

B Minor Mass

Johann Sebastian Bach emerged from the steps of the St Andrew subway station. Bewildered and breathing heavily, he felt his sixty years. Around him lights flickered and traced patterns in the air. Carriages with dazzling lamps hurtled back and forth, an illuminated glass room rumbled slowly by.

Bach blinked away these inexplicable phenomena, and stopping a passerby he asked,

“Bitte, wo findet Mann die Raü Thomssohn Halle?”

“Roy Thomson Hall? It’s just round that corner to the left. You can’t miss it.” The words held no meaning for Bach, but the gesture was clear.

At the corner of the two streets he was surprised to see in a glass display a familiar picture. It was a small, colourless copy of a recent portrait of himself, holding a sheet of music. Below, in the difficult print of foreigners, he made out his own name, J. S. Bach. Other Germanic words caught his eye - Mendelssohn, Iseler - but he could only shake his head.

A gathering crowd of people distracted him from this enigma: they seemed to be making for a nearby building. Bach followed, and in his turn pushed through the heavy glass doors.

The grey and silver interior was brightly lit, with no evidence of candles. A servant pressed a glossy pamphlet into Bach’s hands, but the writing was small and unintelligible and he handed it back. He spotted his reflection on a mirrored wall, and here became aware of the extraordinary clothing of the people around him. For a moment he stood motionless, staring at women in absurd knee-length dresses, at men ridiculous in long flapping breeches.

He mounted a short flight of steps, examining with amazement the bare legs of women balanced on pointed shoes. Another door led him into a vast circular room. He made his way down a long row of chairs and took a seat in the middle.

The ceiling of this immense edifice, slightly beyond his focus, gave a pleasing impression of night sky. He turned to inspect the people around him. What curiosities! Not one man wore a wig, though some were quite bald. A few women had respectable coiffures, while others were done up in the strangest styles imaginable. Had he fallen in with a troupe of clowns?

The rows of seats focused on a wooden stage littered with music stands and chairs. As Bach watched, people appeared in ones and twos carrying musical instruments - violins, violas, cellos, shiny flutes and oboes, complicated brass instruments.

Excellent, he thought, this must be an orchestra! We are here for a concert! Bach had seldom seen so large an orchestra, or so many women players. In contrast to the dull black and white uniforms, he counted several outlandish faces familiar to him only from travel books.

Someone played a few chords at an organ, experimenting with the registration. Bach was surprised at its high pitch, but pleased that the tuning was well-tempered. The instrumentalists warmed up in a cacophony of exotic fragments. What raucous violins, what shrill oboes, what piercing trumpets!

Bach saw then that two or three of the audience were staring conspicuously in his direction. At his age this no longer caused embarrassment; yet he wondered at their curiosity, recognizing that something about him amused them.

“Must be Bach,” said a voice. “A publicity stunt!”

Hearing his name, he turned again, and found himself looking into the magnified eyes of a fat man with lenses balanced on his nose. But surely the meaningless jabber of his neighbours was harmless! Several even smiled as though he had done something clever.

By now most seats were occupied, and streams of men and women began to file onto a balcony behind the stage. Their uniforms were monotonously blue and black and white. After an interminable time they sat down.

Applause greeted a violinist who made a tardy entry and sat at the front of the orchestra. He took charge of a brief tuning process, after which lights were somehow reduced. An expectant hush settled. Bach looked round impatiently, and still the orchestra did not play.

At last four more smiling men and women walked on stage, shepherded by a white-haired man holding a short stick or wand - perhaps an actor or a composer, or a prince in strange costume, for he was greeted with energetic clapping. He bowed perfunctorily before turning to the orchestra. The others sat down and looked out over the audience with careful smiles.

Silence fell. At a gesture of the prince's wand the people on the balcony stood up, holding books in front of them. A choir it must be - but why so many people? Why all those women, why no boys?

Bach had not time to resolve the riddle of the eccentric costumes, the instruments' timbre, or the choir's composition, for bows were poised, the singers watched attentively, and the wand was waved.

With a magnificent soul-satisfying sound the orchestra and choir began their performance.

Kyrie!