

International Festival review
The Herald, 18 August 2014

Bach's Mass in B Minor

Usher Hall

Reviewer: Keith Bruce

Having sung Lassus in Greyfriars, conductor Philippe Herreweghe and the beautifully blended voices of Collegium Vocale Gent moved to the big hall, the 18 singers joined by 24 period instrumentalists for Bach's great portmanteau chorale showpiece. Jonathan Mills has promoted many such chamber-sized concerts into the orchestral hall, with varying success, but the reward of a Saturday night full house came with no reservations about the way the music filled the space. We could have done without the noise of the Tattoo fireworks immediately after the interval, but there is little the EIF director can do about that.

It was the quality of the sound of the baroque winds in the instrumental ensemble that first gave notice of the very special music this team makes, their standard later matched by that of the trio of natural trumpets. Of the singers we know to expect as much. Theirs is a relaxed, integrated sound with the soloists stepping out of the ensemble, a million miles from notions of austere "authenticity". The balance between the voices was exemplary, and so too was that between players and singers for the entire two-hour duration of the work. The pinnacle of that came in the Credo and the sequence of choruses - Et Incarnates Est, Crucifixus and Et Resurrexit Tertia Die - that culminate in a fanfare from the trumpets. Nowhere else is it as clear that Bach's cadences and chords are the building blocks of Western music.

It is permitted to have favourites, however, and it was the contributions of soprano Dorothee Mields and English tenor Thomas Hobbs that I enjoyed most among the soloists, nowhere more so than when they came together in the Domine Deus duet of the Gloria.