

Datestamp: 05/22/2011

Verdi's awesome Mass blesses May Festival

CONCERT REVIEW

By Janelle Gelfand

jgelfand@enquirer.com

Verdi's Requiem Mass is a towering, sacred work that echoes his world of opera with its arias, choruses and dramatic setting, but is unlike anything he ever wrote for the opera stage.

The Cincinnati May Festival launched its season on Friday night in Music Hall with an electrifying performance of Verdi's Latin Mass for the Dead that captured all the sweep and emotional power of this work. James Conlon, music director since 1979, propelled his choral and orchestral forces energetically and without a score. And with a powerhouse quartet of soloists – soprano Christine Brewer, mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe, tenor Stefano Secco and bass Morris Robinson – as well as the excellent May Festival Chorus, you didn't dare breathe for fear of missing a moment.

The May Festival Chorus, magnificently prepared by Robert Porco, filled the stage behind the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, which was sprawled across the front. Offstage trumpets rang out from the balcony in the "Tuba mirum."

Perhaps because Conlon is steeped in Verdi opera, this Requiem was both operatic in its dramatic mood-setting as well as deeply religious. The Requiem aeternam set the stage with a haunting atmosphere, as the hushed chorus intoned against intimate playing in the cellos. The "Dies irae" was chilling for its power and rage. The vehement enunciation of the chorus and intensity of the orchestra, with its thundering timpani and antiphonal brass, left no doubt that this Day of Wrath truly could dissolve the world into glowing ashes.

What a contrast was the cheerful Sanctus, brilliantly announced by the trumpets. With Conlon leading a brisk tempo, it was a hymn of joy. The chorus soared through its fugal counterpoint admirably and cleanly articulated the text against sparkling flourishes in the winds and brass.

For the soloists, Conlon assembled four magnificent voices, each individual in character. Yet in the ensembles, they were firm and well integrated.

In her festival debut, Blythe, fresh from the Metropolitan Opera's new production of "Die Walkure," communicated with spine-tingling power and tonal beauty. She found the emotional depths of the lament Lacrymosa, and added warmth and drama to the ensembles.

Brewer projected a golden tone, and her "Liberate me" was a radiantly beautiful summation. Her collaborations with Blythe were memorable, as in the "Recordare," riveting for its oneness of expression.

Secco's tenor was excellent and although his voice was not as big as the others, it rang through without forcing. His finest moment, "Ingemisco," was beautifully felt.

Robinson's dark, penetrating sound in "Mors stupebit" in the "Tuba mirum," and in the "Confutatis" was simply unforgettable. Here is a young bass of immense expressive gifts.

Conlon's phrasing captured the pathos of the music, weeping one moment and storming the heavens the next. All was paced for the full expression of the Requiem's terror and glory, from the first note to its final plea, "Liberate me" – save me.

The charming traditions of the festival welcomed spring as they have for 138 years: floral decorations, maypole dancers in the lobby and three small children delivering bouquets to the artists, to the delight of the cheering opening night audience.

The May Festival continues at 8 tonight in the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, Covington. Tickets: 513-381-3300, www.mayfestival.com.

Caption:

Publication: The Cincinnati Enquirer

Section: Metro

Source:

Edition: Kentucky

Page: 9

Book: B

Byline: Janelle Gelfand jgelfand@enquirer.com

From: