



Breakdancing in *Sound of Eternity*

Bach for the DVD Set

Sound of Eternity makes music visible. BY SUZI STEFFEN

A huge screen descends on stage. Musicians and chorus, clad in formal black, await the conductor's instructions. As the baton comes down, the screen comes to life with a scene of the solar system. The camera rushes around Mars and toward Earth as the chorus sings "Kyrie eleison" to the strains of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Mass in B minor*.

In Silva Hall on July 9, this will mark the beginning of a visual journey through time, art and geography, with the Oregon Bach Festival (OBF) orchestra and chorus providing the soundtrack.

"Some people think [classical] music is too cerebral," says Royce Saltzman, the OBF's co-founder and executive director. Saltzman hopes this summer's presentation of the multimedia *Mass in B minor*, including movie sections with breakdancers and computer-animated architectural reconstructions, will change that image. Indeed, the Bach Festival's "Major Concert Pocket Guide" says that the audience for the American premiere of *Klang der Ewigkeit*, or *Sound of Eternity*, is "those who like music but get restless simply watching players in tuxes."

Saltzman believes contemporary audiences want more from their performances. "In this age, we are bombarded with the visual," he says, and the movie "is an attempt to make a work like the *B minor Mass*, Bach's ultimate composition, more accessible to a larger number of people."

German cinematographer Bastian Clevé, who is a professor at the University of Baden-Württemberg, says that when he first listened to the *Mass in B minor*, it was "like being struck by lightning." He began work 25 years ago to create a movie set to that inspiring music. Famous for his short movies of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Clevé has also worked on and won awards for feature-length films, including *Exit Sunset Boulevard* (1980), *Bagdad Café* (1987) and *As Far as My Feet Will Take Me* (*So weit die Füße tragen*, 2001).

Using OBF co-founder and artistic director Helmuth Rilling's recording of the *Mass in B minor*, Clevé created a different short film for each section of the *Mass*, 27 in all. Last year, with the movie complete, Clevé asked Rilling to give a live performance.

"Helmuth said, 'I will do the movie performance if I can do a performance later in a church,'" Saltzman says, and the movie premiered in Stuttgart in 2005.

Saltzman says the idea was controversial in Germany, where Bach's work is "sort of like sacred scripture." In Stuttgart, at the end of the performance and movie, some people applauded — but some booed. When Saltzman went backstage after the movie performance to congratulate Rilling on his courage in putting on such a controversial piece, Rilling replied, "Tonight, people all over Stuttgart will be talking about this; tomorrow night [after the performance without the movie], they won't."

The movie mixes a variety of imagery, much of it drawn from European cultural heritage. Some of it comes from a more modern, technological era, including ideas about the nature of space and history. The camera swoops over San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge in one section; in another, stumbling white refugees — European Jews fleeing the Nazis, perhaps — meet with religious pilgrims from the desert. Other sections use high art as an animating principle: One of Venice's famous stone lions flies to its place in front of St. Mark's; in Brueghel's paintings, birds launch from trees and fly across the screen. Snapshots of Baroque statues morph and meld into one another in a kaleidoscope of colors.

In Saltzman's favorite section, Et resurrexit, breakdancers perform. "It's stunning," Saltzman says. "Totally unexpected and absolutely stunning."

Each section of the movie carefully matches the music, so a live performance is a technical as well as an emotional challenge. "Rilling's tempo has to be very carefully planned," Saltzman says. As in Stuttgart, a person watching the movie just offstage will use headphones to give cues and help Rilling hold the musicians to the visual rhythms of the movie.

"The film itself is a cross-section of symbolism and ideas, some of which I don't totally understand," Saltzman says. He's happy to say that even though "this performance is not for the people who want to bathe themselves in the music and the text," he believes it will attract a new audience. The other day, Saltzman ran into someone who told him, "This is the first time I've bought a ticket for the Bach Festival, and it's because of the multimedia aspect."

Meanwhile, the movie is showing in several German cities and opens in more through the summer. Bach Festival fans can hear Bastian Clevé talk about his work on July 7 and 8 before the afternoon performance of *Sound of Eternity* on July 9 (all events at the Hult); Helmuth Rilling joins Clevé on July 7 and conducts a music-only performance of the *Mass in B minor* on July 10 at the First Baptist Church. ■

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