

Two stirring requiems: One old, the other new

By Dan Webster, For The Philadelphia Inquirer

Music lives in the moment of performance, and it lives on as long as performers return to re-create those moments. That mystical idea floated over the Mendelssohn Club's performance of Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* Sunday at the Kimmel Center's Verizon Hall.

The Mendelssohn Club is exactly as old as the *Requiem* - 135 years - thus conflating the moment with the enablers, the monument with those who can revitalize notes on the page. The performance carried this idea forward because while the big work was this revival, the concert was the occasion of a premiere, Jennifer Higdon's *On the Death of the Righteous*. Will the Mendelssohn Club again be singing these pieces in a hundred years?

Higdon faced a huge problem: How to compete with Verdi? Her solution was studied, but also (probably) joyfully indulgent. She had at her disposal Verdi's orchestra with massive percussion, expanded winds, and all the trumpets of heaven.

In a sense she did not compete, but found in John Donne's serene musing on death the basis for another mood, another kind of music. That was an impressive achievement, for her music stayed in the ear, even after Verdi's titanic immersion in emotion and color.

Alan Harler conducted the chorus and orchestra in her work, which began with a whisper and distant bells to suggest her text, "and they shall awake." The text is full of allusion that in other hands might have invited sound effects. For Higdon, her path was clear. She found the apt color, the sustaining boldness, the flow of poetry.

She also found the way to use the orchestra's resources to the full. Enormous timpani and percussion events and full orchestra outcries were mileposts along the way to the final lines of hope and acceptance. Her gift with choral resources matched her instrumental choices. Bold consonance, dramatic dissonance, and vivid dynamic changes organized the 13-minute piece.

Its gloss on 21st-century possibilities of Verdi's forces gave the program added effect. But it also weakened the concert's full impact, for the program placed an intermission after the "Lacrymosa." Regaining the intensity of the first part proved difficult.

Harler found a middle path through this operatic work. The reading was not a feverish evocation of the immensity of death, and some of the best playing and singing came in thoughtful moments. The chorus sailed into the big fugue of the "Sanctus" in a focused after-intermission high point. It also began in finely nuanced singing of the "Requiem aeternam," and sang with sensitively balanced dynamics and intonation through this taxing music.

Verdi wrote operatic arias for his soloists. This performance saw the return of tenor Stuart Neill, an obvious star when a student here and now a galvanic Verdi tenor. He did not turn this into a star turn, but sang with high regard for choral weights, melodic line, and the work of the other soloists. His singing, however, commanded most of the attention, for his pianissimo - as in the "Ingemisco" - was as electrifying as his dominating full-voice singing.

Soprano Sandra Lopez found expressive levels in the final "Libera me," and mezzo-soprano Marietta Simpson applied her ample voice with effect in the "Liber scriptus." Bass Stephen Powell created dramatic continuity in the "Confutatis," and with the ensemble.

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