

## Apollo's Fire: Bach's Mass in B minor (Ap. 5)

by Peter Feher



The 2024–2025 season for Apollo's Fire may be coming to a close, but the group's performances of J.S. Bach's *Mass in B Minor* will continue to resound throughout Northeast Ohio. Just like those listeners who are forever returning to the work for comfort, cogitation, or a glimpse of transcendence, Cleveland's Baroque

orchestra isn't finished with this all-embracing masterpiece.

On Saturday, April 5, at Trinity Cathedral, the consoling final notes of the “Dona nobis pacem” — Bach's “vision of peace,” as AF artistic director Jeannette Sorrell has described it — seemed to linger in the stone vaulting long after the music had died away. The effect was a sublime example of the ensemble making the most of the space, the combined period-instrument forces of woodwinds, brass, strings, and organ supporting the uplifting message sung by the chorus.

You can be sure that Bach's creations will only keep resonating from here. Apollo's Fire is set to follow up its four local performances of the past week, first with concerts in Chicago, then in a “Bachanalia” of smaller events around Northeast Ohio this month and next. The group's current focus on the composer will culminate in a recording of the B-Minor Mass, drawn from the performances at Trinity and scheduled for CD and video release in spring 2026.

A Lutheran cantor in 18th-century Leipzig would perhaps consider this all a bit excessive. Then again, perhaps not.

Among Bach's sacred compositions, the Mass in B Minor is striking for how it surpasses any liturgical function his music would have been expected to serve. Certain sections of the score, such as the opening Kyrie and Gloria (which would together constitute a *Missa brevis*), might have been heard in church during Bach's lifetime. But his entire

Mass never was, consisting as it does of works dating from several different decades of his career and effectively adding up to a Catholic service.

Musicians and historians have long debated what could have inspired Bach to assemble such a score, their explanations ranging from a prospective commission to the composer's own artistic aims.

Sorrell's interpretation comes down strongly in favor of individual artistry. Her flair for the dramatic was apparent right from the start on Saturday, as she conducted the first bars of the Kyrie facing the audience while Apollo's Singers solemnly filed onto the stage.

Simple blocking, including singers on pedestals positioned within the orchestra, helped bring out the various personalities that Bach spotlights in the Gloria. A roll call of accomplished soloists stepped up to these parts. Mezzo-soprano Aryssa Leigh Burrs more than matched the virtuosity of concertmaster Alan Choo in the "Laudamus te." The next aria, "Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris," had contralto Emily Marvosh trading dark-hued phrases with Debra Nagy on oboe d'amore. "Quoniam tu solus sanctus" featured some good-natured bumbling from baritone Charles Wesley Evans, hornist Todd Williams, and two bassoonists.

With so many musicians rotating on, off, and around the stage, the ensemble's cohesion occasionally suffered when a new section of the work commenced, everyone having to adjust to a sudden shift in balance or tempo.

The second half of the evening, beginning with the Credo, saw the chorus taking on a steadier role in the proceedings. The soloists here — soprano Rebecca Myers, mezzo-soprano Gabriela Estephania Solís, and baritone Edward Vogel — sang in an altogether lighter manner, suggesting that neither faith nor Bach need always be severe.

The solitary detour of the Benedictus paired tenor Jacob Perry and flutist Kathie Stewart, who played off each other exquisitely in this peak, profound moment before peace. And it should be no surprise that when the final prayer arrives, what we hear is music from the Gloria, which we fittingly, familiarly, already know.

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