

## **Orchestra United at the Santa Rosa Symphony**

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*San Francisco Classical Voice*

by Steve Osborn

Near the end of its Monday performance of the Brahms Requiem, a soprano in the Santa Rosa Symphony Honor Choir collapsed at the back of the stage, perhaps from excessive heat or lack of air. The incident wasn't surprising, since more than 100 singers were crammed shoulder to shoulder in the limited space. What was surprising was that the singers were able to project a unified sound, given that the assembled multitude was actually composed of four choirs, ranging from the Santa Rosa High School Chamber Singers to two choirs from Santa Rosa Junior College plus the venerable Sonoma Bach Choir.

Unanimity took a while to arrive, but when it did, the results were gratifying, particularly in the latter movements of the Requiem. Of these, the concluding seventh was the most affecting, where the lightly accompanied choir sang "Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herrn sterben, von nun an" (Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth). **The ensemble was impeccable, gently urged forward by Maestro Bruno Ferrandis**, whose fluid arm motions helped sustain each line and bring the piece to a heartfelt ending.

The singing in the preceding movements was less assured, yet the orchestra was rock-solid throughout. The violas seemed to relish being on top of the heap in the first movement, which has no violin parts. They led a strong beginning that was shortly marred by some intonation problems in the choir, which tended to go flat. These difficulties were compounded by Ferrandis' slow tempos and disconnected strokes. Phrases didn't flow into each other, and the music seemed to lurch.

By the second movement, the voices (and pitches) warmed up a notch, leading to some impressive crescendos and strong entries. Baritone soloist Jubilant Sykes took over in the third, strenuously pleading with the Lord to show that "mein Leben ein Ziel hat" (my life has an aim). His voice, which had been sadly amplified in the first half (more on that later), was both riveting and rounded, and his diction was superb.

In contrast, soprano Karen Clift, the soloist in the fifth movement, seemed constricted, her true voice barely emerging from an excess of vibrato. She sounded better in her lower range, and her swells were well controlled, but the overall performance was not up to the standard Sykes had set.

Alternating with the soloists throughout, the choir finally hit its stride in the fourth movement and sang out fully in the sixth, particularly in the section beginning "Denn es wird die Posaune schallen" (For the trumpet shall sound).

### **Too, Too Trumpety**

Trumpets of a different sort sounded in the first half, when Sykes sang the spirituals "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Were You There?" into an unnecessary microphone. Everyone knows that the acoustics at the Wells Fargo Center are bad, but they aren't bad enough

to require a microphone, especially for a singer as powerful as Sykes. The Wells Fargo isn't Yankee Stadium.

As if to demonstrate the blessing and the curse of artificial sound, Sykes began *Sometimes* ... slightly below a whisper, gradually building up in volume while swooping and soaring from one end of his range to the other. The inevitable loud passages were simply too loud, his voice ricocheting around the theater from speakers suspended over the balconies. The same pattern repeated in *Were You There?* which culminates in the line "Sometimes I feel like shouting." And he did.

Before the spirituals, the orchestra warmed up the full house with a respectable but rather lackluster performance of Brahms' *Tragic Overture*. In keeping with the expansive spirit of the evening, the ensemble was supplemented for the overture with about a dozen young musicians from the Symphony's Youth Orchestra. Both young and not-so-young played all the notes, yet the piece lacked shape, a formlessness compounded by Ferrandis' slow tempo.

Given that the Requiem was looming in the second half, the concert might have been better served by a more cheerful opener, such as Brahms' *Academic Festival Overture*, followed by some microphone-free singing from Sykes. The amplification can wait until baseball season.

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