

JASON GRANT

BASS-BARITONE

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Orchestra shows off its diversity at Chrysler Hall

October 12, 2009

By Lee Teply

In a pair of distinctly different pieces, the Virginia Symphony Orchestra showed off a range of talents in its concert Saturday evening at Chrysler Hall. From the technical demands of a recent showpiece to the varied accompanying duties of a 19th century choral masterpiece, the musicians met every need.

John Adams, one of the group of American minimalist composers that includes Steve Reich and Philip Glass, built on a basic foundation in his - by minimalist standards - more expansive "Slonimsky's Earbox." Composed in 1996, it uses the modes and scales discussed in the writings of Nicolas Slonimsky, the great Russian-American musicologist and lexicographer.

Constructed in several sections of changing moods, the perpetual motion of the faster ones had energy and excitement, strengthened by the precision of the players. Quieter patterns in slower passages created some sonorities that almost seemed electronic. In many ways, it was a good mind- and repertoire-expanding experience for both orchestra and audience.

After intermission, conductor JoAnn Falletta may have been retaining some of the energy from the first performance in her approach to Johannes Brahms' "A German Requiem." Her tempos were on the fast side - not a bad thing, as the piece can suffer from a conductor's overly somber approach. However, there might have been greater feeling of cadence, or coming to conclusions before moving on, of reflecting on the text just stated before introducing a new thought.

The orchestra found a good balance between warm wind sounds and the deeper string sonorities Brahms created, providing a sensitive and supportive accompaniment for the singers.

In her one opportunity, the long, slow fifth movement, soprano Janice Chandler Eteme maintained a sweet, light tone that fit her introspective approach to the text. Although it was consistently pleasing, she might have opened up more to reach the listener more directly.

Bass-baritone Jason Grant did just that, as his two movements required. He shaped every phrase carefully, using clear diction and dramatic presentation to get at the deeper meaning. In balance with the orchestra, his softest singing had the effect of fine chamber music while he became more operatic with his full force.

The chorus is at least an equal partner with the orchestra in this piece, and the Virginia Symphony Orchestra Chorus, prepared by Robert Shoup, displayed many of its strengths, with both notes and the German text under control.

But there were varied levels of success with the inevitable balance question. In chordal passages, the singers' warm blend projected well, though at soft dynamics, they sounded far away and covered by the instruments.

It was in the significant contrapuntal sections that it became clear there was a balance problem within the chorus, with female voices overpowering the smaller number of men. With some lines, even fugal subject, hard to pick out of a dense texture, part of the grand effect of some sections was lost.

This problem was noticeable even in the contrapuntal section of the well-known "How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place," but the beautiful chordal music that surrounds it was indeed lovely.

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