

JASON GRANT

BASS-BARITONE

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San Diego Symphony makes Mozart Requiem ring with life

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Today is Halloween, a holiday that's preoccupied with the dead (and undead). Tomorrow is Dia de los Muertos ("Day of the Dead").

So it's only fitting that the San Diego Symphony's latest program - to be repeated tonight and tomorrow - features Mozart's Requiem, a Requiem being the Mass for the Dead.

But don't get the wrong idea. There's nothing lugubrious or off-putting. Quite the opposite.

As music director Jahja Ling conducted the orchestra, vocal soloists and San Diego Master Chorale in last night's involving Copley Symphony Hall performance, the accent was on uplift and affirmation. Though the Requiem is Mozart's final work, dating from 1791, the year he died, the message - and the music - transcend death to provide a timeless consolation and beauty.

Listening to the exquisite interplay between voices and instruments, whether in duets, quartets or choral passages, it struck me that Mozart's Requiem is a kind of spiritualized opera, opera elevated for a lofty purpose.

Only the composer of "Cosi Fan Tutte," "Don Giovanni" and "The Magic Flute" could have achieved such orchestral and vocal mastery in the Kyrie. Only a true man of the theater, as Mozart surely was, could have created so much drama in the harrowing "Confutatis." Mozart died without completing the work, leaving that task to others, including his student, Francis Xaver Süssmayr. (Forget what happens in "Amadeus" - Mozart's arch-rival Antonio Salieri wasn't involved in death-bed dictations.) Conductor Ling is using the Süssmayr Edition because, as he puts it, "he even helped the dying composer to write his notes onto manuscript paper, so, logically, it is probably the closest version to being authentic."

Lasting approximately 50 minutes, not including commentator Nuvi Mehta's introduction, the Requiem is too short to be the only work on the symphony's program. So there were two others.

During its most rousing moments last night, Wagner's "Prelude to Act III of 'Lohengrin'" was a musical thrill ride that got its thrust from the high-powered contributions of the San Diego Symphony's trumpets, trombones, French horns and tuba. Less appealing, at least to my ears, is Bruch's somewhat ponderous Violin Concerto No. 2. Yet instead of getting mired in the swampy excesses of 19th-century German romanticism, symphony concertmaster Jeff Thayer succeeded in rising above them. His playing - clean, lean and confident - attained a rather elegant virtuosity that received cohesive support from Ling and the orchestra.

Still, Mozart's Requiem was clearly the highlight. The orchestra played well under Ling's energetically reliable guidance and the chorus was attentive to phrasing and dynamics. (Balance between the male and female voices was occasionally an issue, however, because there were more women than men.)

The soloists were well chosen. Soprano Jessica Rivera had a lovely, supple tone (though vowels triumphed a bit too often over consonants). Mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke was outstanding, with adroit phrasing and a richly burnished timbre that was intriguingly distinctive.

Tenor Thomas Cooley had a decidedly operatic flair - not surprising considering his background in Mozart operas. **Particularly powerful was the "Tuba Mirum," showcasing bass-baritone Jason Grant and principal trombonist Kyle Covington. Grant produced such an impressively robust sound that I confess to being startled that such a big, deep voice could come from someone so trim and youthful.**

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