

# Concert Review: A Tale of Two Masses in B minor

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Susan Miron

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## By Susan Miron

“It’s there, like Everest, isn’t it? If you’re a climber you want to climb Everest. If you’re a conductor you want to have another go at the B minor Mass,” said Sir John Eliot Gardiner in an interview last summer. He had just re-recorded Bach’s Mass in B minor, 30 years after his first acclaimed recording. Widely regarded as one of the supreme achievements of choral music, Bach’s B minor Mass is having a banner year in the Boston area. So far it has been performed by the Boston Baroque (in October), the Boston Early Music Festival (in November), the Boston Symphony Orchestra (in February), and The Cantata Singers this past weekend. I caught the latter two concerts. (There are several more B minor Masses coming up, including on the Trinity Church Concert Series, May 19.)

Bach, a lifelong Lutheran, composed the music that was to become part of the Mass in B minor between 1724, when he wrote the Sanctus, and 1747 or 1748, when he copied out the entire score. His only setting of the Latin Ordinary was created by reworking music from his other works, such as his cantatas that served other musical, dramatic, or theological goals. Cantata Singers’ conductor David Hoose writes in this program notes that “the completed Mass in B minor stands not just as Bach’s Opus ultimum, but as a synopsis of his entire life as a church musician, a synthesis of every stylistic and technical contribution he made to music. But it is also the most astounding spiritual encounter between the worlds of Catholic glorification and the Lutheran cult of the cross.”

Most of the work’s component parts date from various times in Bach’s long residence in Leipzig; they were assembled to form a complete mass only near the end of his life. The earliest section is the Sanctus, from 1724. The Kyrie and Gloria are taken from a 1733 mass that Bach dedicated to the electoral court of Saxony at Dresden. The last major addition, written in 1748-49, was the Credo, which serves as the keystone to the composition’s archlike structure. (The piece stands on its own as a wonderfully symmetrical arch.)

Bach never heard the work in its entirety, nor did he give the work an all-embracing title. The title is an odd misnomer, given that so much of the piece is in D major. 20 years of Bach’s career is condensed into a single work yet, to this day, no one is quite certain about his reasons for composing a Mass in Latin, after he wrote some 200 German language cantatas. The Mass was published in 1845, nearly 100 years after Bach’s death. Although it had never been performed, its importance was appreciated by some of Bach’s greatest successors. At the beginning of the 19th century Bach’s biographer Johann Forkel and Joseph Haydn possessed copies, and Beethoven made two attempts to acquire a score. However, it wasn’t until 1829 that Mendelssohn’s momentous performance of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion secured his lofty place in music history.

David Hoose writes in his program notes:

*We can see (though seldom feel) an academic quality to the music, as if the composer were demonstrating his consummate abilities in the widest range of styles. That he was displaying his skills we are certain, at least as concern the Kyrie and Gloria, for Bach presented these portions to Friederich August II, the new Elector of Saxony, in 1733, in an attempt to elevate his position as the*

*Leipzig Thomasschule Kantor. (Never in the history of employment has there likely been a more dramatic case of overqualification).*

I heard the Boston Symphony performance on a Thursday night, February 2 with Andris Nelsons conducting. The reviews (at least those I have read so far) have been rather positive, which is surprising, given that I found the performance to be quite problematic. I have heard the BSO a half dozen times this year; this is the only concert I found to be disappointing. Perhaps this is repertoire Nelsons might want to leave for other conductors to tackle.

On the positive side, the reduced orchestra's obligato players were excellent: cellist Martha Babcock, organist James David Christie, concertmaster Malcolm Lowe, flutist Elizabeth Rowe, hornist Richard Sebring, and oboist John Ferrillo. Yet the first half — the Kyrie and Gloria — made for an hour-long soporific — lifeless, dirge-like. My guest, a musician who loves Bach, scampered off to an early train for home at intermission. Things improved in the second half. Again, the playing was on a high level, as one would expect, but the 126 member Tanglewood Festival Chorus, whom I have always admired, seemed to be having a bad night in terms of intonation. This was especially odd, given that day the BSO had announced it had finally picked a successor to John Oliver — James Burton, who led the 116-member chorus in this concert. I heard he is going to re-audition the entire chorus, which would seem to be a good idea. The soloists were soprano Malin Christensson, mezzo-soprano Christine Rice (whom I thought was the best of the four), tenor Benjamin Bruns, and bass-baritone Hanno Müller-Brachmann. I left the concert feeling rather dispirited.

By the time I heard The Cantata Singers (on February 26 in Lexington's Carey Hall), a group I admire more with each passing year, I was aching for a sublime Bach experience. These are troubling times which make us realize how vital music — especially Bach — is to our souls, to our spiritual wellbeing. Conductor David Hoose has led this Everest of a piece seven times in thirty-four years with the Cantata Singers, the last time in 2010, a concert that set an extraordinarily high standard for the many Boston performances that have followed.

The Cantata Singers are about half the size of the BSO's Tanglewood Festival Chorus; they are consistently superb (as was the TFC under John Oliver). The 49 singers and many of the excellent freelance players have spent decades of experience performing Bach cantatas at Boston's Emanuel Church and in the Cantata Singers, and it shows. They clearly knew what they were doing and what Hoose wanted out of them, and were able to deliver the music and words with precision and passion. Hoose's solo singers were all members of the chorus, who exited and rejoined the chorus when their solos were over. I had heard and enjoyed several of these singers in previous Cantata Singers concerts — mezzo-soprano Lynn Torgove (also a stage director and an ordained cantor), tenor Eric Christopher Perry (who founded the a cappella group, Renaissance Men), and the two outstanding basses, Marc Andrew Cleveland and Dana Whiteside.

Starting with the initial majestic "Kyrie" I felt as if I was on the receiving end of an enormous gift. Music I had taken for granted when I heard the Cantata Singers perform the Mass in B Minor seven years ago now assumed enormous emotional intensity and passion. Hoose's pacing and tempi seemed perfect; my guest (a singer) and I were held transfixed. The instrumental playing was uniformly superb. Flutist Jacqueline DeVoe, oboists Peggy Pearson, Jennifer Slowik, and Barbara La Fitte; hornist Clark Matthews and concertmaster Danielle Maddon were particularly splendid. The continuo parts were performed with panache by cellist Rafael Popper-Keizer and organist Michael Beattie. The trumpets (Fred Holmgren, Greg Whitaker, Paul Perfetti) and timpani (Robert Schulz) could be counted on to add visceral excitement whenever they were called on. Other outstanding singers who made valuable contributions were sopranos Lisa Lynch and Karyl Ryczek and mezzo-sopranos Kim Leeds and Janice Webb. But the highest honors went to Hoose and his chorus, who were simply spectacular, individually and as an ensemble.

newspapers. Her fields of expertise were East and Central European, Irish, and Israeli literature. Susan covers classical music for *The Arts Fuse* and *The Boston Musical Intelligencer*. She is part of the Celtic harp and storytelling duo A Bard's Feast with renowned storyteller Norah Dooley and, until recently, played the Celtic harp at the Cancer Center at Newton Wellesley Hospital.

