

• ABOUT MUSIC •

'Food for the emotions'

Masterwork Chorus offers feast of massive Brahms work at Drew concert

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It's truly fascinating that on a spring Sunday at April's end, the Masterwork Chorus and Orchestra came to the Dorothy Young Center for the Arts at Drew University in Madison with a performance of "Eln deutsches Requiem" by Johannes Brahms.

Historically, this massive work in seven movements, based on the Lutheran Bible, had been reviled since its first partial performance in 1867. Only in later years, in an appreciation for the genius of the composer, who went from weak religious belief to agnosticism, has the requiem begun to be viewed not as devotion to the dead, but comfort to the survivors. It is a work that makes religious commitment almost superfluous, but not a longing for unearthly beauty nor regard for musical daring.

It was all part of a fascinating program which began, for those arriving early with a presentation by the Piscataway High School Women's Ensemble. Under choral director Brian A. Schkeeper, the chorus delightfully sang an Estonian folk song, a Finnish folk song and a song by Felix

Mendelssohn.

They then joined the Masterwork Chorus and Orchestra under Andrew Megill with soprano Courtenay Budd and baritone Paul Speiser to perform "Requiem: The Good Fence" by contemporary composer Blake R. Henson.

The composer was on hand to explain the work's motivation to the audience, along with program notes citing the Good Fence as an object dividing the northern Israeli border from Lebanon, with flags of both nations hung over a plaque engraved with Isaiah's injunction to "beat our swords into plough shares."

With vocal parts spoken and sung in Arabic, English, Greek, Hebrew and Latin, the Henson work is a call to pursue a peace that admittedly never comes, but like the Brahms requiem, is seen as a human work for all mankind. It progresses with a troubled lyricism, carrying considerable force and is performed resoundingly by the soloists, choruses and orchestra.

With the Brahms requiem, it's strange to consider the work beyond the structure of religion. The texts are selected from the Old and New Testaments by the

composer, who wrote it over a period of 11 years, adding sections as he went.

It is exactly because Brahms dwelled so long on the music's impact through the interplay of chorus and orchestra that the work assumes a different function. It reaches beyond its original intention to touch generations yet to come with the sheer scope of his creativity.

Some music lovers think mainly of Brahms' genius for using thematic material of other composers, such as his variations on themes by Haydn and Paganini and his enduring tribute to uni-

versity life, the Academic Festival overture. For them, a closer hearing of the requiem may bear strange fruit, but here is food for the emotions worth consuming.

Certainly in the performance by the Masterwork Chorus at Drew, the audience was presented with a feast. The choral voices joined by those of soprano Budd and baritone Brian Mulligan were subtly enhanced by the excellent acoustics of the warm woods in the 500-seat concert hall.

One of its charming touches in the ceiling above the audience is a lighting fixture apparently sculpted in wood to resemble a

boat's keel. Maybe the hall will become a venue of choice for such happy musical voyages in years to come.

Meanwhile, the Masterwork Chorus will return to our area with six summer sing concerts. Each is priced at \$10 or \$5 for students and listeners including score rentals and refreshments. They will be held at the Xavier Center at the College of St. Elizabeth in the Convent Station section of Morris Township, just down the road from Drew University. For specific dates and program information, log onto www.Masterwork.org.