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Juliet England: Review of a signed performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* by London's Bach Choir

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To London's Royal Festival Hall, the other Friday evening, for a performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, one of the composer's most personal works, performed by The Bach Choir and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE).

This was a hugely special event from a deaf point of view for a number of reasons. Beethoven was, of course, himself famously deaf, and had lost 60% of his hearing by 1801, when he was in his early thirties. Some fifteen years later, he was entirely unable to hear.

(The exact cause has never been entirely identified, though theories range from lead poisoning to typhus to his habit of immersing his head in cold water to remain awake.)

First performed nearly two centuries ago in 1824, just a few years before Beethoven's death, *Missa Solemnis* was originally conceived as a mass for the inauguration of Archduke Rudolph of Austria.

Posing some notoriously tricky technical challenges, it was composed for a large choir plus four soloists and comprises the five permanent elements of the Catholic mass. And, as the programme notes put it, "for the

voices in particular, it requires extended passages at high pitch and speed, with huge leaps in pitch and dynamics, as well as some of the most expressive and mystical music ever written.”

Up for overcoming the various challenges were the OAE, conducted by David Hill and launched in the mid-1980s as an experimental ensemble, alongside The Bach Choir, formed more than a hundred years earlier and one of the world’s leading choruses.

A choir member came up with the idea of performing a signed version of this work, to increase access and reach new audiences.

To kick off the evening, compere Sir Richard Stilgoe spoke about deafness and music, explaining for example how Beethoven cut off the legs of his piano, the better to feel the vibrations as he played. Sir Richard, a performer, writer and lyricist of some five decades’ experience, spoke about the way deaf people enjoy and create music, and, of course, about Beethoven’s own deafness.

His words were signed by Paul Whittaker, a profoundly deaf musician and motivational speaker who founded the charity Music and the Deaf more than 30 years ago to help those with a hearing loss enjoy music. Whittaker, who began signing musicals such as *Phantom of the Opera* and *Miss Saigon* back in the early 1990s, received an OBE for services to music in 2007.

Ahead of the Festival Hall concert, he told a journalist: “As far as we know this piece has never been signed before. Translating the words from Latin into BSL and then matching that with the music was a real challenge, but I loved it.

“Although I don’t know of anyone else who would take on such a challenge, it’s brought together all my musical knowledge and experience, my deafness and use of sign language, while enabling access for other deaf people.”

It was the first time I’d been at any kind of signed musical performance, and, perhaps

appropriately, it was the same weekend when all the glorious madness of Glastonbury arguably brought the issue of deaf access to the fore.

I had experienced many hours of signed events before, but nothing quite like this. Indeed, I at first wasn't sure initially that I was even watching BSL, so different was it from anything I'd witnessed previously. But it was hard not to be mesmerised by Whittaker's elegant movements, as he seemingly effortlessly drew out each shape with his hands in time with every note.

At one point, every choir member briefly did some signing too, a sight which really was beautiful, not least because it was so much bigger than I had been expecting, with dozens and dozens of performers. The choir's signing was for the first 30 or so bars of the piece's Credo in their separate voice parts, while singing the music by heart.

Together with the various sections of the orchestra, the choir created an astonishing wall of sound. And, of course, special mention must go to the incredible soloists, soprano Sarah Fox and mezzo soprano Chritianne Stotlin, alongside tenor Toby Spence and baritone Roderick Williams.

If I had one quibble about the evening, it was that, as someone with a significant hearing loss who nonetheless doesn't sign, I struggled to hear Sir Richard's words when he was speaking. So some form of captioning for the spoken elements would have helped hard-of-hearing non-signers immeasurably.

But this was nonetheless a huge opportunity for deaf people to experience a live classical music performance, something which, to the best of my knowledge, doesn't come around as often as it perhaps should, despite the determined efforts of many.

So there was something hugely heartening about this superb occasion, and I hope there will be others like it in the future. Massive jazz hands all round.