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John Eliot Gardiner
MONTEVERDI CHOIR AND ORCHESTRA

FIRST NIGHT | CLASSICAL

Mass in B Minor review — John Eliot Gardiner's matchless, life-enhancing Bach

St Martin-in-the-Fields, WC2

[Neil Fisher](#)

Tuesday April 25 2023, 1.30pm, The Times

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★★★★★

There's an idea of JS Bach that is hard to shift — reinforced by actors' Terribly Serious depictions of the composer. In Nina Raine's recent play *Bach & Sons* Simon Russell Beale played him as a careworn craftsman (verging on truculent), disappointed by his family, scarred by repeated tragedy. I don't expect Brian Cox, aka Logan Roy in *Succession*, to dispel the granite-carved grumpy genius, either, when he plays Bach in another new play in Bath in October.

Listen, however, to the sheer exuberance of the music pouring out of John Eliot Gardiner, his English Baroque Soloists and the Monteverdi Choir, and the portrait of a dour Lutheran dissolves like sugar on your tongue. The delight in invention, the almost constant shifts in colour and texture, the theatrical energy . . . even in music that charts desolation as well as redemption, here is Bach revelling in the sheer joy of existence.

Gardiner has, of course, been revelling in Bach for most of his 80 years. For his birthday celebrations this year, he has returned to the Mass in B Minor and this triumphant concert was the final stop on a European tour (then for the conductor it's on to the coronation service, where he has a key role). He may look a little gnarlier than he used to, but Gardiner still shapes the music with a spring in his step. Indeed, imbuing dance-like energy into what is, after all, a sacred confession of Christian faith, is a cornerstone of his approach. It works because those rhythms are seeded into the music and embedded in the lilting, sparkling phrasing of Gardiner's instrumentalists.

There were some whip-cracking tempi that would have foxed plenty of singers but left the Monteverdi Choir unruffled. The swerve from bass Dingle Yandell's wonderful *Quoniam tu solus Sanctus*, with excellent asides from Anneke Scott's French horn, to a sprint-like *Cum Sancto Spiritu* was thrilling. Yet Gardiner

doesn't skimp on grandiosity either. This is not the skimmed-milk kind of period Bach. The rich choral sound (the bassline especially imposing) was impressive enough for the first two thirds of the night, but for the Sanctus and Agnus Dei Gardiner added a further round of singers to raise the stakes (and the decibels) another notch.

The vocal soloists (also contributing to the ensemble) were all strong. There was notably bubbly singing from the soprano Hilary Cronin, Nick Pritchard delivered a stirring *Benedictus* and Reginald Mobley's secure and serene countertenor made an impact. The final chorus of *Dona nobis pacem* was almost Mahlerian in its expressive weight. After a requisite silence, it triggered justified waves of ovations.

The performance from April 8 is available to stream via mezzo.tv

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