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## The New York Times

### In a Mass, a Cradle of Consolation for Japan

By Anthony Tommasini, March 23, 2011i

*“Mr. Suzuki drew focused sound and clear textures from the ensemble, allowing Bach’s piercing harmonies to penetrate without expressive excess.”*

Hearing a good performance of Bach’s Mass in B minor is always a privilege. But it was especially meaningful to hear the Bach Collegium Japan’s account of this astounding masterpiece on Tuesday night at Carnegie Hall.

The citywide festival Japan NYC, sponsored by Carnegie Hall, which began in December, returned to the hall on Monday with a concert by the NHK Symphony Orchestra. The remainder of the festival has been dedicated to the victims of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. To that end, there could not have been a more consoling work than Bach’s Mass.

That the performers had come from their stricken country to present this piece to a New York audience lent added emotional resonance to the music. In welcoming remarks Clive Gillinson, the executive and artistic director of Carnegie Hall, paid tribute to Japan, its people and “its remarkable culture,” and asked for a moment of silence.

On musical terms alone the performance, if not flawless, was admirable and often beautiful. **When the conductor Masaaki Suzuki founded the collegium in 1990, he was a pioneer in bringing period-instrument performances to Japanese audiences. The group has long been highly regarded.** Mr. Suzuki and his ensemble have been recording an extensive series of Bach works on the Bis label.

The collegium used a midsize number of performers here, nearly 50, about evenly divided between choristers and orchestra players. There was an international roster of five vocal soloists. **Mr. Suzuki’s approach was clear from the opening Kyrie eleison, which begins with the chorus, fortified by the orchestra, singing anguished cries of “Lord, have mercy.”**

**Mr. Suzuki drew focused sound and clear textures from the ensemble, allowing Bach’s piercing harmonies to penetrate without expressive excess.** Clarity and directness were paramount as first the orchestra and then the chorus, section by section, took up the subdued, winding main theme of the Kyrie, to produce an enveloping, organic flow of mingling contrapuntal lines.

Bach Collegium Japan

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Though the textural clarity of the overall performance was impressive, it exposed little missteps and tangled moments, especially in the orchestra, as with some dicey patches for the natural trumpets. The orchestra basically played very well. But standards in period-instrument performances have risen tremendously since the early-music movement began. There was, for example, the magnificent performance of this Mass that Philippe Herreweghe presented with the amazing Collegium Vocale Gent as part of the ceremonies to inaugurate the renovated Alice Tully Hall in 2009.

That smaller hall was actually a more appropriate space for the piece. We all love Carnegie Hall. But sometimes the sound of the Bach Collegium Japan seemed a little small in the auditorium and lacked resonance, especially during some of the arias accompanied by fewer instruments. In the duet *Christe eleison*, there were two sweet-voiced soprano soloists, Hana Blazikova and Rachel Nicholls (who also performed with the chorus). Their singing, though tender and true, did not carry well.

Peter Kooij's bass voice sounded muffled and indistinct, especially during the aria "Quoniam tu solus sanctus." The tenor Gerd Türk and especially the countertenor Clint van der Linde, whose voice was sometimes shaky but vibrant, fared much better.

Still, this was over all an involving, insightful and honest performance. The chorus and orchestra brought fitting exuberance to the Gloria and quiet intensity to the haunting "Et incarnatus est."

**The audience, clearly moved, gave the courageous visitors from Japan a long ovation.**

*JapanNYC continues through April 9 at various locations in New York; information is at [carnegiehall.org](http://carnegiehall.org).*

Bach Collegium Japan