

## Cleveland Orchestra and Cleveland Orchestra Chorus J.S. Bach's *Missa* at St. John's Cathedral (October 17)

by J.D. Goddard



On Friday evening, October 17, a standing-room only crowd gathered in the sanctuary of Saint John's Cathedral to hear the magnificent Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus under the direction of Franz Welser-Möst in a free concert that featured Bach's *Missa Brevis*, BWV 232. The work is more commonly referred to as the "first half" or first two movements — *Kyrie and Gloria* — from the composer's monumental B-Minor Mass which was completed shortly

before his death in 1750. The concert was presented in partnership with the Cathedral's Helen D. Schubert Concert Series.

The soloists gave inspired performances, bringing out the best of Bach's baroque finesse and power while weaving their individual vocal textures into the masterfully written solos and duets. Soprano Joëlle Harvey sang with an entrancing subtlety that seemed to elevate one into the heavens. Her interpretive skills shown forth brilliantly during *Laudamus te*, as she effortlessly drew the audience into Bach's world with generous moments of "flash and flair."

One of the highlights of the performance was the *Christe eleison*. Here the unified blend between Harvey and countertenor Iestyn Davies was truly a thing of beauty. Their lines were filled with magnificent nuance and breathtaking entrances and cadences. Although there were very slight balance issue at times, this in no way detracted from the elegance of their impressive interpretation.

Davies virtually “brought the house down” with his *Qui sedes*. With effortless grace, he traversed this challenging aria with an air of elegance while caressing phrases with an agility and subtlety that was sublime, exciting and enthralling.

Tenor Nicholas Phan brought forth a fine interpretation full of vocal clarity, that blended well with Harvey in the *Domine Deus*. Together they achieved delicate coordination while maintaining an ever attentive flair for the inherent demands within Bach’s design. Bass-baritone Hanno Müller-Brachmann rose to the occasion with his dramatic presentation of *Quoniam tu solus sanctus*. Though somewhat light in the lower register his vocal resonance rang throughout the Cathedral with a profundity that was filled with excitement and drama.

Welser-Möst conducted an even-paced performance that flowed seamlessly with appropriate pauses. His tempos did not fly by the listener in a mad rush. Throughout, a transcendent, rich sound filled the cathedral’s massive space and only rarely covered the chorus and soloists. Noteworthy were the endings of movements which were acutely laid down with just a slight pause prior to the final chord. Exquisite!

The Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, prepared by director Robert Porco, sang brilliantly all evening with an exceptional sound that permeated every corner of Saint John’s sanctuary. The *Gloria* and *Qui tollis peccata mundi* were exceptionally well done and created an exuberance felt by all in attendance. Their forces were aptly sized and at their fullest, such as the opening *Kyrie*, they combined with the orchestra to generate a powerful sound. Orchestral solos were abundant and superbly played. This was truly a picture well painted with a surrounding frame gilded in gold.

*Photo from the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus’s Facebook page.*

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