There are four points of consideration for a conductor when preparing for rehearsals of the Martin *Mass for Double Choir*:

1. Intonation: Modal and impressionist harmonic language provide for unique challenges for even professional singers.
2. Vocal fatigue: The piece far exceeds the comfortable ranges for singers, particularly in the soprano and tenor sections, which can impact the longevity of the vocal instrument as well as the more immediate concern for intonation.
3. Rhythmic challenges: Shifting time signatures and use of odd meters provide difficulty for the choir, especially within the context of a dense, 8-, and sometimes 12-part texture.

Intonation

Most of this presentation relies on the 'Sanctus' as it is the most extracted movement of the work, and the issues found there can be transferred to the other movements with relative ease.

The Sanctus explores several modes including Mixolydian, Dorian, as well as the standard major and minor tonalities. The work also features un- and under-prepared modulations. From the very beginning, the tenors and basses sing in 4-part texture an opening rhythmic and harmonic ostinato with an F# pedal. In measure 6, the addition of the first choir sopranos gives the first glimpse at a Mixolydian flavor with the addition of a C-natural atop a D Major chord. The chord in measure 6 is also a hallmark of the entire piece: a first-inversion chord with the addition of a non-chord tone.

This same kind of tonal difficulty is found in the opening of the second movement, the **Gloria**. Beginning very similarly, Martin builds a Lydian-esque modality culminating with, again, a first-inversion, D-major chord with the added C#. **And, in the Kyrie**, measure 28 features a root-position e-minor chord with the addition of an F#. While these are not the only chords that will be difficult to tune while preparing the Martin Mass, paying particular attention to chords like these will assist the choir throughout the entire work.



The image shows a musical score for the Sanctus. It features a vocal line at the top with the lyrics "Sanc-tus, Sanc-tus, Sanc-tus Do-mi-nus De-us Sa-ba-oth," and piano accompaniment below. The score is marked "dolce" and includes dynamic markings such as "pp" and "p". The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The score is divided into measures, with measure 6 highlighted.

A possible mitigation strategy for intonation is found in choral seating. Seating the choir in double-choir formation is ideal. The published work by Bärenreiter offers a suggestion, but below is my own. Because the basses and altos often provide the root and third, respectively, having higher voices 'sandwich' them will allow them to acoustically fit their intervals. Additionally, warm-up exercises that include modal tones would be of utmost importance. This is also important due to the amount of modal, scalar passages utilized throughout the work. This will also be helpful in discovering which scale degrees of the various modes the choir will sing out of tune. For example, a lowered seventh scale degree in the mixolydian mode is most likely to sit heavily on the voice, especially in D-mixolydian, and under pitch, while raised fourth scale degrees in the lydian mode can sit sharp.



Vocal Fatigue

Barbara Doscher, in a 1991 Choral Journal article remarks, “if the tessitura is too high and stays in the upper passaggio (Eb 2 to G2 for females and D1 to F#1 for males) too long, the laryngeal muscles, both extrinsic and intrinsic, are overtaxed,” which, as we know as singers, can impact the longevity of the vocal instrument as well as more immediate concerns for intonation. Barbara Doscher, “Exploring the Whys of Intonation Problems.” Choral Journal 32, no. 4 (November 1991), 27, 25-30.

For this reason, it is advisable to have sopranos and tenors especially rehearse the extremes of the range the piece demands down an octave, or on a lip trill. A lip trill releases much pressure off the larynx if done properly, while also giving the singer an idea of the amount of breath required to accomplish a given passage of the music. We can see examples of these extremes particularly in the first choir sopranos -- and we can see examples of this in the **Sanctus**.

Additionally, you might consider “mixing” the voice parts -- as in, having half of the first sopranos and half of the second sopranos in each choir, respectively -- and this can go for all voice parts.

Most recordings of this piece utilize what many in the choral profession like to call “straight tone,” while others take on a small amount of vibrato to allow freedom in the voice, especially in the upper registers. I like to avoid the use of the phrase “straight tone” in my own practice, as it tends to elicit the use of musculature that can be harmful to sustainable vocal production, particularly the muscles in the neck that surround the larynx.

The image displays musical notation for various voice parts, organized into two columns: 'Range' and 'Tessitura'. The 'Range' column shows the full vocal range for each part, while the 'Tessitura' column shows the specific notes used in the piece. The parts are: Soprano I, Soprano II (Mezzo), Alto (with 'Upper:' and 'Lower:' sub-sections), Tenor I, Tenor II, Baritone, and Bass (with 'Upper:' and 'Lower:' sub-sections). Each part is represented by a staff with a treble or bass clef and a key signature of one flat. The notes are marked with 'a' and 'b' to indicate specific pitches.