

Madison Symphony Orchestra and Chorus conclude season with powerful Verdi's *Requiem*

Isthmus

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Thunder and lightening electrified Overture Hall last weekend as the Madison Symphony Orchestra closed its season with Verdi's *Messa da Requiem*. This special season for the MSO celebrated the 15th anniversary of its music director and conductor, John DeMain. An added attraction was the recent release of a new CD, *Overtures from Overture Hall*, recorded live in concert.

You might wonder why Verdi's Mass for the Dead was chosen to celebrate these joyous events, but for DeMain, opera conductor and man of the theater, the choice made sense. "Verdi was a great operatic composer, and you can hear ideas from his operas *Aida* and *Don Carlos* in the Requiem," he says. "I hear its drama and opulent lyricism more than funeral music and am amazed at its beauty from start to finish."

The Latin text for the *Requiem* goes back to medieval times. The work has several sections with the "Dies irae" (day of wrath) being the longest and darkest. Verdi gives us a little reprieve in the "Offertorio" and "Lux aeterna," but strains of the ominous "Dies irae" appear throughout the *Requiem*, as if Verdi is reminding us not to become complacent.

In Friday's performance, the Madison Symphony Orchestra and Chorus and soloists surrendered to the music and gave fresh insight into this ancient and arcane musical story. DeMain's baton guided musicians from the earth-shaking terror of the "Dies irae" to the final plea for deliverance in the "Libera me" in just 83 minutes, without sacrificing depth. The percussions set off powerful explosions in keeping with the day of wrath, and the winds did a mighty fine job with those difficult scales.

The chorus was excellent throughout. Chorus director Beverly Taylor chose to mix all voices together, regardless of range, to enhance beauty in the a cappella parts. This required more independence of each singer, but the choristers handled it well and gave a shimmering opening in the "Requiem aeternam" and an impressive fugue in the "Libera me."

The quartet of soloists was equally impressive, but soprano Karen Slack and mezzo-soprano Guang Yang stole the show. Their clear, warm voices were angelic in duet, and Slack brought tender urgency to her final prayer. Tenor Arnold Rawls was the first soloist up, and his "Kyrie" had ample energy to propel the rest of the quartet into action. His forte singing was metallic at times, but his soft passages were lovely. Bass-baritone Kyle Ketelsen is no stranger to the Madison Symphony Orchestra and Chorus or to the Madison Opera. His subdued presence worked well with the dark undertones in the music, and his voice was rich and sobering.

With over 200 performers on stage, the words were not always clear, but that didn't bother me. The blend of voices and instruments was powerful enough to tell the story without them.

Overtures from Overture Hall is slated to be available at Borders West, the MMoCA gift shop and the MSO office by May 10 for \$15.