

Symphony Captures Pain, Horror, and Redemption

Written by Zach Carstensen
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Giuseppe Verdi originally wrote only a portion of his *Messa da Requiem* (conceived to honor Rossini) with the hope that other composers would join in him in completing it, but the project never materialized. It was only later, after Alessandro Manzoni died, that the requiem was fully realized; Verdi took the completed *Libra me* and built the remaining six movements around it. The completed project blends the traditional liturgical text with Verdi's flair for operatic drama.

Despite the requiem's moving nature, some have criticized it for being too dramatic and not sacred enough. But the composer's interpretation of the Latin text captures the pain, horror, and redemption that other requiems just tinker with. Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* utilizes the forces of the orchestra, the chorus, and the soloists in a complementary fashion, making the piece a balanced tour de force that adds to the profound nature and the depth of the individual impact.

On April 7, the Quad City Symphony Orchestra (QCSO) tackled Verdi's mammoth work at the Adler Theatre. That would be a daunting task for most orchestras, but under conductor and musical director Donald Schleicher, the requiem was vigorous without being overbearing. Schleicher enlisted the help of the Handel Oratorio Society and a crop of qualified soloists: Nancy Pifer, soprano; Marion Dry, contralto; Eric Ashcraft, tenor; and Mark McCrory, bass.

Most would agree that the highlight of the requiem is the sprawling *Dies irae*. Spanning almost 40 minutes, no other movement in the piece captures such a mix of emotions. A swirling maelstrom from the beginning, terror is the rule of thumb as the chorus pounds out its wrath-filled part. It is hard to compare Verdi's *Dies irae* with any other; it is horrific, and the hairs on the back of your neck stand up and you break out in a cold sweat. The QCSO's performance, along with the intimacy of the Adler, made the *Dies irae* even more chilling. It reached into me.

But the *Dies irae* isn't all about terror, dread, and judgment. There are more conciliatory moments, for instance, when soprano Pifer and contralto Dry beg for absolution in the *Recordare*.

The *Ofertorio*, at the start of the second half, strikes a different tone, as the soloists, without

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the help of the chorus, offer hope and solace. But the soloists were somewhat off their marks. Without the chorus to contend with, clarity is important, and at times, the performance was a little marble-mouthed.

Like the *Dies irae* of the first half, the *Sanctus* offers a thrilling double fugue. Spirited in nature, the text is praise- and awe-filled.

The *Libra me* ties the entire mass together, reaching atonement with shades of the *Dies irae* and *Aeternam*. Soprano Pifer carried the movement with grace and supplication, leaving deliverance in doubt as it trailed off into silence.

Though generally clean, Schleicher's interpretation and the QCSO's playing lacked a necessary edge, in particular on the *Dies irae*. The impact of the movement was delayed, as the wrath the music world has grown to love was a step behind where it should have been.

But Schleicher did an exceptional job of separating the holy from the profane. His interpretation seemed to rely more on liturgical purity than fireworks.

The integrity of Verdi's mass can be questioned – is it opera or is it liturgical? – but Schleicher has demonstrated profound bravery in attempting to command the mix of forces present in the work. Thankfully, the Handel Oratorio Society and the soloists were up to the task.

Like last year, Schleicher ended the season with the audience salivating. The Quad Cities will have to wait until October for Schleicher's podium panache and flair for the grand to return to the Adler. I'm sure they will.