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Splendid Requiem singers foiled by St. Paul's acoustics

MUSIC REVIEW

By John Zeugner Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

Here's a fact few people know, and perhaps only music critics need to ponder:

For about a dozen years, before he was a famous playwright, George Bernard Shaw paid the rent by writing concert reviews. Shaw had a very nasty way with words. Here's what he wrote June 21, 1891, reviewing Brahms' German Requiem: "...unrestrained by any consciousness on his part of the commonplaceness of his ideas, which makes his tone poetry all but worthless, or of the lack of constructive capacity which makes his 'absolute music' incoherent. He is quite capable of writing half a dozen more Requiems, all as insufferable as this one. ..."

Given the strength of Shaw's acidic convictions, it's doubtful even the magnificence, ambition and professional sheen of the Salisbury Singers' performance of the Requiem Saturday night at St. Paul's Cathedral would have changed Shaw's mind. History, of course, has given the lie to his little tirade. Music director Michelle Graveline, as always in tight command of nearly 40 orchestral musicians and 80 well-rehearsed voices, surely put an exclamation point to history's verdict.

She was joined by three superb soloists, soprano Holly Cameron, baritone Sumner Thompson and cellist (from the orchestra) Matthew Capobianco. This huge assemblage put on as powerful a performance as you're likely to hear anywhere in New England — a performance, one might add, that almost, but not quite, overcame the really ghastly acoustics at St. Paul's Cathedral.

Shaw certainly would have objected to the church's enormous vault spaces that guarantee smudging any mighty vocal outpourings. And the seven movements of Brahms' German Requiem are littered with mighty outpourings. Smaller-scaled music can work fairly well in the church's sanctuary, but anything of the size and ambition of this performance risks becoming a melded jumble of sound. And there were portions of the Brahms where even meticulous articulation simply cascaded into poignant overwhelming decibel-melt, so that vocal-orchestral sonic tsunamis washed over the audience in roiling emotional uplifts.

Brahms' Requiem isn't a requiem, rather a big boned would-be oratorio, a kind of riposte to Handel's Messiah, that focuses on Bible verses of consolation for the living rather than commemoration of the dead. Hence, it's a favorite of secularists and may at some level reflect the composer's ambivalences about the death of his mother, as well as that of Robert Schumann, whose marital life Brahms may have, what shall we say, impacted?

Both Cameron and Thompson unfurled pure golden tones and, if minimally accompanied, were bell-clear in articulation; when they sang with the full chorus, the resulting sound melt minimized perception of their wonderful gifts. In the third movement and the most moving seventh movement, however, Thompson and the chorus generated emotional aural crescendos that seemed to sweep even the acoustic smudging into a new level of almost spiritual height and bedazzlement. The full range of Brahms' symphonic architecture from motet to fugue was unfurled. The experience was dizzying, amazing, even transporting. At the end, the audience seemed stunned in its standing ovation.

The concert began with a very beguiling rendering of Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Fantasia on Christmas Carols." The first carol, "The Truth Sent from Above," opened and closed with a very deft cello solo, the chorus initially humming in the background. The chorus transitioned into the second carol, "All You Worthy Gentlemen," gradually turning up the volume, so that by the time

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Thompson opened the third and more familiar carol "On Christmas Night" the audience had a seductive glimpse of the power, persuasion and majesty awaiting them in the Brahms.

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