

## Concert Report

### Akron Symphony gives warm, lyrical reading of Brahms' *German Requiem*

When you have a 70-minute piece that can stand on its own, perhaps there's no need to fill out the rest of a concert just to bring it to the traditional length of an evening at the orchestra. That was the smart decision of Akron Symphony music director Christopher Wilkins, who led a warm, lyrical account of Brahms' *German Requiem* on Saturday evening at E.J. Thomas Hall with the fine collaboration of the Akron Symphony Chorus, expertly prepared by Hugh Ferguson Floyd.

Long contemplated but finally brought to fruition after the death of his mother, Brahms' *Requiem* is a concert work which departs from the medieval tradition of the Latin liturgical requiem in favor of texts selected by the composer from Luther's German translation of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Reflecting Brahms' agnosticism, the text avoids themes of judgment and resurrection, preferring to offer consolation and acceptance in the face of bereavement.

The *Requiem* project inspired Brahms to some of his most expressive choral writing and orchestration. Wilkins shaped a performance conceived on a grand scale, characterized by long melodic lines, broad musical gestures and dramatic dynamic contrasts, revealing the architecture of the piece without obsessing over details that might have impeded the sweep and flow of the music.

The opening of the first movement told a lot about what was to come: the lower strings provided a warm and vibrant prelude to the first entrance of the 140-voice chorus, who intoned 'Selig sind die Toten' with beautifully blended and well-supported tone. Throughout the rest of this movement, as well as the next six, the choral work was admirable: rhythmically vital, well blended throughout the dynamic range and sensitive to the words, which the singers articulated with fine but not excessively 'German' diction. Especially effective: the two unison fortissimi reprises of 'Den alles Fleisch', the three fugues, the lovely backup singing under the soprano solo movement 'Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit' (here the chorus was seated), and the great climaxes, where the tone was full, strong and never forced. Pitch was generally excellent except in a

few passages where the sopranos got a bit saggy (though their highest notes were admirable).

The Akron Symphony was a fine partner to the choral forces, supporting them attentively with good balance and fine ensemble. The wind section was in particularly good form this evening with great team and solo playing coming from the woodwinds and mellow support from the horns and trombones.

The *Requiem* also features two small but essential solo roles: a baritone who introduces important themes in two movements and a soprano who takes the spotlight for one. Brian Keith Johnson was the fine baritone, proclaiming the text with authority and singing with a colorful, focused tone. Tiffany Jackson, the arresting soprano, sang without score, which gave her the freedom to make expansive gestures with her hands. Though Ms. Jackson's work was expressive and passionate, she sometimes cruised up to pitches rather than meeting them head on. This made for a curious effect, and one not much helped by E.J. Thomas' problematic acoustics. Both soloists were stranded in the no-person's land at the front of the stage where they were occasionally submerged by the strings through no fault of leadership from the podium. This hall also has the habit of damping and compressing large volumes of sound, creating the same kind of effect you get when you throw the switch on your amplifier from stereo to mono. Strange and not a little frustrating when you imagine even how much better Akron Symphony and Chorus could have sounded in a more generous space.

While spending Saturday evening at a *Requiem* may not be everybody's idea of a good time, this night out was perfectly satisfying. A well-conceived, well-performed account of a choral and orchestral masterwork which left you needing to hear nothing more, and got you out the door by 9:15. What's not to like?

—Daniel Hathaway