

Akron Symphony: sincerity and solace in Brahms' *German Requiem* (May 13)

by Stephanie Manning



It's not unusual to hear Johannes Brahms' *German Requiem* with chorus and piano four-hands, rather than chorus and orchestra. Music-loving Clevelanders may even have heard that version recently, as it's been popping up on local programs. But on Saturday, May 13, the Akron Symphony Orchestra and Chorus teamed up for a performance of the work that would satisfy lovers of both versions alike.

Before the *Requiem*, however, the Orchestra and music director Christopher Wilkins opened the evening with Valerie Coleman's *Umoja*. Best known in its arrangement for woodwind quintet, the piece gained an orchestral version a few years ago — one that uses the diverse timbres of the bigger ensemble to put a new spin on the work. The lush soundscape brings to mind scenes from nature, and folksy solos gave concertmaster, piccolo, and trumpet their turn in the spotlight. The celebratory melody that first appears in the violas builds a slow crescendo as it spreads to other sections of the orchestra, and on Saturday, the mood was suitably infectious.

At 70 minutes, the Brahms gradually traces a seven-movement musical arc that peaks at the center, framed by pairs of outer movements. After a few moments of unsteady intonation towards the beginning, things became smoother for the orchestra from then on out. Both Brahms' deliberate orchestrations and the ensemble's sensitive playing allowed them to support the chorus behind them. The sizable group of singers brought energy and a big sound to the moments that needed it the most.

While the choir's lower pitches were occasionally overbalanced by the orchestra, and their tempo sometimes pushed ahead, their overall group sound produced some fantastic moments. The second movement was a particular highlight, where the combined forces of those on stage produced a huge, dark, very German sound. Unlike the in-your-face dramatics of works like Mahler symphonies, the biggest moments of Brahms feel as if

they surround the listener, rather than hitting you full force — and the effect was chill-inducing.

Solo moments of note came from soprano Brianna J. Robinson and baritone Brian Keith Johnson. In their respective movements, they each added a special layer of emphasis to the text, which Brahms drew from Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible. Johnson came across steady and assured, with great control over diction and pitch. Although he couldn't quite project enough to really fill E.J. Thomas Hall, his interpretation of the text remained convincing.

Robinson's performance in the fifth movement felt more operatic, thanks to her fast vibrato and expansive sound. Her assertive voice allowed for a clear interpretation of the musical line as she sang words of comfort. Given these captivating elements, her brief appearance felt like it was over far too soon.

The two movements that bookend the *Requiem* mirror one another in a few special ways, one being the way they end — a delicate sustained chord with a gentle harp flourish. It could be heard easily over the rest of the ensemble, providing the last little sparkle that twinkled into silence.

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