

MUSIC REVIEW | COLLEGIUM VOCALE GENT CHOIR AND ORCHESTRA

Conductor as Analyst, With Bach as Patient



Philippe Herreweghe led the Collegium Vocale Gent Choir and Orchestra on Sunday.

As a university student in Germany, the Belgian conductor Philippe Herreweghe studied medicine and psychiatry along with music. Music won out, thank goodness. In 1970 he founded the Collegium Vocale Gent Choir and Orchestra, and this remarkable early-music ensemble has since won devoted audiences around the world.

On Sunday afternoon Mr. Herreweghe conducted his 18-voice chorus and period-instrument orchestra in a texturally lucid and transfixing account of Bach's Mass in B minor, part of the ambitious Opening Nights Festival at Alice Tully Hall. Listening to the performance, trying to account for exactly why it was so remarkable, I wondered whether Mr. Herreweghe's background in psychiatry might be a factor.

Obviously, Mr. Herreweghe would not be so successful were he not a first-class musician who has long been able to recruit accomplished, like-minded singers and instrumentalists to his ensemble. Perhaps because of his medical background, Mr. Herreweghe brings clear-headed, almost diagnostic emotional insights to his work. The

performance conveyed the psychological ambiguity of Bach's great Mass as few others I have heard.

In the opening "Kyrie eleison" ("Lord, have mercy"), from the series of wrenchingly beautiful opening chords, there was anguished yearning in the performance. As the chorus unfolded, with a steady accretion of subdued contrapuntal voices, the plaintive anxiety of the music was balanced by a calming certainty that suggested that this plea to the Lord would surely be heard. Mr. Herreweghe might be especially comfortable at conveying ambiguity in music, without calling attention to it or exaggerating it but simply by empowering expressions of the conflicting emotions.

Maybe this is a stretch. Still, something beyond the excellence of the music making had to account for the magnificence of this Mass in B minor. The choir sang with robust and unforced richness. Yet there was transparency even in the joyous "Osanna in excelsis," a big double chorus of eight busy vocal lines.

The clarity was only aided by the lively new acoustics of the hall. The orchestra is a roster of period-instrument virtuosos. It was heartening to see superb musicians like the flutist Patrick Beuckels and the natural-horn player Teunis van der Zwart cheered during ovations as if they were opera superstars.

There are no stars, however, in Collegium Vocale performances. The vocal soloists on Sunday stepped out from the line of choristers: Hana Blazikova, a soprano who combines melting sound with scrupulous execution; Hans Jörg Mammel, a hardy tenor who is not afraid to bring some temperament to his singing of Bach; Matthew Brook, a bass with a clear and agile voice; and especially Damien Guillon, a miraculously natural and subtly expressive male alto.

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At the end of the performance the ovation was so enthusiastic that Mr. Herreweghe repeated the final chorus, “Dona nobis pacem” (“Grant us peace”), as a special gesture to us all, he said, during troubled times.