

Apollo's Fire: Bach's B-Minor Mass at St. Raphael, Bay Village (Apr. 14)

by Daniel Hathaway



In the third of four back-to-back performances of J.S. Bach's "Great Catholic Mass" on Sunday afternoon, April 14 in St. Raphael Church in Bay Village, the musicians of Apollo's Fire showed no signs of fatigue despite heavy physical and

musical demands. Led by artistic director Jeannette Sorrell, soloists, chorus, and instrumentalists gave uniformly brilliant performances of a musical monument that the composer was only able to hear in bits and pieces during his lifetime.

The jury is still deliberating why a thoroughly practical Lutheran Cantor would assemble a work that had no possibility of a performance on his home turf, but assemble it he did, leaving to posterity one of the great artistic accomplishments of Western civilization. Happily, nowadays the so-called *Mass in b minor* can be experienced both as a complete entity and in its constituent parts — the composer mined it for cantata movements and reused its Kyrie and Gloria as a *Missa Brevis* of the sort that *could* be performed in a Lutheran liturgy.

Sorrell enjoys adding a bit of theater to her performances, and this one began with Apollo's Singers stationing themselves in the side aisles of the church with soloists and orchestra on a raised central platform. From those positions, they sang the opening Kyrie eleison from memory, then moved to their seats behind the orchestra during the lengthy interlude that follows.

Similarly, certain phrases normally assigned to the chorus were taken by soloists who moved to the front of the stage, including the bass solo in the “Et resurrexit” of the Credo — innovations that worked well.

The principal soloists — soprano Amanda Powell, mezzo-soprano Amanda Crider, tenor Jacob Perry, and baritone Jesse Blumberg, joined by a few others not acknowledged in the program — made ravishingly beautiful moments of their solos and duets, adorned by alluring obbligatos played by traverso flutists Kathie Stewart and Sarah Lynn, oboist Debra Nagy, and concertmaster Olivier Brault. Hornist Todd Williams’ cameo appearance in the “Quoniam” of the Gloria was gorgeously sonorous, but he should have had two bassoonists as his accomplices rather than the one (Nathan Helgeson), with a cellist filling in on the second part.

For the choral movements, soloists joined Apollo’s Singers, who sang with heightened diction and attractively focused tone. At climactic moments, they were enhanced by exquisite natural trumpet playing (Steven Marquardt, Perry Sutton, and Stanley Curtis) and dramatic timpani punctuation (Luke Rinderknecht).

Sorrell’s concept for the Mass included brisk tempos (exciting in the choral movements, and occasionally a bit breathless for soloists who had to clip off phrases to snatch air), dramatic emphasis on musical motives (sighing choral figures in the “Kyrie” and slashing violin bow strokes in the “Crucifixus”), and sudden dynamic shifts (a near fading to silence on the words “et sepultus est”).

In a choice that paralleled the way Bach packaged the manuscript of the Mass, this performance separated the “Osanna” from the Sanctus (with a shift of singers’ seating in between), a departure from liturgical practice where those two sections are continuous.

Photo: rehearsing the “Quoniam” movement at First Baptist Church.

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