

Santa Rosa Symphony performs ‘German Requiem’

PRESS DEMOCRAT Review by Diane Peterson |

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The Santa Rosa Symphony Honor Choir joined forces with the Santa Rosa Symphony Saturday night, ushering in the holidays with a tautly satisfying performance of Brahms’ *German Requiem*.

The non-liturgical work, full of tenderness and compassion for those left behind, was chosen by the New York Philharmonic to be performed after the 9/11 tragedy in 2001. It was last performed by the Santa Rosa Symphony in 2002.

This time around, Music Director Bruno Ferrandis coaxed a richly textured performance from the choir, directing dynamics and phrasing with passionate energy. It seemed to take a minute or two for the choir to warm up, but they quickly hit their stride during the first of the seven, long movements.

Particularly heroic were the tenors, who brought an impressive unanimity to their lines, especially during the many high, exposed passages.

Prepared by its director Robert Worth, the choir is composed of singers throughout Sonoma County, including the Sonoma Bach Choir, the Santa Rosa High School Chamber Singers and the Santa Rosa Junior College Chamber Singers and Concert Choir.

Adding a professional touch were the two vocal soloists: Baritone Jubilant Sykes, who lent heft, drama and delicious diction to the third and sixth movements; and soprano Karen Clift, who soared through the shimmering fifth movement with her narrow, rapid-fire vibrato.

While Ferrandis kept his attention on the choir – mouthing each word along with them — the orchestra stayed in the rhythmic groove, anchoring the grandiose fugues with precision.

The concert opened with Brahms’ *Tragic Overture*, another tightly controlled work full of dark, harmonic tension. About a dozen principal players from the Santa Rosa Youth Orchestra joined the professional musicians onstage for the curtain opener.

Despite some spotty pitch problems, the brass section shone in the work’s tight harmonies with a beautifully burnished tone, and Ferrandis kept dynamics and pacing lively throughout.

Following the overture, Sykes took the stage with a microphone to perform two spirituals — “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” and “Were You There?” — boasting a lush, jazzy orchestration.

Sykes has an incredible voice with a huge range, from a low grumble to a high whisper, but it's what he does with it that takes your breath away.

While his *piannissimo* passages came off beautifully — that was apparently the reason for miking his powerful voice — the loud passages were nearly deafening, at least from the side balcony. And when he hit the low notes, there was a mysterious buzzing, as if the timpani drums were rumbling sympathetically.

Still, his efforts were rewarded with a standing ovation from the audience, who overlooked these minor, technical difficulties.

Ferrandis dedicated this weekend's three performances to long-time symphony bassoonist Lynne Dubin, who died at her Santa Rosa Home on Nov. 25 at age 54.

The concert will be repeated at 8 p.m. Monday at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts.