

1939 World War 2 and the B minor mass

It was September 1939 and war had broken out in Europe. The committee of the Edinburgh Bach Society met on 23 November to reconsider their plan for the fifty-second season, 1939-40. Following a successful performance of the B Minor Mass in March 1939 the committee had hoped to put on a repeat performance of the Mass before Christmas 1939, followed by a performance of the St John Passion in spring 1940. But with the declaration of war the Society's hall bookings had been cancelled and the Society's publicity material had been printed but not distributed. Choir rehearsals did, however, continue.

In 1939 the committee was concerned about falling membership numbers, with ordinary (ie non-singing) members down from 160 in 1924-25 to 50 in 1938-39. (Over the same period the number of singing members was more stable, at around 70.) While the main effort to increase membership was "postponed until more peaceful conditions" the committee decided to try to widen interest through a joint venture with the Water Colour Society. The result was a performance, which included J S Bach's Magnificat, in the Royal Scottish Academy Galleries on the Mound, in February 1940. Ticket prices were two shillings for the concert only, and two shillings and six pence for the concert and admission to the Water Colour Society's Exhibition.

Going back to the 1939 performance of the B Minor Mass, it is interesting to note that this was only the third time the Mass had been performed in Edinburgh, the previous performances having been in 1907 and 1931. It is also worth noting that the soloists were drawn from the choir and only one of the instrumentalists was a professional. One reviewer quoted Parry's opinion that this is "the mightiest choral work ever written". This puts in context the Glasgow Herald's assessment that "it was a courageous but a somewhat ambitious effort." The Scotsman was more positive and reported that "the singers and players concerned are entitled to unreserved congratulations. a repetition of the Mass at a future date would surely be welcome." At its meeting in June 1939 the committee agreed that the performance was "a noteworthy landmark in the history of the Society".

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