

The Bach Choir and David Hill present the first signed performance of Beethoven's choral masterpiece, *Missa Solemnis*



"probably the finest independent choir in the world"
Evening Standard

Friday 28 June, 7:30pm
Royal Festival Hall

Beethoven *Missa Solemnis*

The Bach Choir
Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment
David Hill conductor
Sarah Fox soprano
Christianne Stotijn mezzo-soprano
Toby Spence tenor
Roderick Williams baritone

"Music is like a dream. One that I cannot hear."
Ludwig van Beethoven

On **Friday 28 June**, **The Bach Choir** and conductor **David Hill** create the first signed *Missa Solemnis*, joined by **Sir Richard Stilgoe** and deaf musician **Paul Whittaker OBE** in partnership with the charity **Hearing Link**. The choir is joined by the **Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment** and soloists **Sarah Fox**, **Christianne Stotijn**, **Toby Spence**, and **Roderick Williams** for the concert, which takes place at the **Royal Festival Hall**.

Central to this performance will be the choir's participation: singers will use British Sign Language in a section of the 'Credo' of the *Missa Solemnis*

while they are singing: *"I believe in one god, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all that is visible and invisible."*



The full performance is signed in British Sign Language by the profoundly deaf musician **Paul Whittaker OBE**, who is also teaching the choir, allowing deaf audience members in a specially allocated section of the audience to enjoy the performance.

Sign language performances do not just offer word-for-word translations but can convey different intents and emotions much as singing can do. Signing the *Missa Solemnis* offers a unique insight into Beethoven's writing, especially in light of the composer's long battle with hearing loss.



The concert is produced in partnership with **Hearing Link**, a UK-wide charity for people with hearing loss, their families and their friends.

One of classical music's most famous disabled musicians, Beethoven began losing his hearing only in his twenties, just as he built a reputation as a musician and composer. His 1802 Heiligenstadt Testament, written but never sent to his brothers, shows the depths of despair to which Beethoven was driven by his loss of hearing: *"how could I possibly admit an infirmity in the one sense which ought to be more perfect in me than others, a sense which I once possessed in the highest perfection, a perfection such as few in my profession enjoy or ever have enjoyed."*

In his later years Beethoven developed a stoical resignation to his deafness, resolving to make his peace with his condition and carry on in spite of it: *"This is the mark of distinction of a truly admirable man: steadfastness in times of trouble."* His progressive illness eventually left him profoundly deaf, unable to perform or conduct, and able to communicate only through conversation books. The 1824 **Missa Solemnis** dates from this late period in his life, a time when Beethoven had come to rely on his inner ear as much as the few sounds he could still hear.

Composed over a period of several years while he supplemented his income with smaller piano works, the *Missa Solemnis* is a robust testament of faith hard-won that remains one of the most significant large-scale religious works ever composed. Beethoven was not a practising believer, though later seems to have found a much deeper personal significance in the words of the church than in his early years: the music takes listeners on a profound spiritual journey through turbulent doubt to ultimate redemption: *"There is no loftier mission than to approach the Divinity nearer than other men, and to disseminate the divine rays among mankind."*

The *Missa Solemnis* was written for the enthronement of his friend and patron Archduke Rudolph as the Archbishop of Olmütz. Beethoven began working on the Mass on hearing the unofficial announcement in 1818, but prolonged attention to writing meant Beethoven missed the consecration ceremony in 1820, eventually finishing the mass in time for a premiere in April 1824 in Saint Petersburg. Beethoven would later conduct three movements from the *Missa Solemnis* at the infamous premiere of his *Ninth Symphony*, unable to hear the audience's applause.

Founded in 1876, **The Bach Choir** is recognised as one of the world's leading choruses, building upon a tradition that combines musical excellence with creativity and innovation. The independent chorus has 250 amateur singers from diverse backgrounds who join together to take pride in performing, recording and sharing music at the highest level. The Choir's conductor **David Hill** was recently made a Member of the Order of the British Empire in the New Year Honours for his services to music.



On **17 October**, The Bach Choir commences its new season with the world premiere of **Roxanna Panufnik's *Four Choral Seasons***, commissioned for the occasion. The new choral work compliments a programme featuring Debussy's *La mer*, Delius' *Sea Drift*, and American composer Bloch's famous *Schelomo*, with cellist Raphael Wallfisch.

O where, tell me where?, three short songs by **John Tavener**, have been recorded and released by The Bach Choir. The arrangements were written shortly before the composer's death in 2013. Scored for choir and tubular bells, the set was premiered by the Bach Choir in Shanghai and had its UK premiere a year later when the Choir celebrated the late composer's 70th birthday.

"Tavener composed this work whilst in the Highlands as a homage to the country he had come to love - that he did so was quite obvious, from the eerily evocative bells to the deceptively uncomplicated treatment of the songs themselves."

Bachtrack, 2014

The Choir has recently recorded **Herbert Howells' 1953 *Missa Sabriensis***, with the **BBC Concert Orchestra** and soloists **Helena Dix, Christine Rice, Ben Hulett**, and **Roderick Williams**. An extended and complex setting of the Latin Mass for soloists, chorus and orchestra, the *Missa Sabriensis* was named after the River Severn.

Listings

Friday 28 June, 7:30pm

Royal Festival Hall

Beethoven *Missa Solemnis*

Royal Festival Hall

The Bach Choir
Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment
David Hill conductor

Sarah Fox soprano
Christianne Stotijn mezzo-soprano
Toby Spence tenor
Roderick Williams baritone

Thursday 17 October, 7:30pm

Roxanna Panufnik *Four Choral Seasons* **WORLD PREMIERE**
Bloch *Schelomo*
Debussy *La mer*
Delius *Sea Drift*

The Bach Choir
Philharmonia Orchestra
Raphael Wallfisch cello
Duncan Rock baritone
David Hill conductor

The Bach Choir

Founded in 1876, The Bach Choir is recognised as one of the world's leading choruses, building upon a tradition that combines musical excellence with creativity and innovation.



From the first performance in Britain of Bach's *Mass in B minor* 142 years ago to the soundtrack for Ridley Scott's epic *Prometheus*, the Choir's musical heritage is as rich as it is diverse. Directed by David Hill, one of the country's most eminent conductors and choir trainers, the Choir regularly performs and records across London and the UK in prestigious venues, from the Royal Albert Hall to Abbey Road Studios.

Described by the London Evening Standard as 'probably the finest independent choir in the world', the Bach Choir values the freedom that its independence brings, allowing it to work with the very best orchestras and soloists, and to choose the music it performs. To date the Choir has sung over 400 works in more than 120 venues, and continues to share its work with audiences around the world. Following an invitation from the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, the Choir gave two performances of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in Hong Kong's Cultural Centre just before Easter 2014, and it gave further concerts in Shanghai and Hangzhou. In October 2017, the Choir gave six concerts in the Netherlands of *a cappella* music and works for choir and organ, one of which was broadcast on Dutch radio. Plans are under way for a tour to the US in 2020.

With a strong commitment to new music, the Bach Choir has commissioned works from some of the world's leading composers including Sir John Tavener, Bob Chilcott, Jonathan Dove, Will Todd and Carl Rütti. In June 2017 the Choir gave the world premiere performance of James MacMillan's *Blow the trumpet in the new moon*, and it has commissioned Roxanna Panufnik to write a new work – *Four Choral Seasons* - which the Choir will perform in October this year.

The Bach Choir has always been characterised by the commitment of its members. With over 250 talented singers coming from all walks of life, an international touring schedule, and a pioneering outreach programme, *Vocalise!*, that takes its passion for music into inner-city schools, the Choir takes pride in performing, recording and sharing music for all to enjoy.

thebachchoir.org.uk

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