





The published edition is more readable for modern musicians:

Bärenreiter BA 5293a (2006)

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**Sanctus**  
BWV 232<sup>III</sup>  
Fassung / Version 1724

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### Why did he do it?

It looks like a deliberate mistake, so what's the hidden message? Pat Saunders replied to a version of this note in the defunct forum of that erudite Facebook page 'Every time you write parallel fifths Bach kills a kitten', to say that Bach saw the octave as a representation of Heaven and Earth. The Sanctus is all about Heaven and Earth getting joined up, and angels are the messengers.

Furthermore, the error happens to be between the choral first angels and the double-grumpies. True, not every day of Bach's life had been a happy one. Also, in his new job transient problems with the choir school resulted in unsatisfactory Key Performance Indicators. According to modern experts, this led Bach to restrict his aspirations for the rest of his life to giving dispiriting historically informed performances.

Bach's thoughts were surely of something more universal. That something could have been one of

the wonkier mysteries of creation, known to the ancient Greeks: musical scales that allow pure harmony don't add up to an octave. Double the length of a vibrating string or organ pipe and you get the octave below. Take 2/3rds of the length and you go up a perfect fifth. Start on some note and go up 12 fifths and down 7 octaves in a convenient order: you visit (sort of) the 12 notes of a keyboard octave and would expect to end up on the note you started from. But, you end up nearly a quarter of a semitone low. Even worse, hardly any of the harmonic intervals in your circle of fifths are perfectly consonant. This problem won't be fixed properly before (if that's the word) the next Big Bang arrives. That's why people were subjected to plainchant (or equivalent) for two millenia.

Only two years before the Sanctus, Bach had completed the first book of 24 preludes and fugues, written to illustrate how a suitable kludge can alleviate the effects of nature's imperfection. Experts on temperaments are troubled because he didn't say what his favourite kludge was.

### **How did he show it was deliberate?**

Given that Bach might have been sending some kind of message, how could he have, as it were, signed it? He was keen on numerology, an ancient means of mystifying the masses that may leave some people cold nowadays. In Bach's time, it was also a common practice to have one's personal number; his was B-a-c-h = 2 + 1 + 3 + 8 = 14 and he used it a lot. Having said that, here are so many ways of extracting a 14 from his names that it seems you could, if you really want to, find a conspiracy theory in almost any of his compositions. Ruth Tatlow wrote a book about the subject, in order to challenge some published nonsense.

Many writers have noted that Bach carefully wove into the score of the Sanctus the sacred numbers of the biblical source: Isaiah chapter 6, verses 2 and 3:

[(1) In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.]

(2) Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

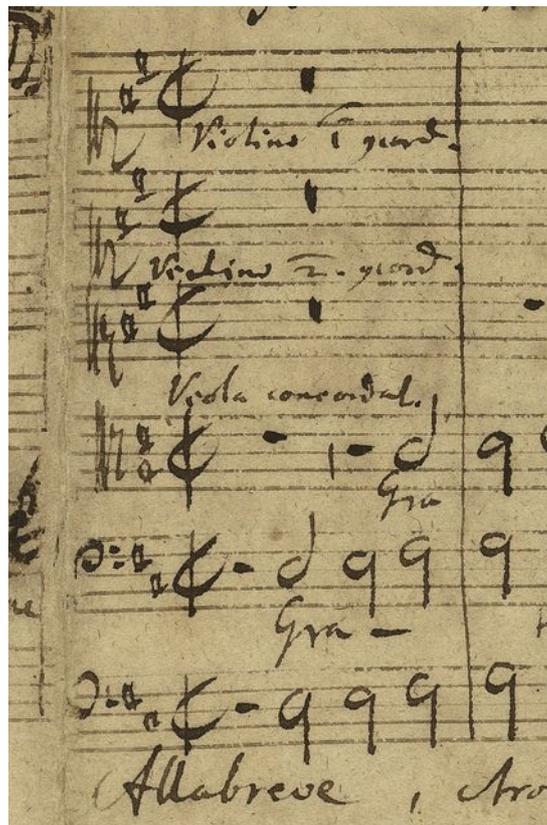
(3) And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.

Of the six choral voices, three were sopranos in the early version, to go with the three trumpets and three oboes. That matches the three spheres, each of three orders, in the hierarchy of angels. The seraphims were top management. Your guardian angel, which you may have wanted to strangle when you were seven-and-a-half, is at the bottom of the pile. Apparently, if you think this is all a load of rubbish you won't necessarily go to hell for all eternity.

How can we find a '14' in bar 27 the Sanctus? The easy way is to multiply 2 by 7, which Bach would probably have liked if he really had been thinking that way.

A remark by Barney Sherman ([www.bsherman.net/bachtempo.htm](http://www.bsherman.net/bachtempo.htm)) sets off another train of thought. Barney was discussing the modern fad for what could be called 'HIPster' ('Bullivantine' in Sheffield) warp speeds for performances, a subject that doesn't concern us much here. Time signatures are thought to indicate baroque composers' intentions with respect to speed. Barney noted that, whereas the B minor Mass has 'C' as time signature (common 4/4 time), the original 1724 version has '♩' (common time crossed out). This alla breve indication can mean either 4/2 or 2/2 (compare for example the B major and E major fugues of Book II of the 48). We note that the early versions of the second Kyrie and the Gratias Agimus Tibi, BWV 232(I), are alla breve but barred in 4/2 time. Short vertical lines are added half way through some of these long bars to guide the reader, as shown below for the early version of the Gratias. Incidentally, given that Bach found it necessary to

guide performers through these long bars, with their big long notes in the antique style, it's hard to understand why the Gratias and particularly the Dona Nobis Pacem are given so indecently fast nowadays.



The 1724 Sanctus has full bar lines throughout (see illustration given earlier). It has the same note values and bar lines as in the B minor Mass (see illustrations above), so the 'c' clearly indicates 2/2. This conveniently avoids the off-topic number '4', but otherwise it may attract attention because it doesn't really suit the crotchet (quarter-note) beats. So, why did Bach indicate alla breve for the early version of the Sanctus, and change his time signature for the B minor Mass in a way that doesn't change the appearance of the score? Could it be that if you switch from 2/2 time to 4/2 (removing half the bar lines) and count up on your fingers, the angelic consecutive double octaves arrive in the first half of bar 14? We could, then, speculate that Bach used the alla breve ambiguity to cover his tracks.

## Conclusion

It's all idle speculation and it's hard to know if this little story is worth telling. After all, the early Sanctus brought only a couple of minutes of brilliance to what seems to have been an interminable ceremony. On the other hand it was the starting point for one of the most profound works ever written.