

# Chicago Chorale evokes ecstasy through Bach's B Minor Mass

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Bach's Mass in B Minor is one of the world's greatest art works and it richly repays repeated listenings. Hyde Park's own Chicago Chorale gave a worthy performance of the mass in 2006 and has again made this work a big part of their celebratory 10th anniversary season. Last month they performed the mass, this time with an exemplary orchestra composed of period instrument players, filling Rockefeller Chapel with rapt listeners, as well as a few fidgety young children who never got the news that this was a stupendous event.

Classical music events are not as staid as people who don't listen to classical music think, but it certainly is not common for a group's music director to receive whoops along with enthusiastic applause before even a single note has sounded. But Bruce Tammen is well loved and considerably respected in these parts, and that's precisely the greeting he got as he stood in the front of one of Chicago's great churches, ready to bring the Mass in B Minor to life.

Tammen is known for his careful yet artful attention to detail, and this was again

evident from the very beginning of the performance as the "Kyrie" was blooming with forceful vocal attacks and lots of clearly enunciated consonants, particularly the omnipresent "K", contributing to a brisk and efficient feel.

The general approach to the mass was one which was unaffected and natural. The chorus, the soloists and the orchestra never slid into melodrama or screeching volume in an effort to wring more out of the music. This honest approach let the music sound for itself and the results were splendid, from the gentle simplicity of the "Christe eleison" duet for two sopranos, to the humble graciousness in the uplifting final chorus, "Dona nobis pacem."

The chorus, which does so much of the work, displayed faceted subtlety, with a bright sound in the "Et in terra pax," a spunky attitude in the "Credo in unum Deum" and joyful boisterousness in the "Et resurrexit." They might have flagged once or twice near the end, but they never completely lost the artistic thread.

Tammen assembled a fine array of soloists. Alto Angela Young Smucker was the standout, notably beautiful in the "Qui sedes ad dextram Patris" where she shared the spotlight with a lovely oboe performance. Just before the final chorus she had the audience in her hand as she hypnotized them with her feather soft closing to the "Agnus Dei."

Soprano Ellen Hargis was in fine voice, as

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was tenor Christopher Cock, yet even so, they were upstaged by the scrumptious flute playing in the "Domine Deus." Bass Ben LeClair had a rocky start with the "Quoniam tu solus sanctus, which was rushed and further marred by problems with the horn.

The orchestra featured Chicago favorite Rachel Barton Pine as concertmaster. They offered many gleaming moments and generally Tammen found just the right balance, even if there were a few times when the 60 voices of the Chorale was more than the instrumentalists could compete with.

It was a fine performance, even better than the Chorale's last fine outing with this great work, a great tribute to a group of amateur singers. Perhaps the biggest disappointment, however, was that while the essay on Bach's

B Minor Mass provided in the program, and apparently the same essay used by the Chorale in 2006, was cogent and informative it was a little too reminiscent of earlier works, a trait often appropriately admired in musical composition but routinely frowned upon in expository prose.

The Chicago Chorale continues to celebrate its 10th anniversary with a gala concert and reception next month. The event takes place at 8 p.m. on Saturday, June 4 at the Hyde Park Union Church, 5600 S. Woodlawn Ave., featuring music of Palestrina, Rautavaara and Paulus. The reception will include a wine tasting, silent auction, raffle and the opportunity for everyone to join in the singing. For tickets, visit [ChicagoChorale.org](http://ChicagoChorale.org) or call 773-306-6195.