



April 9, 2014

Classical

## Blessed and beautiful Brahms

By Anthony Rodgers Tue, Apr 08, 2014



Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* was the first piece of classical music that I consciously listened to in high school. After many years and numerous opportunities to both hear and perform this work, it remains one of my all-time favorite compositions. This weekend, the William Baker Festival Singers performed an English version of *The German Requiem* at Grace and Holy Trinity

Cathedral with brilliance and a sensitivity that spoke to all, both present and past.

The first choral entrance was remarkable: gorgeous in sound, well balanced, and so soft that audience members—myself included!—literally sat forward to hear the music. At such quiet volumes, the choir enunciated with a clear intention so that each word might be understood, even if only barely audible. On the other end of the dynamic spectrum, loud sections were full yet unforced, which created a powerful ring in the beautiful cathedral setting. Blend was seamless. The control exhibited by the sopranos was impressive; there were just a handful of times during which a single voice could be singled out from the lot. In the fourth movement, the altos were able to generate an incredible moment of tension and release with a single suspension. The cyclic nature of the overarching form became apparent in the finale with the exact execution of returning material, bringing to mind the phrase “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

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Guest soloist Joshua Lawlor, baritone, sang with heart and authority. His voice was rich and embodied the voices of all those who have experienced loss and sought help from a higher power. In 1868, Brahms added what is now the fifth movement, and many consider this inclusion to be due in part to the earlier death of the composer's mother. Words of delicate comfort from soprano Arietha Lockhart in this movement seemed to float from another realm.

An orchestral reduction for two pianos by the composer was performed by pianists Wayne Smith and Robert Pherigo. Together, they were perceived as one instrument, which was lovely during exposed passages, many moments sounding like excerpts from a Romantic piano sonata. Occasional attempts to emulate pizzicato strings were too percussive in the space, resulting in an almost comedic-sounding effect. This version, to me, lacks the timbral nuances found in the original orchestral parts, removing the sustained sound that highlights lush harmonies and contrapuntal elements.

The William Baker Festival Singers handed this magnificent work with the utmost care. In the end, I would have preferred that some more risks had been taken as far as allowing the energy of the full choir blossom or explode more, but the gentle treatment was well crafted and has re-sparked my adoration of the musical masterpiece.

**REVIEW:**

**The William Baker Festival Singers**

***A German Requiem***

Sunday, April 6, 2014

Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral

415 W. 13th St., Kansas City, MO

For more information, visit <http://festivalsingers.org>

Top Photo: William Baker Festival Singers in Helzberg Hall

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