

Janelle Gelfand

May 30, 2015

May Festival's Berlioz Requiem electrifies

The cathedral of sound unleashed in the "Tuba mirum," with a chorus of 129 voices, 16 timpani and 29 brass players sounding across the four corners of Music Hall's stage, was unforgettable. The intimate moments of Berlioz's Requiem also impressed.

But nothing prepared the listener for the "Sanctus," when Barry Banks' tenor voice soared from the highest reaches of Music Hall. That spine-tingling moment was one of many in this rare mounting of Berlioz's monumental Requiem, conducted on Friday night by James Conlon at the Cincinnati May Festival.

Conlon's informative comments just before he took up his baton offered a glimpse of the 90-minute journey that was to come. The spectacle onstage included 109 musicians in the Cincinnati Symphony orchestra, including those four brass ensembles and 16 timpani (played by six musicians). The May Festival Chorus, Robert Porco, director, was joined by the Vocal Arts Ensemble, directed by Craig Hella Johnson.

Even though the text of Berlioz's Requiem is the traditional liturgical Mass for the Dead, nothing about this Requiem is predictable. The French composer, a true musical maverick of his time, probably wanted it that way. He wrote his Requiem in 1837 in memory of fallen war heroes, specifically for the echoing acoustics of the church of Saint-Louis-des-Invalides in Paris.

The vast spaces of Music Hall were ideal for a work of such grandeur. Yet what was also fascinating was how, partly thanks to Berlioz, its massive textures – and often quirky orchestrations -- were consistently clear. Conlon led its 10 parts broadly, allowing the music to breathe while also conveying its humanity and often spiritual atmosphere.

The work alternates between intimate, personal movements and those that cry out with drama. One was struck at the outset by the pristine sonority of the chorus in the opening "Requiem aeternam," with the sopranos singing with ethereal beauty against transparent textures in the orchestra.

The chorus, which sang with unforced sound even in the most monumental choruses, shone especially in those meditative parts. The a cappella setting of "Quaerens me" ("Faint and weary")

was serene and pure-toned. In the unusual "Offertorium," the chorus sang mournful, fragmented lines, as if in the distance. It left a chilling impression.

Conlon kept a tight rein on his forces, particularly during the substantial "Lacrymosa," with its off-kilter rhythms and wide-ranging moods. The tension built to a climax of remarkable power, its final chord glowing as it died away.

Then there was the electrifying "Tuba mirum," part of the "Dies irae," evoking the Judgment Day when trumpets shall sound throughout the world's graves. The effect, as the men intoned those words over the drumrolls of 16 timpani, was otherworldly. The majestic power of the brass fanfares playing antiphonally in Music Hall's glorious space gripped the listener.

Banks, making his festival debut, displayed a heroic tenor as he reached effortlessly into the stratosphere of his voice in the "Sanctus." Against the shimmering strings of the orchestra, time seemed to stand still. The great choral fugue that followed on the words "Hosanna in excelsis" was buoyant and beautifully sung.

Conlon expertly led the massive forces through the work's peaks and valleys, including its sudden extremes of dynamic and treacherous rhythms. The expanded orchestra performed magnificently. The final "Agnus Dei" ("Lamb of God"), flowed into an extraordinary conclusion of softly intoning brass and winds against faintly sounding timpani-strokes.

The conductor waited before lowering his arms, the cue for the audience's tumultuous applause.

The May Festival concludes with a Russian program, 8 p.m. Saturday May 30 in Music Hall. Tickets: 513-381-3300, www.mayfestival.com.