

Review: Obscure and the familiar from Glorïae Dei Cantores

Sunday Posted Oct 30, 2016 at 6:12 PM

Updated Oct 30, 2016 at 6:12 PM

By Keith Powers Contributing writer

With explorations showing their sense of devotion, and their sense of adventure, the singers of Glorïae Dei Cantores presented a program of the familiar — and the not-so-familiar — Saturday evening at the Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans.

Mozart’s “Requiem”? You know about that. But Benjamin Britten’s “The Company of Heaven”? There probably weren’t a half-dozen members of the sold-out audience that had ever even heard of the English composer’s 1937 cantata (if that’s what you call it).

Prepared expertly by director Richard K. Pugsley, the chorus and orchestra were joined by four well-blended soloists to perform Mozart’s final work. Martha Guth (soprano), Kathryn Leemhuis (mezzo), Aaron Sheehan (tenor) and Andrew Nolen (bass) sang perfectly well in brief solo moments, but it was their naturally sounding blend with instrumentalists and chorus that added balance to the performance.

The “Requiem” did have an unbalanced beginning, however. The inviting double fugue of the “Kyrie” washed over the room without distinct sounding parts, and overwhelmed the instruments. It does take some time to adjust to the acoustics in the vast church, which is an incredible building, and has many good musical qualities, but is long and tall, causing a pronounced delay echo.

Pugsley pushed his forces urgently through the “Dies Irae”; the four soloists came to life with individual lines in the aptly titled “Tuba mirum” (“wondrous sound”), kicked off by a charged duet between Nolen and tenor trombonist Joe Walsh. Circling through well-articulated solos in each

range, the foursome culminated with a beautifully woven quartet at “cum vix justus sit securus” (“when the just are mercy needing”).

The “Requiem” is a compelling work, proportionate and thoughtful. By the time the music of the double fugue from the “Kyrie” recycles at the conclusion, “Cum sanctis” of the Communion, a deep sense of rest and completion has been achieved.

Describing Britten’s “The Company of Heaven” still fails to make sense of it. Set for string orchestra, timpani (alertly played in a major role by Timur Rubinshteyn), and organ, with chorus, tenor and soprano soloists, and three narrators, “The Company of Heaven” alternates between spoken parts and accompanied vocal settings.

Some texts are Old Testament, but most are drawn from British writers: Ruskin, Emily Brontë, Blake, Hopkins and the Rossettis. The subject matter: angels.

The work was written for radio performance, and Britten’s music was meant to be incidental accompaniment to the poetry. Therein lies the reason it’s not performed — the balance between spoken word and music weighs heavily on the side of the speakers.

The instrumental music, when it does appear, is archly Britten and brilliantly conceived. It mainly centers around the strings, who have a number of idiosyncratic lines and approaches.

But the chorus — the real star of this entire performance — also unleashes its musicianly power with an eight-part a cappella canon, “Whoso dwelleth” from Psalm 91, sung with majesty and precision.

The vocal soloists’ parts are limited but touching. Of particular note was Guth simply singing “Hail, Mary” above a single organ note and a scant choir accompaniment, with a calm and lustrous tone.

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