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Go Big or Go Home: the Bach B minor Mass Finish Line

By [BRIAN MCCREATH \(/PEOPLE/BRIAN-MCCREATH\)](#) • FEB 23, 2017

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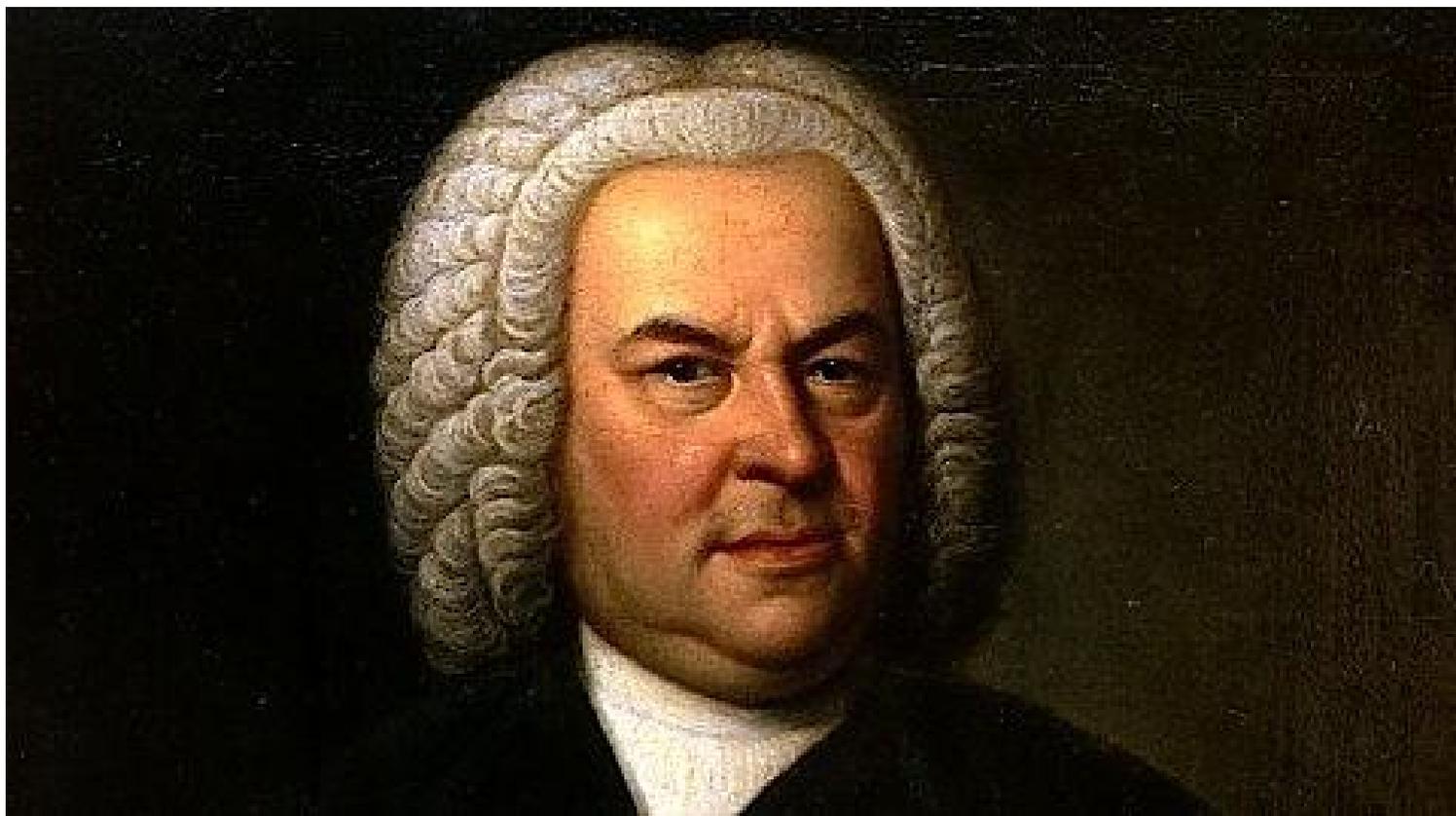
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I just listened to a podcast interview with a former CIA analyst who said, "It's not uncommon for an analyst to get a bit obsessed with his quarry." Boy do I know it.

Not that "quarry" is the first term I would use to describe Bach. But after many years of producing and hosting a show called The Bach Hour – which explicitly traffics in the composer's complicated, often thorny, and ultimately extraordinary church cantatas – I'll admit that I continue to find myself obsessed with Bach's music. Which made the prospect of attending four different performances (<http://classicalwcrb.org/post/ok-bach-lets-do-0>) of Bach's Mass in B minor (two of which I also produced for broadcast) in the space of just over four months either a can't-miss opportunity or really dangerous to my mental health.

Now we're at the end of that stretch, and I hope you've been able to join in for at least part of it. And don't stop now. Join me for the last round, with the Cantata Singers (<http://www.cantatasingers.org/home>) this weekend. I'll be there, and if you can show me evidence that you've made it to at least three of the four B minor Mass performances in my challenge I'll have a gift for you. If you made it to all four, you'll get free admission to a WCRB event at our Fraser Performance Studio in April. And for all in that category, we'll put names in a hat for one special surprise bonus prize!

Rumor is that the Cantata Singers will have a few gifts to pass out as well. And even if this weekend marks your first Bach B minor Mass of the season, stop by anyway to say hi!

You can catch up with a few of my thoughts about the Boston Baroque and Boston Early Music Festival presentations of the B minor Mass in an earlier blog post (<http://classicalwcrb.org/post/bachs-b-minor-mass-next-bso>). As previewed there earlier this month, Andris Nelsons led the BSO and Tanglewood Festival Chorus in four performances at Symphony Hall, using modern instruments and a chorus of 140.

And sure enough, it was a full-on modern orchestra, big-boned interpretation. Just as engaging as the others, but coming from a different perspective. Nelsons's interpretation was fairly fleet if not historically-informed quicksilver. But what really struck me is how much the BSO plays with such a distinctive sonic signature. Check it out for yourself (<http://classicalwcrb.org/post/nelsons-conducts-bachs-b-minor-mass>) to hear what I mean.

Now, about that obsession.

If you haven't read it yet, please do yourself a favor and find John Eliot Gardiner's *Music in the Castle of Heaven* (<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/58045/bach-by-john-eliot-gardiner/>). It came out a couple of years ago, and it's like an vastly extended version of the vivid and very personal program notes Gardiner writes for his Bach recordings. He gets a bit of blowback from those who point out the high degree of opinion and subjectivity mixed in with the cold, hard musicological facts in his writing. But while he may or may not be right in connecting some of the dots in his analysis, if we read those connections as possibility and not fact in themselves, it really opens up the imagination.

So I'll end with a paragraph from Gardiner's book about the Mass in B minor:

"Bach, in the breadth of his vision, grasped and then revealed to us his conception of the universe as a harmonious whole; yet he was composing at a time when the breakdown of social unity was well advanced and the old structures of religion were fast being eroded by Enlightenment thinkers. Revealing as the work of recent musicologists has proved to be in tracing the varied provenance of the Mass and in uncovering more and more signs of its having been recycled from earlier compositions, it carries a certain danger: it could diminish Bach's music to a bundle of influences, to a collection of parts that are less than the whole; whereas it is precisely his ability to transform material and weld it into new patterns and his willingness and courage to strike out on his own, regardless of fashion, which is so inspiring about the B minor Mass. Without this realization we run the risk of missing the driving force behind it: Bach's resolve not merely to mime the gestures of belief, nor to interpret doctrine via music of his own invention, but to extend the very range of music's possibilities and through such exploration to make sense of the world in which he lived and whatever lay beyond it."

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