

# New Director's Fresh Look at a Bach Warhorse

By Tom Huizenga Special to The Washington Post  
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If Sunday afternoon's performance of [J.S. Bach](#)'s Mass in B Minor by the Washington Chorus was any indication, choral music fans in this town may be in for surprises. The season-opening concert, at the [Kennedy Center](#) Concert Hall, was [Julian Wachner](#)'s first as the chorus's new music director, and he did not play it safe.

Choosing the revered B Minor Mass represents nothing new, but what the 38-year old conductor did with Bach's score -- he calls it a "transcription" -- could be viewed as innovative by some, willful by others. In program notes, Wachner eloquently argues against a single correct way to perform the Mass, especially when it comes to numbers of singers.

Wachner employed his full 175-voice symphonic choir but backed them not with a beefy modern orchestra but with a smallish band of baroque specialists. Their sound was robust and colorful and rarely swamped by the choir. That's because Wachner diligently kept the lid on his giant vocal forces. And therein lies a fundamental problem behind large swaths of the performance.

Wachner has said that to mitigate balance issues between chorus and orchestra he would lead the choir at a volume level "somewhere between 60 and 80 percent." Indeed, during the opening "Kyrie," amid sluggish tempos, the choir lacked urgency and tension. As Bach's five-part fugue was passed around, the sound was mushy and indistinct. Low volume begat low energy.

But when the chorus was allowed to sing out, colors and textures

popped. There was a dark, burnished glow to the basses, and in the exuberant "Et Expecto," sopranos soared in tandem with gleaming trumpet fanfares.

Another Wachner experiment stems from a camp of scholarship holding that Bach envisioned only one singer per part in this music. For a taste of that theory, Wachner let his four solo singers substitute for, and share movements with, the entire chorus. It's an interesting idea that in practice fell flat.

Assigning the entire "Crucifixus" movement to four voices increased intimacy but overemphasized the contrast with the explosive "Et Resurrexit" that followed.

Some of the most impassioned, beautiful singing came from soloist Charles Daniels. The tenor's creamy tone and plaintively nuanced phrasing made for a truly blessed "Benedictus."

Unlike Bach's great St. Matthew Passion, the B Minor Mass was composed for no specific performance or practical use. Instead, near the end of his life, Bach built his enormous Mass, block by block, largely from music he had composed previously, achieving in the end a grand skyscraper of a composition, constructed in styles both ancient and contemporary. Still, for all its grandeur, the Mass remains his intimate, personal statement of music and theology.

Wachner boldly made the Mass his own statement. It may not have been entirely successful, but it signals the arrival of a courageous new conductor.