

April 6, 2001

Classical Music in Review: Offering a Bach B-Minor Mass That's a Learning Experience

By PAUL GRIFFITHS

The New York Collegium

What many will remember from Tuesday night's Bach B minor Mass will certainly be the sound, but also the sight of the eagerness on the boy choristers' faces as they flung out their music, and then their dipped heads as they followed in their scores the solo arias that punctuate the choruses. As performers and as people, they were learning something. So was everyone else there.

The church's choir was thoroughly involved all through, and finely accompanied by the New York Collegium. There were 15 men singing, with about twice as many boys and an orchestra also of around 30 - forces probably more luxurious than Bach would have imagined, but appropriate to this big space, and directed by Gerre Hancock, the church's organist and master of choristers, with alacrity and precision.

Many moments shone. Mr. Hancock showed an expert sense of nuance. And there was also the fine brilliance of the choral countertenors at several points and the glorious, winging sound made by the boys near the start of the "Sanctus," while the "Dona nobis pacem" was a real culmination and grounding.

From the orchestra, Sandra Miller played wonderful flute solos, leaning into the beat and into the music. Her colleague Stephen Hammer on oboe did splendidly, too. The vocal soloists were Amanda Balestrieri, Jennifer Lane, Dana Marsh, Geoffrey Carder and Curtis Streetman, among whom Mr. Streetman - a superb bass - was a St. Thomas alumnus returning to the place that helped form him.