



# AN AMERICAN MASS: CELEBRATING OUR SHARED MUSIC IN AN ANCIENT FORM

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The Mass is a treasured form in the Western canon of music and liturgy. A celebration of the sacrifice offered for the forgiveness of sins in the early Christian faith, it is still part of the worship in modern Catholic denomination. Settings of these ancient texts have been continuously performed both in liturgy and in concert for hundreds of years. From plainchant settings by anonymous monks to the high drama of majestic settings by Mozart, Beethoven, and Haydn for chorus, soloists, and orchestra, the Mass text continues to provide inspiration for composers. Mass settings appear less frequently among the non-idiomatic compositions of Black composers. Marques Garrett's online resource of "Non-Idiomatic Choral Music of Black Composers"<sup>1</sup> identifies fifteen, only a few of which utilize the forces of mixed choir and orchestra. When the search is stretched to idiomatic music, defined here as gospel, spirituals, jazz, hip-hop, and rap (among others), more examples exist, including the well-known *Gospel Mass* composed in 1978 by Robert Ray.

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In that same year, André Thomas, a first-year doctoral student at the University of Illinois–Champaign–Urbana, performed as a pianist and singer in the premiere performances of Robert Ray’s newly composed *Gospel Mass*.<sup>2</sup> Some forty years later, Thomas would find himself surrounded by signs that he should pursue a Mass project of his own. The resulting work blends both the idiomatic and non-idiomatic aspects of Thomas’s compositional oeuvre, resulting in a work that is in his unique voice—an American voice.

### About Mass

*Mass: A Celebration of Love and Joy* is written in a *Missa Brevis* format with a complete *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei* in English translation (Table 1).<sup>3</sup> Utilizing the Mass movements as a framework, Thomas incorporates other scriptural texts into the work freely. The length of the work is approximately twenty-five minutes.

Each movement can be performed as a stand-alone piece. This *Mass* is set for SATB voices with some divisi. The choir will find much to enjoy, and much to challenge them. The challenges are primarily in the colorful gospel and jazz harmonies and some complex rhythmic structures. The use of 9th and 11th chords is common. Thomas makes frequent use of a specific chord (1-♭3 or 6-5-♭7-+8) in all his works and it appears in the *Mass* as well (Figure 1 on page 57). Thomas’s signature playful rhythms are featured throughout the piece. The use of syncopation is consistent.

Stylistically, the *Mass* is a pastiche of Thomas’s many compositional interests. To call it a “gospel mass” is a misnomer. Though there are suggestions of influence from Ray’s *Gospel Mass* and a healthy dose of gospel style, particularly in the deployment of the solo voices, the piece also suggests Thomas’s spiritual arrangements as well as his original compositional ideas.

**Table 1. *Mass: A Celebration of Love and Joy***

Movement	Duration	Key	Soloist
<i>Kyrie</i>	3:40	dm-FM-CM	T solo (optional S solo)
<i>Gloria</i>	4:05	GM-gm-GM	S solo
<i>Credo</i>	4:55	CM	T solo
<i>Sanctus</i>	3:50	CM-cm	T and S or A solo
<i>Agnus Dei</i>	4:40	CM-FM-CM-B♭M	T Solo
Full Instrumentation	2 fl, ob, ob/eh, 2 cl, 2 bn, 4 hn, 3 tpt, 3 tbn, tba, timp, 2 perc, drum set, piano, strings		
Chamber Instrumentation	fl, ob, cl, bn, 2 hn, 2 tpt, tbn, bass tbn, timp, 2 perc, drum set, piano, strings, electric bass		
Trio Instrumentation	piano, electric bass, drum set		

**Kyrie m. 68**

**Sanctus m. 48**

**When the Trumpet Sounds m. 52**

**Figure 1.** André J. Thomas, *Mass: A Celebration of Love and Joy*.

Signature “Thomas” chord examples

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*When the Trumpet Sounds*

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The work encompasses his experience with Western sacred and secular music, traditional gospel styles, and settings of the spirituals of the African slaves. The styles are blended freely, just as the slaves blended their native music with their captors’ music. The result is best described as a truly “American” Mass. It is a unique blending of cultural experiences from the ancient Christian church, to Black church traditions in the southern United States, to the earliest concertized spirituals performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, to the grand tradition of choral-orchestral masterworks societies across the globe.

## Movement by Movement

The piece begins with an intense setting of the *Kyrie*. In performance, Thomas added ghostly “oohs” and “Oh Lord!” improvisations for the soprano soloist over the initial accompaniment measures and in between the chorus’ rhythmic statements of the *Kyrie* theme.<sup>4</sup> The composer suggests the use of *staccati* on the sixteenth notes in the opening measures with a strong emphasis on the final two syllables of “eleison.”<sup>5</sup> At m. 12, strong emphasis can be placed on the words “mercy on us.”

The tenor soloist introduces new material that directly quotes Thomas’s much-loved *Where Shall I Be When the Trumpet Sounds*.<sup>6</sup> which incorporates melodic and rhythmic material from the spiritual, *Sinner, Please Don’t Let This Harvest Pass*<sup>7</sup> (Figure 2 on page 58). This spiritual is thought to have been used as a message song to slaves about to attempt escape via the Underground Railroad.<sup>8</sup> In the original version, the title stanza is repeated three times: “Sinner, please don’t let this harvest pass...” and the chilling conclusion, “and die and lose your soul at last.” Even though they may have been afraid of the journey, it was essential to take advantage of the opportunity—an interesting juxtaposition with the *Kyrie* text. The spiritual has been arranged by William Grant Still, Margaret Bonds, Florence Price, and Mark Butler, among others.

Thomas asks the chorus to add a marked crescendo on the word “don’t” in m. 19. The initial *Kyrie* plea returns, only to be interrupted by new material for the unified tenors and basses at m. 37, drawing

textual inspiration from Thomas's own background in African American spiritual arrangements, many of which incorporate trumpet imagery, and the text of 1 Corinthians 15:52 that inspired movements in Handel's *Messiah* and Brahms's *Ein Deutsches Requiem*. The *Christe eleison* begins as a contemporary gospel solo for the tenor with original text by the composer, allowing the soloist to function as a worship leader or intercessor. The chorus takes up the plea to Christ at m. 51, leading into a repetitive one measure phrase for the chorus through a variety of richly harmonized chordal structures and the tenor's improvisatory exhortations lead to an exciting and dramatic finale as both soloist and chorus beg for the Lord's mercy.

The *Gloria* begins in a stately, joyous tempo. Thomas gives special attention to the *staccati* idea on "highest" in the opening section, which introduces a repeated melodic motive. This motive occurs throughout the

piece and incorporates the following pitches  $\flat 7-5-4-\flat 3$  in sequence utilizing the entire choir singing in unison octaves (Figure 3 on page 59). The *Laudamus te* text introduces new material with a swung, cool jazz feel before a return to the initial material. The soprano soloist is featured in the next section over a choral "ooh." At m. 51, Thomas incorporated a step-touch for the choir that continued to the downbeat of m. 59 when clapping on beats 2 and 4 was added. Thomas also encouraged the soprano to improvise freely over the repeated measures also beginning at m. 51. Thomas draws the text freely from different translations of the *Gloria*. He chooses to use the pronouns "Thee" and "Thou" throughout. A variant of the Trinitarian formula ("In the name of the Father, etc.") is interpolated before the liturgical text's final *Gloria patri* statement.

The *Credo* text presents a challenge to composers who must find a way to handle the lengthy, yet signif-

Kenneth W. Louis, arr., *Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass*

from *Lead Me, Guide Me*, 2nd ed. (GIA Publications, 2012). Used by permission.

André J. Thomas, *When the Trumpet Sounds*, mm. 24–27

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André J. Thomas, *Mass: A Celebration of Love and Joy*, "Kyrie," mm. 16–19

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**Figure 2.** The Spiritual *Sinner Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass* in its hymn form as quoted by Thomas

icant, text. Thomas addresses the challenge by choosing to set the Apostles' Creed rather than the more substantial Nicene Creed or *Symbolum Nicenum*. This movement is the longest and contains some of the more challenging singing in the piece. The tenor soloist introduced the initial *Credo* statement in English, not unlike an incipit, with the choir joining on "and in Jesus Christ." The tenor soloist (not the tenor section *Soli* as indicated in the score) and the choir repeat this material and continue into the next section celebrating the Virgin birth. Thomas has cited Francis Poulenc's influence on this section utilizing quartal harmonies, concluding with the unison choir's emphatic downward descent to "hell" again, incorporating the  $b7-5-4-b3$  motive. The tenor soloist works his way up through a series of exclamations and pitch levels celebrating the third day's resurrection. At m. 71, the tempo dramatically accelerates with the tenor soloist and chorus in a call-and-response exchange. This call-and-response transfers to the lower voices and the upper voices. All voices begin a joyful repetition of "I

believe" with the tenor section making interjections at m. 119. Thomas directed the choir to pull back to a *sotto voce* at m. 129. He also added a *caesura* at the end of m. 154 for a lengthy improvisation by the soloist before the final chord.

As in the other movements, Thomas does not rely on one strict translation of the liturgical *Credo*, though he closely adheres to the text. His additions to the Apostles' Creed include the belief in one baptism and "that when my life is over, I'm going home to live with my God!" The longing for home and the idea of a "heavenly home" is an idea present in many spirituals<sup>9</sup>—"my home is over Jordan" in *Deep River* and "going home to live with God" in *Soon I Will Be Done*, for example. Interestingly, it is also a direct textual quote of the final line of Robert Ray's setting of the *Credo* in his *Gospel Mass*.<sup>10</sup> For choirs that may be uncomfortable with the *Credo's* reference to the "and the holy catholic church," Thomas suggests replacing it with, "and the church universal on earth" in situations where there is an objection to the term "catholic." Ray also utilized this text swap in his Mass setting on occasion.

Incorporating material from Isaiah 6:1-4, the *Sanctus* begins with what Thomas calls a "mystical" choral setting describing the seraphim. Inspired by a graduate student's research, the opening measures are an homage to legendary Detroit-based gospel choral director and arranger, Thomas Whitfield. The dynamic at the beginning of this movement was changed from *forte* to *mezzo-piano* by the composer in performance. The tenor soloist continues with the seraphic text before the whole chorus enters on a triumphant "Holy!" The liturgical *Sanctus* text is set rhythmically and ends with a unison descending passage, like those found in the *Gloria* and *Credo*.

The soprano soloist returns with a complete statement of the text from Isaiah beginning, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I also saw the Lord..." which leads into a return to the "Holy" material. The *Hosanna* is also adjusted down one dynamic level (*mp* from *mf*) and Thomas was insistent that the choir would not breathe after each repetition of "highest." The upper choral voices and lower choral voices share the *Benedictus* text, which Thomas has set using repeated quarter note triplet patterns, reminiscent of passages in

Figure 3 displays four musical excerpts from André J. Thomas's *Mass: A Celebration of Love and Joy*, each featuring a SATB unison melodic motive. The motives are:
 

- Gloria m. 9:** A melodic line starting on a high note and ending with a descending triplet pattern. The text "high" and "est." is written below the notes.
- Credo mm. 53-54:** A melodic line with a descending triplet pattern. The text "scend - ed in - to hell!" is written below the notes.
- Sanctus mm. 25-26:** A melodic line with a descending triplet pattern. The text "glo - ry, are full of thy glo - ry." is written below the notes.
- Agnus Dei mm. 58:** A melodic line with a descending triplet pattern. The text "is the Lamb that was" is written below the notes.

**Figure 3.** André J. Thomas, *Mass: A Celebration of Love and Joy*.

SATB unison melodic motive:  $b7-5-4-b3$

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his setting of Langston Hughes's *I Dream a World*. The soprano soloist continues with a more personal plea based on the scriptural text already incorporated. The personal nature of these pleas, "I want two wings..." etc., has its roots in traditional gospel music, as well as referencing African American spirituals such as *I Got Shoes* ("I've got wings...") A final repetition of the *Sanctus* section serves to end the movement, but instead of a cry of angels, it is the cry of those on the earth.

Thomas asks for a dramatic crescendo on the initial "Lamb" of the exciting finale to the *Mass*. Conductors should note an error in the alto line at m. 7 and m. 18. The latter half of beat 3 should be an E<sup>♯</sup> instead of an F. The tenor solo line that follows two statements of the *Agnus Dei* is in a contemporary gospel style. The text is by the composer and references the African American experience of slavery through the use of the word "captives," a coded word that could refer to either the Israelites enslaved in Babylon or Egypt or to the enslaved Africans themselves.<sup>11</sup>

The final *Agnus Dei* statement is repeated twice, ending with "grant us thy peace." This is a departure in format from liturgical practice, as is the driving gospel breakdown that follows. In what is surely a nod to Handel's immortal *Messiah*, Thomas incorporates the "Worthy is the Lamb" text from Revelation 5:12-13 and also evokes classic choral gospel works, such as Byron J. Smith's "Worthy To Be Praised" rather than concluding with the *Dona nobis pacem* text. Thomas incorporates movement beginning at m. 47 with a standard step-touch and adding claps on 2 and 4 at m. 84. He also adds an extension to the piece by incorporating a *Dal Segno al fine* at m. 98 that returns to m. 82. The repeated text of "honor and glory and wisdom and power and strength" propels the piece to a stirring ending with repeated "Amens."

### Performing Mass

High school choirs, college choirs, and community and professional ensembles will find the work accessible in its entirety and as excerpted movements. Of special note are the vocal ranges, which are limited and lie in a reasonable tessitura for amateur singers. Care is taken that the tenor part does not lie consis-

tently at the top of the range and the alto part does not lie at the bottom of the range. Each section is given *tutti* solo moments that are melodic and exciting. There is also a great deal of tenor/bass unison sectional singing and soprano/alto unison sectional singing. The work is primarily homorhythmic for the choir with the use of the soloists and orchestra to add texture.

The energy of the piece and some of the more gospel-inspired segments pair naturally with movement. Movement should feel organic, and the ability of the singers in the ensemble to execute it appropriately should be taken into consideration. Simple step-touches and claps are recommended.

The length of the piece makes it ideal to program with another shorter multi-movement work or octavo program. For the ACDA National Conference performance, the *Mass* was paired with *Alzheimer's Stories* by Robert Cohen. Thomas suggests the *Requiem Mass* of Afro-Brazilian composer José Maurício Nunes Garcia, which, interestingly, was the work originally paired with the *Ray Gospel Mass* in 1978. Other possible pairings from Black composers include Rosephanye Powell's *Cry of Jeremiah*, Adolphus Hailstork's *I Will Lift Mine Eyes*, or Psalm settings by George Walker. Several of Thomas's popular spiritual arrangements and non-idiomatic compositions have also been orchestrated and would complement the larger work.

The composer's notes indicate the work may be performed with piano only; piano, bass, and drum set; chamber orchestra, or full orchestra. The piano part will work best with a strong technical player capable of playing the part as notated. Due to the supportive nature of the written piano part, improvisations cannot veer from the established harmonies. Thomas's long-time friend and musical collaborator, Judy Arthur, was the pianist for the 2018 world premiere performances. She found the piano part published in the choral octavo to be more challenging than the orchestral part and to be among Thomas's most challenging piano accompaniments.<sup>12</sup> She says, "Pianists need to have facility playing gospel and jazz styles. *Credo* and *Sanctus* have strong jazz influences, while *Gloria* is a heavy, driving gospel style. If a pianist doesn't have a bass and drum set playing with them, they will have to add a great deal of rhythmic drive to their playing, and heavy on


the bass line. Playing with confidence and style is very important.”

The selection of soloists for the performance of this piece is a crucial element. Two or three solo voices may be utilized. Thomas suggests a lighter soprano voice for the *Gloria* and a more powerful mezzo-soprano or alto voice for the *Sanctus*, though some singers can produce both the necessary delicacy and heft for both solos. The tenor soloist is required to sing several G4s in dramatic, full voice and demonstrate gospel flexibility. The singers must be capable of legitimate classical singing in the upper register, as well as more idiomatic gospel-style chest voice singing and improvisational melismas.

Soprano NaGuanda Nobles has been collaborating with Thomas for almost thirty years and was a soloist at the world premiere performances of the *Mass*. Nobles says, “Dr. Thomas demands excellence and preparation. He welcomes artistry and creativity, as long as it is stylistically appropriate and accurate.”<sup>13</sup> When approaching the role as soloist, the singer must execute the music with beauty, while incorporating improvisations as a tasteful garnish. Nobles credits her church background and her years of experience singing with Thomas for her familiarity with the style of this piece. Singers with less familiarity are encouraged to spend some time listening to a variety of music by Thomas and others to familiarize themselves with the style.

## *A New American Mass*

A new Mass setting by a significant and popular composer is always of interest to choral directors. A setting by a Black composer of international renown is even more exciting. André Thomas’s enduring legacy will be in his music’s accessibility and the enjoyment and satisfaction both singers and conductors find in performing his works. For those who have selected repertoire from his catalog frequently, the hallmarks of Thomas’s style are ubiquitous in this work—the playful rhythms, the carefully written piano accompaniments, and the inviting, singable melodies partnered with gospel forms and jazz harmonies. These elements are paired with incredibly diverse references

from Poulenc to Whitfield and the rich musical and textual legacy of the Black spiritual; the resulting work is an American original. 

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Marques L.A. Garrett, “Beyond Elijah Rock: The Non-Idiomatic Choral Music of Black Composers,” accessed September 21, 2020, <https://www.mlagmusic.com/research/beyond-elijah-rock>.
- <sup>2</sup> Details about Thomas’s life and the writing of the *Mass* come from an interview with the author conducted in July 2020. Details about the Negro spiritual can be found in André J. Thomas, *Way Over in Beulah Lan’: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton, OH: Heritage Music Press, 2007).
- <sup>3</sup> André J. Thomas, *Mass: A Celebration of Love and Joy* (Dayton, OH: Heritage Music Press, 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> The score markings referred to throughout the interview come from the author’s marked score from the rehearsal process with the composer.
- <sup>5</sup> André J. Thomas (composer) in discussion with the author, July 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> André J. Thomas, *When the Trumpet Sounds* (Nashville: Shawnee Music, 1992).
- <sup>7</sup> Kenneth Louis, “Sinner, Please Don’t Let This Harvest Pass” in *Lead Me, Guide Me*, ed. Robert Batastini (Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc. 2012), 774.
- <sup>8</sup> Charles Blockson, “Songs of the Underground Railroad,” in *The Hippocrene Guide to the Underground Railroad* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994), 339.
- <sup>9</sup> Charshee C. Lawrence-McIntyre, “The Double Meanings of the Spirituals,” *Journal of Black Studies* 17, no. 4 (1987): 390-397. [www.jstor.org/stable/2784158](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784158).
- <sup>10</sup> Robert Ray, *Gospel Mass* (New York: Hal Leonard, 1978).
- <sup>11</sup> Lawrence-McIntyre, *Double Meanings of Spirituals*, 390-397.
- <sup>12</sup> Judy R. Arthur (pianist) in discussion with the author, September 2020.
- <sup>13</sup> Naguanda Nobles (soprano) in discussion with the author, September 2020.