

First-rate performance of Brahms' Requiem intoxicates audience

By Colin Seymour
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concert review

Through the centuries, composers have addressed not just the joys and pleasures of life but its weightier issues — death and loss, doubt and faith, fear and hope, judgment and mercy, punishment and redemption — often in the context of the Requiem Mass.

If one had to choose which of these great musical statements offers the most profound, comforting and moving approach, the decision could be tough. But last Friday at Mission Santa Clara, Thomas Colohan, conductor of the Santa Clara Chorale, made a strong case for Brahms' German Requiem.

Though not definitive, the performance was first-rate, with Symphony Silicon Valley backing Colohan's

150 singers, drawn from the chorale and his Santa Clara University Choir and Chamber Singers.

They presented this 78-minute tour de force in the aftermath of a 98-degree day, with crucial contributions from a pair of formidable local soloists, baritone David Cox and soprano Kristin Genis-Lund.

Pride in our local musicians, empathy for Colohan and the heat of the day made the whole thing intoxicatingly personal for many in the audience, and not just those who rate Brahms' Requiem as their favorite choral work.

Colohan made it seem as if this were the most important night of his life, so you had to root for him. He dedicated the evening to the memo-

ry of his mother, Gertrude Agnes Colohan (1924-2004), just as Brahms had dedicated the work to his own mother.

In the program notes, the conductor said the performance constituted "a coming of age for me, both personally and professionally."

He also prepared the audience to get the most out of this unorthodox Requiem, which is not strictly a Mass at all, but more like a Unitarian memorial-service approach to dealing with death. The conductor delivered some five minutes of supplemental program notes, urging the audience to soak up the printed English text for the seven movements during the performance, which was sung in German. Brahms used the orchestra to convey pain and grief, Colohan said, and the voi-

ces to communicate comfort and serenity.

The singing was angelic throughout, through sometimes lacking in oomph during passionate passages, such as the third movement climax, which invokes the words "pain and grief" in most translations.

The choir succeeded, however, in conveying "joy everlasting" in the second movement, which mitigates the "all flesh is as grass" dirge for which that section is justly famous. And the ethereal fourth movement ("How lovely is thy dwelling place") delivered fully on the conductor's promises.

The professional orchestra teamed well with the choral singers, and so did the vocal soloists. Cox, long an Opera San Jose performer, was appropriately godlike in the cru-

cial sixth movement ("Lo, I unfold to you a mystery; we shall not all sleep when He cometh but shall all be changed in a moment"). And the choir finally let loose for the climactic "worthy to be changed" section.

But the performer who best interpreted the text was Genis-Lund, whose fifth-movement solo radiated solace ("you shall again behold me, and your heart shall be joyful") from the eternal mother.

My only quibble about the evening involved the English translation in the program, which was indeed childlike, as Colohan said he intended it to be, but was printed in very small type, particularly for a graying audience.

By contrast, Colohan's contribution to the cultural life of the South Bay is now writ very large.