

San Diego Arts

Bach Collegium San Diego Presents the B Minor Mass



Kenneth Herman

Scintillating Bach on Period Instruments and Glorious Voices

By Kenneth Herman

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How should we perform the music of J. S. Bach? This question has engaged and vexed both historians and performers since Felix Mendelssohn revived the music of the then-forgotten Leipzig cantor with his performance of the "St. Matthew Passion" in Berlin in 1829. Because the manuscript scores of Bach's music give so little information about how to interpret his music, every generation since Mendelssohn has come up with a performance practice that suits the tenor of the times, and all performers reflect a ruddy confidence that they are on the right track.

One of my favorite musical anecdotes centers around Wanda Landowska, an accomplished keyboard artist who single-handedly brought back the harpsichord as a viable concert instrument just after World War I. Following a heated argument with a colleague about the correct way to play the music of Bach, Landowska arched her eyebrow, so the story goes, and proclaimed, "Well my dear, you may continue to play Bach your way, but I shall play Bach his way!"

At the turn of the last century, massive choral societies assembled choruses with hundreds of voices to undertake Sebastian Bach's major works such as the "B Minor

Mass," and accompanied them with symphonic orchestral forces. Think of the celebrated Bach Choir of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

In the 1980s, certain Dutch musicologists decided that patterning a Bach performance after Mahler's "Symphony of a Thousand" was seriously misguided, and they went to the opposite extreme recording performances with only one vocal soloist to each line in the choral score. This minimalism may have been a purist's dream of Bauhaus "less is more" aesthetics, but it removed the "B Minor Mass" outside of the sphere of actual choral music and had no relationship to the kind of music Bach oversaw as music director of Leipzig's major churches and the famous St. Thomas choir school.

This thumb-nail sketch of performance history brings me to Sunday's (June 8) magnificent "B Minor Mass" given by Ruben Valenzuela's Bach Collegium San Diego in St. James Episcopal Church, La Jolla, because Valenzuela's approach to Bach represents the best application of music research and insight that has gathered strength in the last two or three decades. I would call his work "state of the art," but such appellations tend to push the designee into immediate obsolescence.

The size of his ensemble--some 28 singers (including four soloists) and 25 musicians playing period instruments--provided an elegant balance, allowing the well-produced choral sound to float over the orchestra, to be enriched by it (period instruments are so much gentler than their modern orchestral counterparts), but never competing with the orchestra for dominance. Equally important were Valenzuela's precise and articulate sense of phrasing and his downbeats that exploded upwards, keeping the choral motion lithe and propulsive.

For a smallish chorus, Valenzuela pulled many contrasting colors from the group: from the somber, stately opening "Kyrie" to the scintillating, bordering-on-raucous "Cum Sancto Spiritu" that ended the "Gloria"; from the broad and expansive "Gratias agimus tibi" to the anguished chromaticism of the "Crucifixus"; from the cool, reflective "Et incarnatus est" to the rapturous "Expecto resurrectionem mortuorum." The flexibility and focus of the chorus kept this 2-hour mass continually fresh and engaging.

Four vocal soloists (Bach calls for five, but Valenzuela had his second soprano Angela Young Smucker sing the alto solos as well) brought distinct temperaments and supple technical prowess to the mass. John Polhamus, a bass with a burnished, velvety upper

range, made his extended solo in the Credo ("Et in Spiritum sanctum") an eloquent tour de force that would have brought jubilant applause from the audience if the venue had been an opera house and not a church. Equal to his intensity and fervor was mezzo Angela Young Smucker, who negotiated suavely the rhythmic complexities of the "Laudamus te" without losing any of her warm, effusive timbre. Tenor Vladimir Maric exuded a sweetness of timbre that sounded effortless but never weak. The beauty of his line in the "Benedictus" removed the slightest hint of difficulty in Bach's vocal writing, as if the composer had penned a benign lullaby rather than a dense virtuoso trio sonata giving the tenor a craggy line that any self-respecting violist would require extensive labor just to sound mildly coherent.

For soprano Anne-Marie Dicce I can only offer respect for her agility and rhythmic precision. Her slightly covered sound did not carry well in the room, and she had one color for every solo; she seemed less emotionally engaged than the other soloists, less communicative of the heart of her text, as in her duet with Smucker in the second movement of the Credo ("Et in unum Dominum").

Among the instrumentalists, I would shower bouquets on Mindy Rosenfeld, a winning player of the flauto traverso; Michael Du Pree for his sumptuous solos on oboe d'amore; Michael Sponseller for his clean and rhythmic organ continuo; and Kathryn Aducci and Raymond Burkhart for beautiful and incisive playing of the natural (i.e., valveless) trumpet.

The Bach Collegium San Diego has announced a more far-ranging catalogue of projects for next season, including Haydn's beloved oratorio "The Creation" and Handel's rarely performed oratorio "Theodora." If last season's "Messiah" and this "B Minor Mass" are indicative of the ensemble's trajectory, you would be foolish to miss these musical celebrations.

Dates : June 8 and 9, 2008
Organization : Bach Collegium San Diego
Production Type : Concert
Region : La Jolla
URL : www.bachcollegiumsd.org