

The Boston Musical Intelligen

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Bach's *opus ultimum* Triumphant

by SUDEEP AGARWALA

Cantata Singers is among several Boston-based ensembles to have undertaken J. S. Bach's Mass in B Minor (BWV 232) this season, with even more performances to come. This epidemic has resulted in a new type of marathoner, one who excitedly discusses the number of performances he has heard prior to current one while comparing notes about those previous outings. And why not? The monumental Mass is Bach's *opus ultimum*—at once a compendium of his life as a church musician, a summary of his musical style, and a deeply-felt devotional permeated with Lutheran symbolism. This season's opportunity to hear, compare, and contrast different versions is extraordinary. Friday's Cantata Singers' Jordan Hall traversal of Bach's great Mass with understanding and intelligence, will certainly rank among the loftiest examples. *

Bach's Mass can be roughly divided into four independent parts that he composed throughout his lifetime; they were performed together for the first time in 1859, roughly a century after the master's death. The earliest portion, the *Sanctus* (dating from 1724) was probably done most frequently during Bach's life, although he heavily reworked before it giving it its final form. The opening *Kyrie* and *Gloria* are the next oldest, and constitute the *Dresden Missa* that was presented to Augustus III of Poland and the court of Dresden in 1733 as part of a diplomatic mission; in that case, the *Kyrie* mourned the passing of August III's father, while the *Gloria* likely represented his ascension. The *Credo* and the final tetrad (*Osanna/Benedictus/Agnus Dei/Dona nobis pacem*) came last, completed in the year before Bach's death; these borrow heavily from previous cantatas, and were never heard in his lifetime: the *Credo* received its premiere in the spring of 1786 under the leadership of CPE Bach, 36 years after his father's death. Although in form the piece is a complete mass, the nearly 2-hour span precludes inclusion in a regular church service, and concert performances of masses were not in practice when Bach was writing. So it's unclear Bach why referred to the four sections as a single opus, when, in fact, the final manuscript, preserves each in its own folder.

Friday's reading took breaks between these four sections while inserting an extended intermission between the *Gloria* and *Credo*. The *Kyrie* fared well in Jordan Hall, presenting an awe-inspiring wall of sound that melted into delicately-shaped counterpoint accompanied by sturdy but well-balanced orchestra. Karyl Ryczek and Lynne Torgove collaborated in a graceful, operatic *Christe*, preparing the way for a return to the brooding *Kyrie* by the full choir and orchestra. Hoose's careful, ambulatory tempo lent a meditative air to this initial complex, happily disrupted by the ebullient first section of the nine-part *Gloria*. The extensive setting of the *Gloria* is so varied in its music and emotional range that it often feels more like a cantata than a single movement of a mass. The choir proved strong throughout, specifically in the *Gratias*, beautifully shaped with pristine diction and crisply-shaped choral lines. Later sections showed some fray: *Qui tollis*



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showed issues coordinating the choir with the orchestra; the concluding *Cum Sancto Spiritu* made for a thrilling ride, but an effusive tempo caused issues with clarity for choir and orchestra alike. The *Gloria* prominently features many solos and duets, which were taken by members of the chorus on Friday evening. Jennifer Webb's *Laudamus Te* was beautifully realized and tastefully ornamented, met on equal footing by violinist Danielle Maddon. Karyl Ryczek returned in duet with tenor Eric Christopher Perry and obbligato flute by Jacqueline DeVoe. Kim Leeds collaborated well with Peggy Pearson on oboe in *Qui sedes*. Mark Andrew Cleveland's expressive *Quoniam* was amply supported by Clark Matthews' boisterous horn.

Like the *Gloria*, the nine-section *Credo* also has the feel and scope of a cantata. Whereas the previous movement relies heavily on small-ensemble work, this movement is a masterwork of choral writing, setting seven of the nine sections for choir alone. The same zealous tempo that affected the close of the *Gloria* opened the proud *cantus firmus* of the *Credo*. Although this time, both choir and orchestra appeared better prepared for the challenge and met it successfully, the grand opening statement of the section still felt rushed. The remainder of the section flourished on Friday evening, particularly the other-worldly, painful *Crucifixus*, that led to a genuinely surprising and uplifting *Et resurrexit*. Kim Leeds returned with Lisa Lynch for *Et in unum Dominum*, supported by a spare string orchestra that at times had trouble balancing with the soloists. Dana Whitesides's expansive bass colored *Et in Spiritum Sanctum* with warm reassurance.

The *Sanctus* is smaller in scope than the previous sections, and is derived from a smaller work written for higher voices. The B Minor Mass expands this, increasing the chorus from five parts to six. The opening *Sanctus* unfurled in stately swathes of sound that gave way to a supple dance-like *Pleni sunt coeli*, moving directly into the concluding *Osanna/Benedictus/Agnus Dei/Dona nobis pacem* complex Eric Christopher Perry and Lynne Torgove, respectively too the inner solo movements. Singing the *Benedictus* off-book with expressive voice and dramatic command, Perry was riveting. Torgove's dark alto imbued the penultimate *Agnus Dei* with a mournful interiority; her thoughtful interpretation created a meditative space for the concluding *Dona nobis pacem*, a reprise of the seemingly simple counterpoint of the *Gratias* from the earlier *Gloria*. While the movement slowly crescendos to a triumphant end, on Friday evening it remained subdued and reflective. The close of the final movement commanded an awe-struck ten-second silence before the audience broke into a full, appreciative standing ovation extending through multiple bows: even for those for whom repeated hearings seem daunting.

Cantata Singers repeats the work on Sunday afternoon at Carey Hall in Lexington.

* Boston Baroque, Ton Koopman, and the BSO have done the work, Trinity Church, and the Concord Chorus, and the Harvard-Radcliffe Collegium Musicum mount it later this season.

Among his professional singing experiences, Sudeep Agarwala has performed with many local choruses, including Cantata Singers.

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