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Hearing — and seeing — Bach's B Minor Mass

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As a cornerstone of Western music, Bach's B Minor Mass is on the must-hear list of many devout music lovers. This week, it can be seen, too.

The intricate structure of the Mass — 27 brief movements grouped symmetrically within three large sections — inspired German film director Bastian Clevé to create a silent film that accompanies the work measure-by-measure in an identical structure. Bach used musical notes to paint a meaningful aural picture of the Latin text about life, death and eternity. The film strives to do the same with video images.

"Sounds of Eternity" had its premiere in 2006 at the Oregon Bach Festival under the baton of world-famous Bach specialist Helmuth Rilling. Salt Lake Choral Artists brings the Mass, and the film, to Utah this week under the baton of the group's artistic director, Brady Allred.

In program notes for the 2006 performance, Rilling said of the film: "Though wordless, it is about life and lives, birth and death, about individuals, families, politics and world history. It is about art, science, intuition and mysticism. It is about the endless pilgrimage of mankind in search for fulfillment and peace."

Allred said the Mass performance is a fitting capstone for the 2010-11 SLCA season, which he titled "One Joyous Voice." To help his singers strive for that kind of musical unity, Allred posted a Mass score on SLCA's website, marked throughout every choral and orchestral part with the precise articulations and dynamic changes he expects in each measure.

Participants were required to mark their Mass scores accordingly, a way of unifying their effort to let its glory shine. "The work is so magnificent," Allred said. "We see the maturity in Bach's writing. He wrote this out of his love of God and his love for his art and was not encumbered by the time constraints that would have been required by a commission. He took the time to craft it the best possible way he could."

Virtuoso vocal solos are a hallmark of the B Minor Mass, and many of them are performed in counterpoint with instrumental soloists whose musical lines are equally florid and beautiful.

Concertmaster Monte Belknap, a music professor at Brigham Young University, said Bach's writing for solo violin in the B Minor Mass is some of the most virtuosic music written by any

composer of the time. “To find writing like this in a sacred work is quite exciting,” Belknap said. “Those who come will have a great, uplifting experience — the best you can find.”

Pairing the Mass with Clevé’s film is intended to further heighten the audience’s emotional journey during Bach’s musical depiction of death and resurrection.

The Eugene Register-Guard said of the film’s premiere that the “short films match the Mass’ movements, with imagery of alpine glaciers and peaceful valley, pulsating modern cities and majestic ancient architecture.”

Rilling, in his notes, put it another way:

“The vision behind the film is to let the audience take inspiration through their ears and eyes, leave them contentedly carried away, feeling fulfilled and complete, and — one hopes — to keep this happiness for a little while.”

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Bach for more

The Salt Lake Choral Artists present Bach’s B Minor Mass, accompanied by a chamber orchestra, under the baton of artistic director Brady Allred. Soloists are soprano Carol Ann Allred, mezzo-soprano Holly Sorensen, tenor Christopher LeCluyse and baritone Tyler Oliphant. The silent film “Sounds of Eternity,” created by German director Bastian Clevé to accompany the B Minor Mass, will be shown during the performance.

When • Saturday, May 14, at 7:30 p.m.

Where • Libby Gardner Concert Hall. 1365 E. Presidents Circle, University of Utah campus, Salt Lake City.

Learn more • There is a preconcert talk by Brigham Young University music professor Douglas Bush at 6:30 p.m. in the hall.

Also • SLCA’s Young Choral Artists children’s choir performs theater music in a 2 p.m. May 14 concert, also at Gardner Hall.

Tickets • For the Mass, \$22; \$15 for students. For the children’s choir concert, \$10; \$5 for students. 801-232-7521 or [www.saltlakechoralartists.org](http://www.saltlakechoralartists.org)