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Oakland Symphony's Heavenly Brahms Requiem

By Be'eri Moalem

Michael Morgan and the Oakland Symphony and Chorus blessed concertgoers at the Paramount Theater on Thursday with a taste of heaven — an earnest and wonderfully played performance of Brahms' *German Requiem*.



Michael Morgan

Music Director Morgan guided the choir through the emotional peaks and valleys of the piece. The enormous ensemble was able to lull listeners into a gentle acceptance of their ephemeral and humble existence with lines such as “For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower thereof falleth away.” But then exclamations such as “But the word of the Lord endureth for ever!” startled and reinvigorated. The orchestra swept through these contrasts convincingly, thanks to a faithful delivery of dynamics. The piano passages were truly soft yet crystal clear even in the

cavernous hall, and forte sent heads flinging backward, resounding with a magically decaying reverberation of sound well after the musicians would stop playing. On some nights, the German Requiem can tax a listener's patience, but in this performance I found myself yearning for more, even as the seventh movement was drawing to a close — heaven drifting away like a fleeting dream.

Soprano Carrie Hennessey and baritone Brian Leerhuber delivered their lines as a conversation with the choir and orchestra, blending with ease yet maintaining a soloistic presence. Both

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soloists and Lynne Morrow's Oakland Symphony Chorus enunciated their words with breathtaking clarity, which is miraculous in the context of Brahms' sinuous counterpoint. Following the words in the printed program with the music made for some pleasurable and enlightening listening.

In Praise of Mother

The first half of the concert consisted of short compositions by Armenian composer Avetis Berberyan. The pieces' subject matter drew some parallels with Brahms' work. Berberyan's song in praise of his mother (or perhaps of a divine mother) was an overt ode pouring praise on that maternal presence. Brahms' Requiem is believed to have been written for *his* mother, as well, as it was composed around the time of her death, though he refrains from making a direct reference to her. The title and language of his Requiem also tinges the piece with a hint of nationalism, though again, overt exclamations of national pride are not to be found.

Where Brahms is subtle, Berberyan is obvious, painting bold lines with a wide musical brush. Drum rolls, cymbal crashes, and chorus shrieks leave no doubt about the Armenian passion. Ethnic flavors from central Asia could be heard, but they were submerged in a mix of all-too-expertly orchestrated "Hollywood style" harmonization and sensibility. *Wake Up, Armenian* was a fiery statement that left little to be desired but sounded like a government propaganda piece with a bit of Soviet flare left over from 20 years ago. Rousing percussion parts propelled the piece, including virtuosic xylophone and glockenspiel lines that obliterated everything else.

Soprano Ani Christy sang with convincing emotion, but she did so by whispering into the microphone in a "pop" style that felt a bit out of place when shared on the same program as a Brahms Requiem. This isn't to say that her singing wasn't beautiful. Plus, she wore a stunning dress, a black mini under a see-through gown.

I never cease to be impressed by the proportions, detail in metallurgy, symmetry, and lighting at Oakland's Paramount Theater. The 80-year-old restored Art Deco architectural gem that seats well over 3,400 (as opposed to Davies Symphony Hall's 2,743) is dramatic in a way that contemporary buildings seldom are. Yet, I am still conflicted about the hall's acoustics. Sometimes it absorbs the sound in splendid fashion, creating well-balanced echoes. At other times, much of the sound is lost — the string section easily gets drowned out, for example, or the men's voices in the choir get swallowed up by the women's voices, and a general lack of intimacy prevails. The hall's grandeur, however, more than makes up for its shortcomings.