

Interpreting a Requiem from a heavyweight

By Jeffrey Johnson, Special Correspondent

After the eighth bar of the “Lacrimosa” in Mozart’s Requiem, the handwriting changes. This is because he died two months before his 36th birthday and the work was completed by a young apprentice who was studying with him. The genesis of Mozart’s Requiem is a network of irresolvable speculation. To what extent did Mozart articulate his intentions to his apprentice before leaving us?

The Greenwich Choral Society ended their 2008-2009 season by derailing the Requiem where the handwriting changes – freezing the work in mid-thought with icy silence. Echoes subsided. The audience, packed full into Christ Church Greenwich, was motionless.

Then in a single gesture, conductor Paul F. Mueller broke the silence with the downbeat of the “Ave verum corpus,” written by Mozart the summer before he died in a day or two during a stopover in Baden.

The impact of the “Ave verum corpus” in this context was powerful. It resolved the broken music of the “Lacrimosa” by shifting from D minor to D major. The warm singing of the Choral Society left the place in awe.

Part of the impact was prepared by a deliberate and engaging performance of the music that led to the “Lacrimosa;” in particular, in the forceful declamation of the Kyrie, where the singers articulated fast melismas with clarity and precision. Mueller brought the ensemble into the “Dies Irae” without pause and the choir sang full throated, forceful and frightening.

But this program remained a puzzling mixture of sacred music and opera.

The chorus made its impressions mostly through the sacred music, beginning with the “Alma Dei creatoris” KV. 277. The ensemble accentuated the elaborate patterning in this work with strong solo singing from members of the chorus.

In Mozart’s “Coronation Mass” K. 317, the joyous and ceremonial feel of the music is occasionally suspected by parenthetical passages that sound personal and self-reflective. Soprano Kathryn Lewek made these personal moments glow by singing the Agnus Dei solo with a dreamy lyrical tone that resonated within the ensemble and throughout the rich acoustics of the church.

Alexander Gusev played the andante of Mozart’s second horn concerto with both confidence and tenderness. It was a shame not to hear the entire concerto. This brief excerpt was teasing and it did not fit into the larger sense of the program in any focused way.

Just before intermission, we heard an entertaining “Là ci darem la rano” from Don Giovanni sung by Baritone Thomas Woodman and Lewek.

Excerpts from “The Magic Flute” commenced after intermission: the Overture, “Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön” sung beautifully by tenor Kirk Dougherty, the duet “Papageno! Papagena!” sung by Woodman and Lewek, and the choral finale to Act II.

This program had a sprawling quality that made both the operatic passages and the sacred music harder to place. Nonetheless, the Greenwich Choral Society sounded great, and the impression made by the juxtaposition of the Requiem and Ave verum corpus made a lasting impression.