

Review

Canton Symphony & Chorus deliver transcendent Brahms *German Requiem* (Feb. 16)

by Tom Wachunas



In celebration of its 30th Anniversary, the Canton Symphony Chorus joined the Canton Symphony Orchestra on February 16 for the Masterworks Series concert at Umstattd Hall. Augmented by the Malone University Chorus along with members of The Wooster Chorus, the combined vocal ensemble of 125 members, conducted by Chorus Director Britt Cooper, gave a truly beautiful account of the first work on the program, Mozart's brief motet, *Ave verum corpus (Hail True Body)*.

Hushed and ethereal, the performance was nonetheless an inspiring tone-setter for the more dramatically expansive Brahms *German Requiem* that followed, conducted by Gerhard Zimmermann.

Unlike the traditional Latin Mass for the Dead, this requiem eschewed the blunt Biblical language of a wrathful God dispensing the fire and brimstone of the Last Judgment. Brahms composed it more in the fashion of an oratorio in seven movements, all with Old and New Testament texts intended to comfort the living rather than warn the dead. Conceptually, the music traces a steady transformation of dark mortality into the light of divine joy.

Happily, the chorus was radiant, the orchestra powerful. Both ensembles were seamlessly blended into an uncanny manifestation of unified purpose, making the work's spirit of solace and hope a soaring, visceral experience.

The emotional thrust takes on especially poignant and dramatic dimensions in solos for baritone (third and sixth movements) and soprano (fifth movement). The singing by both guest artists — baritone Brian Keith Johnson and soprano Rachel Jeanne Hall — was wholly impressive.

At the end of the third movement there is a breathtaking crescendo, an orchestral and choral swelling of affirmation, as the baritone soloist solemnly intones, “*Nun, Herr, wess soil ich mich trösten? (And now, Lord, what is my hope?)*,” followed by the stirring response, “*Ich hoffe auf dich (My hope is in Thee)*.” Brahms added the fifth movement as a remembrance of his beloved mother, who died in 1865. The text for the soprano soloist is from Isaiah, promising the bereaved child the kind of comfort that a mother would offer.

Befitting the image, Hall's achingly sweet soprano tonality, warm and full, was a moving embodiment of maternal consolation.

In its day, this Brahms masterpiece was soundly skewered by many critics on dogmatic, technical and philosophical grounds. Wagner, particularly contemptuous of Brahms' desire that the work be regarded as a wholly German one, written for all of Germany, once quipped that when his own generation passed, "...we will want no *German Requiem* to be played on our ashes."

In retrospect, such short-sighted objections amount to missing the forest for the trees. This performance illuminated Brahms' own description of the work, repeated on several occasions after its final version premiered in 1869, as a "human" requiem. It is, after all, unequivocally a work for the ages, presented here with compelling authority and palpable, indeed amazing grace.

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