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Christmas With Bach, Times Two

By **JAMES R. OESTREICH**

Handel's "Messiah," it appears, will reign forever and ever over the Christmas season, no matter that it was written for Easter. In theory, Bach's "Christmas Oratorio" is a better fit, but there are reasons it doesn't receive similar play.

The oratorio consists of six separate cantatas, intended for performance over the 12 days of Christmas, a practice [the Trinity Choir emulated](#) a year ago at St. Paul's Chapel. Performed together, with a necessary intermission, the works run almost three hours, and there is a certain repetitiveness of structure despite a wondrous variety of individual forms.

Still, the work is thriving in New York this year, with two high-profile performances over the weekend and another, from the [Riverside Choral Society and Orchestra](#), to follow on Thursday.

On Friday evening, Harold Rosenbaum conducted the [Canticum Novum Singers](#) and the Artemis Chamber Ensemble in a complete performance of the oratorio at the Church of St. Jean Baptiste on the Upper East Side. And on Saturday evening, Philippe Herreweghe led the renowned Collegium Vocale Gent in four of the cantatas (Nos. 1-3, 6) at Alice Tully Hall.

[Mr. Rosenbaum](#) has been a stalwart on the New York choral scene for decades, most notably with his professional chorus, the New York Virtuoso Singers. With the older, amateur Canticum Novum, he has made a particular specialty of Bach, and to celebrate the chorus's [25th anniversary](#) in the 1997-98 season, Mr. Rosenbaum led the singers in 25 cantatas attributed (in a couple of cases wrongly) to Bach.

As expected, the chorus, 41 strong, acquitted itself admirably on Friday in the church's forgiving (not to say murky) acoustics, as did the 23 Artemis players, using modern instruments. At times in the early going, chorus and orchestra seemed to have different expectations of tempo, but Mr. Rosenbaum righted the ship quickly.

The vocal soloists were uneven. Jesse Blumberg, a baritone, was solid and effective from the start, and Katherine Wessinger, a soprano, overcame a shaky beginning. Anthony Roth Costanzo sang with beautiful countertenor tone, but his passionate delivery came eventually to sound a bit hectoring. As with many a tenor before him, Tommy Wazelle served mainly as an unfortunate reminder of just how difficult, and how crucial, Bach's Evangelist roles are, in this oratorio and in the Passions.

Mr. Herreweghe can hardly be faulted for skipping two of the cantatas, especially since, by omitting the fourth, he was spared the expense of bringing along French horn players from Belgium. (As it was, he had 16 choristers and 23 players.) But much of the Collegium Vocale's interpretation had a slightly perfunctory feel, unusual coming from a group that has given many

superb performances in New York.

The chorus sang with a purity of tone that the Canticum Novum singers could only dream of, and the Tully Hall acoustics rewarded the excellent balance and clarity of the counterpoint. Yet there was little of the spirit shown by Mr. Rosenbaum's choristers, most notably in the opening chorus of the fifth cantata, "Ehre sei dir, Gott, gesungen." (The Collegium added this as an encore and was at its liveliest here.)

Some of the Collegium's instrumental playing seemed understated, especially that of the trumpeters, ideally among the stars of the oratorio, who proved undistinguished at best. It is a considerable surprise, and a hopeful sign for New York, to be able to report having heard better Baroque trumpet playing in local ensembles recently (special thanks to John Thiessen) than from a stellar European ensemble on this occasion.

The Collegium's vocal soloists, drawn from the chorus, were adequate, and more than that in the case of the tenor Thomas Hobbs, who was a fine Evangelist.