

***Range, depth on display for Verdi's Requiem***

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As one who grew up listening regularly in my Catholic elementary school days to the Gregorian Chant "Dies Irae" dirge from the 13th century - easily more than 1,000 times - the thunderous, cataclysmic, rip-roaring Dies Irae of Verdi's Requiem shocked the nether world out of me when I first heard it not so many years ago.

It is still very strong stuff, as established Friday night in Overture Hall.

An 86-piece Madison Symphony Orchestra, 143 members of the Madison Symphony Chorus and four soloists offered an often exciting, often lyrical, often intense interpretation of the monumental musical achievement that is the Requiem.

The 40-minute Dies Irae is the centerpiece of Verdi's conception of the Requiem text. Its opening, "Day of wrath," has an apocalyptic intimation as envisaged in the hammer-like chords, bass drum accents and fortissimo choral work. The theme is repeated three times. But there is much more range and depth of feeling in the full 83 minutes of the work, and everybody got it right, with opera-like scope, strong dramatic quality, no self-conscious sanctimony - and, most important, excellent playing from the orchestra and top-notch singing from chorus and soloists. Credit music director John DeMain, energetic on the podium, and chorus director Beverly Taylor for getting the widely varying tempos and the dynamics right.

Of the quartet of soloists, inevitably the focus centers on the soprano, because she leads chorus and orchestra in the last 14-minute "Libera me." Karen Slack not only has the range for the Requiem, but she has the rich, weighty timbre. She has, as the program notes said, "a voice of extraordinary beauty." She might have taken the near-recitative opening of the Libera with a bit more bite.

Certainly as fine a singer, with the same richness of voice, was mezzo-soprano Guang Yang. She was fine in her solos, but the most stunning singing came in the duets with Slack: stylish, rich in intonation, soaring loveliness and ideal vibrato.

Bass-baritone Kyle Ketelsen, who has distinguished himself in operatic roles here for more than a decade, and has acquired a high international reputation, was his usual professional self with that exceptionally strong and flexible voice. Tenor Arnold Rawls had the necessary range and strength for his "Ingemisco" solo, but the voice was piercing and lacked warmth.

The chorus began the evening promisingly with an a cappella "Requiem aeternam" and lived up to that promise the rest of the evening.

Articulation by the soloists was good, and even the chorus was understandable in the quieter music. Unavoidably the words in the loud choral parts became blurred to the point of incomprehensibility.