

MSO powers through riveting Requiem

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I knew it was coming, but when that epic "Dies Irae" burst through Overture Hall on Friday night, I got goose bumps like I'd never heard it before.

Verdi's Requiem is incredibly dramatic, a tight 85 minutes of massive highs and whispery lows that the Madison Symphony Orchestra tackled with confidence and expressive beauty. (This is the final concert weekend for the MSO, which reconvenes Oct. 2 with Peter Serkin on piano.)

Maestro John DeMain's conducting style was well-matched to Verdi's almost operatic requiem. Seeing his grand gestures in a work like this was gratifying, feeling more appropriate than the restraint of some of the guest conductors this season.

DeMain led the 100-plus singers and at least as many instrumentalists -- though I did not get an exact count -- through Verdi's lush, quiet opening with grace, making the transition to the spine-tingling "Dies Irae" all the more powerful.

The most striking and memorable of the four soloists was easily Philadelphia soprano Karen Slack, whose stunning necklace and black fitted dress (it tapered to petals) caught the eye. Slack had a lovely dark tone color, harnessing a captivating depth of emotion especially in the final "Libera Me."

Guang Yang, a mezzo-soprano who was a late replacement for Kristine Jepson, had a pleasing rich tone, though notes in the lower part of her range tended to get lost. She was especially lovely on the "Lux Aeterna."

Tenor Arnold Rawls's voice was a better fit for this work than his last appearance in Madison (in Madison Opera's "Madama Butterfly" as Lt. Pinkerton), but still, his highest notes sometimes sounded pinched and he struggled to blend with the other soloists. Bass-baritone Kyle Ketelsen, a Wisconsin native and MSO favorite, was competent, with a smooth, pleasing tone.

Choral director Beverly Taylor did not conduct herself, but deserves kudos nonetheless for her essential role in shaping the volunteer community chorus.

In Friday's performance, sections faltered when they were exposed (especially the men) and diction wasn't as clean as it might be. Still, the quality of the choral singing was commendable. The choir blended well, stayed on pitch and maintained an admirable balance with the orchestra -- no small feat with several hundred people onstage.

According to MSO musician/historian Michael Allsen, the symphony has programmed Verdi's crowd-pleasing requiem seven times since 1936 (this was the eighth). It's not hard to see why, when the chant-like "Lux Aeterna" washes over the hall, the "Domine Jesu Christe" rolls in like a slow-moving river and "Dies Irae" crashes like a tidal wave.

Personally, it's the drama that keeps me coming back, the wrath and the despair and the ultimate hope. These make even an imperfect performance of Verdi's Requiem worth seeing as many times as I can. Don't miss this one.