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Confident and precise attack, despite the cast of hundreds

Philharmonia / Bach Choir / Hill
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Inexplicably, I have not heard the Bach Choir live for some years. On the evidence of last night's concert with the in-form Philharmonia Orchestra, it's in excellent shape. David Hill, its conductor since 1998, has effected an impressive rejuvenation, and the general vocal quality certainly seems higher than I remember from before his time.

Moreover, Hill proved that a cast of something over 200 need not mean flaccid rhythms, insecure tone and pitch, or ragged ensemble. Although the altos sometimes lacked adequate presence within the overall texture, the tenor line, often the Achilles heel of even our most famous amateur choirs, here showed itself to be strong and secure.

And as a body the choir showed an unfailingly confident and precise attack, even when Hill pushed them hard in faster passages such as the *Dies Irae* and *Confutatis maledictis* from the evening's main work, Mozart's *Requiem*, given a dramatic and moving reading.

The excellent choral and orchestral work in the piece was matched by that of the vocal soloists - soprano Carolyn Sampson, contralto Catherine Wyn-Rogers, tenor James Gilchrist and bass Michael George - who sang as a real team, and with irresistible, characterful eloquence. One highlight was Sampson's singing of the words "Lux Aeterna" in the *Communio*. Here, surely, was the reassuring focus of the piece.

Wyn-Rogers, as musically insightful and vocally gifted as any British contralto has ever been, previously offered a ripe intense reading, (inadequately applauded) of Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody*, but she wasn't needed for Beethoven's rarely performed *Christus am Olberge* (Christ on the Mount of Olives), composed in 1803 in the immediate wake of the composer's soul-searching *Heiligenstadt Testament* in which he reconciles himself to his suffering.

The self-confidence of this deeply felt piece points firmly towards the two later, great masses in C and D minor [sic]; it was good to hear it so convincingly done.