

MUSIC AS THEOLOGY¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, known as Candlemas, 2 February 2025, and on the Orchestral performance of the Mass in C Major, K257 "Credo", by W A Mozart

It is my great privilege to preach when we celebrate with Mozart's "Credo" *Mass in C Major*, K 257 of 1776, written when he was 20 years old. It is named "Credo" because of its extended treatment of the Credo text. Although the decision to compose in this way was entirely Mozart's, the treatment itself is certainly appropriate because the Creed is the hinge or pivot of the Mass. Before it we have the ministry of the Word; after it we have the ministry of the Sacrament. We conclude hearing the Word by expressing our faith in the Creed. We cannot proceed to the Sacrament without that faith. Thus, the Creed is truly the hinge on which the Mass swings. A composer is well justified in emphasising it.

This year is the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, called by Emperor Constantine in 325 AD to combat the Arian heresy. This council began the process that ended in our Creed, to which it gave the name. So, the choice of this Mass is especially appropriate for 2025.

Today's Mass was the second of Mozart's Masses to be called a "Credo Mass", the first was *Missa Brevis in F Major, K192* of 1774. How does Mozart create his emphasis on the Credo? First, he does so by an elaborate setting. The Credo text is already the longest in the Mass, so it will take some time anyway unless the setting telescopes it by singing some separate sentences at the same time, as Haydn did in his *Little Organ Mass*.²

Mozart's first scholarly biographer, Otto Jahn,³ commented that the Credo "offered the greatest difficulties to musical treatment". Being dependent, in the Latin text, on the single word "Credo" at the beginning, it is hard to maintain the grammatical connection through each of the following sentences. In both his Credo Masses, Mozart resolved this problem by inserting and repeating the word "Credo" at appropriate points, mostly in unison, as you will soon hear.

Jahn identified a second problem. The Credo is a long statement of theological belief. The sections might be declamatory in tone, where a big sound would suffice, but emotion is more difficult to express. The sections of the Credo that describe the events of Jesus' life: incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension, are not only theologically important, but they also provide the best opportunity for emotional expression. Jahn said:

Mozart's wonderful genius succeeded in awakening imagination and emotion which, again, his artistic moderation knew how to calm; his firm grasp of his art enabling him to produce the most striking effect with the simplest means, and to gather up the details, so that each sustains and elevates the other without injuring the consistency of the whole Credo.⁴

Mozart wrote this Mass in the last period of his employment by Prince-Archbishop Hieronymus Collredo of Salzburg.⁵ Collredo required Masses to last no longer than 45 minutes and yet

¹ Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24 or 84; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

² [Missa brevis Sancti Joannis de Deo - Wikipedia](#)

³ [Otto Jahn - Wikipedia](#)

⁴ Otto Jahn, *Life of Mozart*, translated by Pauline D Townsend, Vol. 1, London, Novello, Ewer & Co, 1882, p. 249

⁵ [Hieronymus von Collredo - Wikipedia](#)

to include all the necessary orchestration, “trumpets, drums etc”.⁶ Mozart was not happy there and soon departed Salzburg, never to return.

Since this is a Credo Mass, we might like to ask what the composer himself believed. There is considerable debate about Mozart’s beliefs. The theologian Hans Küng was convinced that Mozart was a believer,⁷ others less so.⁸ As his modern biographer, Jan Swafford, says, at the time of writing this Mass, Mozart “socialised with friends, went to Mass, played at cards and shooting, strolled with the family dog, wooed girls ...”,⁹ that is, behaved like a 20-year-old. In that context, even to ask about his beliefs is strange. Why would we think that he was any different from an ordinary Catholic living in the late 18th century? Why do we think that we can give a single answer for the whole 35 years of Mozart’s life? If we are to find a sensible answer, we must find it in the music itself.

That these discussions are important is supported by the comments of theologian Karl Barth, who said:

It may be that when the angels go about their task of praising God, they play only Bach. I am sure, however, that when they are together *en famille* they play Mozart and that then too our dear Lord listens with special pleasure.¹⁰

As Jeremy Begbie comments, this may be because Barth saw Mozart’s music as exemplifying the ‘authentic praise of a finite, limited creation.’¹¹ Barth was so serious in his praise of Mozart that he devoted part of his major theological work to him.¹² He notes that Mozart had neither theological qualifications nor holiness of life, but that he “knew something about creation in its total goodness” that none with the apparently appropriate qualifications knew. He had this knowledge because he heard it. Barth argues that creation includes both chaos and harmony:

Hearing creation unresentfully and impartially, he did not produce merely his own music but that of creation, its twofold and yet harmonious praise of God...Mozart causes us to hear that ... in its totality, creation praises its Master Mozart has created order for those who have ears to hear, and he has done it better than any scientific deduction could.

In an article about Choral Evensong that he wrote in 2014 for the UK paper, *The Guardian*, Canon Giles Fraser echoed Barth when he said:

The best theologians are musicians. And Christianity is always better sung than said. To the extent that all religion exists to make raids into what is unsayable, the musicians penetrate further than most.¹³

And what about ourselves? As we hear Mozart’s Credo, what do we believe? What we take to be the doctrines and beliefs of Christianity are the result of the application of reason to our religious experience. That application led the Church to produce the Nicene Creed, which was, in effect, made up by the church. While it contains nothing contrary to the scriptures, it is a

⁶ Jahn, p. 244

⁷ Hans Küng, *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence*, Eerdmans, 1993

⁸ [Mozart, Religion and Death. Precis: Mozart’s relationship to... | by Otto Deutsch | Medium](#) and [Mozart: Divine, dirty, and poor? - ABC Classic](#)

⁹ Jan Swafford, *Mozart: the Reign of Love*, London, Faber & Faber, 2020, p. 187

¹⁰ [Karl Barth - Oxford Reference](#)

¹¹ Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 95

¹² [Karl Barth on Mozart – Tom Underhill](#)

¹³ [If religion exists to make raids into what is unsayable, musicians penetrate further than most | Giles Fraser | The Guardian](#)

development and organisation of what the scriptures say. Not only that, the Creed has also been subject to various interpretations over time. Mozart lived during what we call “the Age of Enlightenment”,¹⁴ under the influence of scientific discoveries and rationalist philosophy. Prince-Archbishop Colloredo was, in his day, a progressive, admiring Voltaire and Jean Jacques Rousseau, which is possibly behind his reduction in church liturgy. His detractors called him a “secret Lutheran” who had “neither *Gloria* nor *Credo*”. I do not know exactly how our predecessors in the faith have taken the words of the creed, but I do know that I view the world very differently from those who lived in the 4th, 16th and 18th centuries. Thus, as I say the creed, I locate it in my world, not theirs. I expect that you do the same.

In the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* this festival, set down for 2 February, is entitled ‘The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, commonly called, The Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin.’ The latter name, ‘The Purification of the Virgin Mary’ is the name by which the feast was most known until the liturgical revisions of the mid-twentieth century. In the 1978 *An Australian Prayer Book* the Presentation is in large type and the Purification in very small type, while in the 1995 *A Prayer Book for Australia*, which we now use, the Purification of the Virgin Mary has disappeared altogether, leaving the Presentation of Christ in the Temple in sole possession. The same is true of the Roman Catholic calendar.¹⁵

Most of this morning’s gospel reading is given over to two very old worshippers in the Temple: Simeon and Anna. Their reactions allow Luke to indicate the important role that Jesus was to play. Simeon had been assured that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Using the words so familiar to us as the *Nunc Dimittis*, part of the order of Evening Prayer, he identifies Jesus as the Messiah. His words to Mary also indicate Jesus’ death, a sword that would pierce his mother’s heart. Anna, who is described as a prophet, and who must have had some official recognition in the Temple, also says who Jesus is.

This gospel draws us to what I have already described as the central part of the Creed: the life of Jesus. As Tom Wright suggests, this gospel is about drawing us in:

No matter who or where you are, the story of Jesus, from the feeding-trough in Bethlehem to the empty tomb and beyond, can become your story.¹⁶

Simeon and Anna remind us that the origin of our belief is not in any series of propositions, no matter how well argued, but in what we see and experience. The Creed itself comes from the community of faith trying to organise and express what it already knew. Our act of faith is not one of binding ourselves to the words but of living into them.

When I pray to You, words are not enough.
They fail to tell You what is in my heart
Until I add the *midrash* of my art.

Music is feeling filtered through fire,
Purified passion, molten desire.
Music is sunlight that shines from the soul.
Words come in fragments, music is whole.

¹⁴ [Age of Enlightenment - Wikipedia](#)

¹⁵ See John Henry Blunt, *The Annotated Book of Common Prayer*, Rivingtons, London, 1872, p. 131.

¹⁶ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone (New Testament for Everyone Book 4)* London, SPCK p. 27.

When I pray to You, words are not enough.
My supplication turns into a song,
Asking for the grace for which I long.

Music's a gift from Your heart to mine.
As I write it, our spirits combine.
Your gift to me twice given proves:
Through it I give You the gift of my love.¹⁷

And our challenge this morning is to have Mozart's ears as we listen to his *Credo*.

¹⁷ [A Religious and Philosophical Poem About Music as a Kind of Prayer | by Nickgo | Medium](#)



W A Mozart portrait c1781