

Review: Mixed results for heartfelt holiday concert

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BETH SCHLANKER/PRESS DEMOCRAT

The Honor Choir performs with the Santa Rosa Symphony at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts on Sunday.

Despite missing two key players, Santa Rosa Symphony Music Director Bruno Ferrandis rallied the troops Saturday night for a heartfelt holiday concert featuring French choral music and a lush, world premiere by French composer Aubert Lemeland.

Lemeland, who was commissioned by the symphony to write the curtain-opening “Battle Pieces” for strings and piano, was scheduled to appear at the concert but died on Nov. 15 at age 77, just a month short of his 78th birthday.

A recent video of Lemeland was shown at the pre-concert lecture, and Ferrandis praised the little-known composer as a “hidden pearl.”

After intermission, Ferrandis dedicated the performance of Gabriel Fauré’s “Requiem” to Lemeland, who had recently become his friend.

In Fauré’s “Requiem,” baritone Marcus DeLoach was forced to cancel due to illness and was replaced by Bay Area baritone Hugh Davies.

Despite these minor setbacks, the show went on, with mixed results. The first half of the program felt a bit choppy and disjointed. Both Lemeland’s “Battle Pieces” and Francis Poulenc’s “Gloria” for Soprano, Orchestra and Chorus before intermission were broken up into short sections that went by so quickly, they were difficult to fully digest.

But thanks to Ferrandis’ passionate conducting of the symphony and the 140-member Santa Rosa Symphony Honor Choir, Fauré’s “Requiem” offered a smooth and secure landing for the all-French program.

With its quiet refinement and restraint, French music can sometimes be a hard sell to outsiders. Fauré's music, which is regarded as the musical embodiment of the French culture, has been compared to a priceless wine that refuses to travel.

Still, the classical clarity and quiet confidence of his "Requiem" seem to exert a universal appeal, even to first-time listeners. Though it dates to 1887, its freshness and originality are still striking today.

Fauré wrote the work between the deaths of his father and his mother, and its overall tone is more consoling than dramatic, emphasizing the solace of eternal rest.

Keeping his left hand on the throttle of the dynamics, Ferrandis led the piece with sensitivity, mouthing the words along with the choir and keeping a close eye on the soloists.

Davies sang with a delicate restraint but was sometimes difficult to hear in the lower register. Soprano Cyndia Sieden, on the other hand, sang with passion and operatic flair.

Sieden also elevated Poulenc's "Gloria" with her top-notch musicality and crystalline timbre in the upper register. The work sparkled like a holiday bauble, polished by lush strings and colorful brass.

In Lemeland's "Battle Pieces," former English teacher and World War II veteran Bernard Sugarman of Santa Rosa recited with dramatic flair and clarity poems written by American soldiers, while the strings and piano played Lemeland's alluring pieces with rhythmic precision and tight ensemble.

Both poems and music were surprisingly accessible and poignant, providing a fitting tribute to all the fallen soldiers.

The Santa Rosa Symphony will repeat the performance at 8 p.m. Monday at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts.