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J.S. BACH
 Mass in B minor
 Carolyn Sampson, Rachel Nicholls (soprano); Robin Blaze (alto); Gerd Türk (tenor); Peter Kooij (bass)
 Bach Collegium Japan
 Maasaki Suzuki
 BIS- 1701/2(SACD)
 Reference Recording - Hengelbrock (dhm); Jochum (EMI); This One

Artistic Quality **10/10** Sound Quality

This performance of the B minor Mass has everything: great playing, sensational singing from the soloists and chorus, ideal pacing, and a powerful feeling for the character of each movement as well as for the architecture of the whole massive musical edifice. Although Suzuki uses relatively small forces (18 singers, 11 strings), he never compromises the grandeur of such movements as the Sanctus, the opening of the Gloria, or the Credo's final Et expecto--and the concluding Dona nobis pacem must be accounted one of the most satisfying ever recorded. Taken a touch slower than the Grattias, whose music it shares, Suzuki's conception has a rhetorical splendor that caps the performance like the dome on a cathedral.

The soloists are uniformly strong, and are major names in Bach performance. Carolyn Sampson leads the sopranos with a tone at once rich but still pure, and teams up with Rachel Nicholls for a gorgeous Christe eleison. Countertenor Robin Blaze is in excellent voice on this outing, and his Qui sedes hasn't a trace of the hollowness that sometimes mars his vocal production. Bass Peter Kooij is a veteran of this series. His dry-ish timbre and focused intonation (aided by gutsy horn-playing) make the Quoniam a highlight of the performance.

BIS's engineers wisely put a good bit of space around the players, which allows the big choruses to fill the room while giving just the right prominence to the trumpets and drums. The result, whether in stereo or multichannel formats, gives the music tremendous physicality and impact. Make no mistake, this is one of the great versions of Bach's masterpiece. [12/3/2007]

--David Hurwitz

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