

## Cleveland Orchestra, Chorus & Youth Chorus: Bach's Grand Mass at Severance Hall (October 16)

by Daniel Hathaway



As Johann Sebastian Bach neared the end of his career, he took care to put his musical legacy in order, making archival-quality copies of Passions and completing what his son, C.P.E. Bach, called his “grosse catholische Messe.” The Lutheran Cantor of Leipzig had no practical use for such a work, which he assembled from earlier compositions and finally fleshed out with newly-written movements. It was and is a stand-

alone monument to his musical craft.

Franz Welser-Möst, The Cleveland Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra Chorus and Youth Chorus, plus a quartet of fine soloists, brought what we now call *Bach's B-Minor Mass* to vibrant life on Thursday evening in Severance Hall.

It was a splendidly-conceived and masterfully performed affair. The mass was presented straight through without a distracting intermission, and though long, Welser-Möst's brisk but unhurried pacing brought the entire work in under two hours. Transitions between movements were managed with precision. The four sections into which Bach gathered the manuscript were clearly set apart by brief pauses, but everything else flowed seamlessly together into a wonderful musical tapestry. Even the chorus's standing and sitting cues were integrated into the music rather than taking up time between sections. (Seated for the *Crucifixus* of the *Symbolum Nicenum*, after singing an exquisitely soft cadence, the chorus instantly surged to their feet for the *Et resurrexit*.)

Conducting expressively with bare hands, Welser-Möst summoned a vast range of dynamics and colors from singers and orchestra throughout the mass, which helped stave off sonic fatigue during such a long performance. The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus were chameleonic, singing gently but with well-supported tone in reflective moments, then

going full bore when the music turned triumphant. In the *tuttis*, the chorus emulated the extraordinary ability of The Cleveland Orchestra to play loud but with transparency.

Soprano Joëlle Harvey, countertenor Iestyn Davies, tenor Nicholas Phan and bass-baritone Hanno Müller-Brachmann never sang together as a quartet, but all were elegant, clear-voiced soloists whose voices rang out into the hall, and were perfectly matched in their duets.

The Cleveland Orchestra shone as an ensemble and distinguished itself in various combinations of instruments on Thursday. The high trumpet parts were thrillingly and spotlessly dispatched by Michael Sachs, Jack Sutte and Michael Miller. Concertmaster William Preucil contributed agile and alluring violin obbligatos. Joshua Smith was a limpid and expressive flute soloist and Frank Rosenwein and Robert Walters played oboes d'amore with nobility and grace. Principal horn Richard King joined bassoonists John Clouser and an unnamed colleague in a stirring trio in the bass aria, *Quoniam tu solus sanctus*, of the *Gloria*. Joela Jones played organ continuo steadily for two hours with unflagging verve.

In a brilliant final touch, the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Chorus suddenly filed in on either side of the dress circle to join the onstage singers in *Dona nobis pacem* — a moment of gentle, surround-sound that elevated an already transcendental moment.

For the record, the performance got off to an unlucky start when singers and orchestra parted ways early in the *Kyrie*. Welser-Möst did the right thing by calling a halt and beginning again. It happens to the best of us, and the moment was easily forgotten as wave upon magnificent wave of Bach poured forth from the Severance Hall stage. The near-capacity audience was ecstatic.

*Photo by Roger Mastroianni.*

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