

Review**West Shore Chorale — Brahms's Requiem
at St. John's Cathedral (March 14)**

by Daniel Hathaway



What to do about the Brahms *Requiem*? It's one of the most beloved extended works in the choral repertoire, but what amateur choral society has the resources to put it on with full orchestra? Some settle for organ accompaniment, some for Brahms's own arrangement for piano four-hands, but a lot of orchestral color goes missing.

For the West Shore Chorale's performance of the *Requiem* at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist on Friday evening, March 14, conductor John Drotleff presented another solution: German flutist Joachim Linckelmann's 2010 reduction of the orchestra score for just eleven players — string quartet plus double bass, standard woodwind quintet and timpani.

If that would seem to put the well-fed sonorities of Brahms on a drastic diet, consider a few other cases where composers have trimmed their resources and produced wonderful results — the chamber operas of Benjamin Britten come immediately to mind.

It helps to have an excellent group of musicians manning those one-on-a-part assignments, and Drotleff assembled some of Cleveland's most experienced free-lancers for the Brahms. Let's call them out by name: violinists Wei-Shu Wang Co and Nancy Cooke, violist Laura Kuennen-Poper, cellist Charles Griffith, bassist Sue Yelanjian, flutist Sean Gabriel (who doubled on piccolo), oboist Thomas Moore, clarinetist Louis Gangale, bassoonist Mark DeMio, hornist Cynthia Wulff and timpanist Andrew Pongracz, who provided much of the instrumental drama.

It took a few minutes for the ear to adjust to leaner instrumental textures, but then most of Brahms's orchestral colors came through beautifully. The 88-member chorus also took a few minutes to find its focus, but after a slightly tentative entrance on the hushed opening words, "Blessed are they that mourn," the singers took hold of their role, producing lovely moments of blended tone as well as grippingly strong choral unisons and stirring fugues.

Soprano Coeli Ingold and baritone Thomas Scurich added a fine gloss to the performance, Ingold with her clear and soaring *Ye now are sorrowful*, Scurich with his arresting declamation of *Lo, I unfold you a mystery*, and earlier with his rich, resonant *Lord, teach me to know the measure of my days on earth*.

Drotleff led a strong, well-paced performance. If some tempos seemed on the slow side, St. John's Cathedral is a big, resonant space and speed limits help prevent sonic pileups.

Friday's performance successful validated Linckelmann's instrumental arrangement — but I found myself unconvinced by the decision to sing the Brahms in English. It is, after all, *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, and its original language is embedded in its musical DNA. Even though there are occasionally similar-sounding words that fall in the same place, there are also cases where singers have to sing long phrases on difficult vowels.

The large audience responded with ovations and *bravos* (for a requiem!) at the end of each half of the concert — and *bravas* for Ingold after her aria. Drotleff and the Chorale richly deserved the applause. So did the little orchestra, who covered the normal duties of dozens of musicians with stamina and distinction.

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