

Master Singers honor the retirement of founder J.D. Goddard (Aug. 12)

by Robert Rollin



Last Sunday, August 12, an all-Brahms concert by the Master Singers Chorale and Orchestra at SS. Cosmas and Damian Church in Twinsburg honored the retirement of founding artistic director J.D. Goddard. The afternoon's high point was the performance of the Fourth Symphony.

The first movement's complex opening can be overplayed, but Goddard and the Orchestra kept a smooth sense of motion, exposing the intricate phrasing. The small string section played crisply, and woodwinds and intermittent brass helped punctuate the flow. Principal oboe Cynthia Warren was terrific on her solos, and the horn section played with flair. The cellos displayed lovely tonal purity, especially in the recapitulation.

The beautiful second movement began with powerfully expressive horns and attractive woodwind doubling. Next, the tune went to the two talented clarinetists, playing in pianissimo thirds and sixths accompanied by string pizzicatos. Color and dynamic contrast were stunning. The cello section again shone in the middle section.

The scherzo sparkled, providing emotional relief. A flurry of sixteenths dominated by raucous brass answered the electrifying tutti of the first tutti. Cascading accompaniment figures in piccolo, flute, clarinets, and bassoons gave the quieter second theme a special grace. The short, slightly slower middle section featured the gorgeous horns, and led to a return followed by a tumultuous coda.

The fourth movement reestablished the earlier passionate intensity, but this time in passacaglia form — here, 30 ingenious variations on a repeating bass line. The stentorous trombones darkened the powerful opening chords. The main theme, in entrancing staccato string triplets, overlaid the tutti climax.

Principal flute Sean Gabriel's solo was engaging, especially in the low range. Portentous upper string tremolos decorated the louder woodwinds and brass. These details added up to a stunning performance.

The dark opening of Brahms' *German Requiem* omits violins, perhaps reflecting Brahms' sadness at the losses of both his mother and his mentor Robert Schumann. Cellos dominated poignantly, followed by colorful unaccompanied chorus and exquisite oboe solos.

"All flesh is grass" began in funeral march tempo and with another oboe solo gently doubled by violins. The tempo increased in a tutti climax expressing "eternal joy," enlivened by solos by principal horn Nathan Peebles and principal trumpet Alan Couch.

The third movement closed brightly on "my hope is in you," sung by bass-baritone soloist Frank Ward, Jr. His shorter solos in the sixth movement engendered attractive ascending choral sequences and, later, a formidable choral fugue. Soprano Marian Vogel animated the fifth movement with three beautiful solos emerging clearly from choral and orchestral textures. Though the church's acoustics made it difficult to discern the text, the Requiem received a strong performance.

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