

Mass in B minor

Salisbury Cathedral, 25th November 2023

Over 1000 people flocked to Salisbury Cathedral last Saturday to hear a performance of one of the greatest choral masterpieces, JS Bach's Mass in B minor. It was presented by the Salisbury Musical Society, together with the Cathedral Choir, five professional solo singers, and the prestigious period instrument ensemble, Florilegium. The conductor was David Halls.

At every level this was a memorable, deeply-moving, and outstanding performance. Many things contributed to make it excellent. First and foremost was the brilliant decision to invite the Cathedral choir (boys and girls together with six lay clerks), to sing alongside the SMS choir. This addition must have greatly assisted with the demanding technical challenges of many choruses in the Mass, especially those with long runs of rapid semiquavers requiring precise articulation and extraordinary breath control. The balance between voices was very well maintained, even where the scoring required 5, 6, or even 8 parts. There was also excellent clarity, especially in the two independent soprano lines. The high-lying tessitura seemed to present no problem, with frequent apparently effortless visits to top A, even a few B's.

The second good decision was to have the chorus on raised seating directly under the Crossing, with the orchestral players at ground level between them and the audience. The beautiful period instruments of Florelegium never overwhelmed the singers, even at the many grand moments with trumpets and timpani in full swing. It may be a subjective observation, but the Cathedral reverberation time, which can reduce fast music to a jumble, seemed less of a problem in this concert compared to some past events with the singers at the West end.

One other novel feature of the staging was to seat the five soloists unobtrusively off to the side. They rather stealthily returned to the limelight as the introduction for their next solo was in progress. More than once the timing of their arrival seemed to cut it a bit fine, raising concern amongst some of the audience!

Turning to the history of music itself, modern scholars have discovered a great deal about why and when Bach wrote the Mass. Jon Hampton's helpful programme notes described how three of the four distinct parts were assembled by Bach late in life, and how the majority of the material was derived and adapted from earlier church cantatas. John Butt has written a fascinating monograph (published 1991) telling the whole story in detail. Bach's primary motive for composing Part 1 (Kyrie and Gloria) was partly a thoroughly worldly one. He presented a handsomely copied manuscript in 1733 to August II, the new Elector of Saxony. Accompanying this was an obsequious (to modern eyes) request to be awarded the title of *Hofcompositeur* at Dresden. At the time Bach was having great difficulties over his salary and conditions in Leipzig and needed

an extra string to his bow. He therefore made sure that the Kyrie and Gloria incorporated features popular in the churches and court at Dresden, at the same time satisfying both Roman Catholics and Lutherans (surprisingly the Lutheran Church continued long after the Reformation to use much of the Ordinary of the Mass in Latin in their liturgy). The “Dresden” features included two soprano lines in the choruses, setting the *Christe* as a duet, absence of da capo arias, and a fine horn part in *Quoniam* (the horn was a particular Dresden favourite). There is nothing to suggest that in 1733 Bach had any thought of compiling a complete Mass – that was left to his very last years, nearly blind and in poor health. His final composition may have been the *Benedictus* of the B minor Mass.

Returning to last Saturday, it is difficult to have to single out individuals who contributed to such a memorable concert. First in the list must be David Halls, whose countless hours of preparatory rehearsals and superb conducting on the night ensured precision and safe passage through the many extremely demanding choruses. Tempi were often brisk, and there were many well-judged build-ups to magnificent final cadences, often with Bach’s trick of using rapid passage work against long held chords. *Cum Sancto Spiritu*, *Et Resurrexit* and *Pleni sunt Coeli* were particularly brilliant examples.

The five soloists, Ana Beard Fernández, Jessica Cale, Gwilym Bowan, Hugh Cutting and James Newby, each contributed perfectly judged poised performances. As with the main chorus, they were supported by Florilegium’s beautifully controlled and never over-loud players. The soprano duet *Christe* was especially lovely, and the *Laudemus Te* was memorable for an extremely virtuosic violin solo. Florilegium, together with John Challenger playing the continuo organ, were about as perfect a team as one can imagine throughout every moment of this concert.

After the concert it was interesting to talk to two fine local musicians. When asked what they most liked and will long remember, they both concurred that it was the liquid-toned baroque flute solo of the *Benedictus* and the hauntingly beautiful singing of the *Agnus Dei* by countertenor Hugh Cutting. I agree.

Richard Godfrey