

First we heard the *Mass in D Major* by Antonin Dvorak. Unusually, at least for me, this production was of the original scoring of this work. I have heard the Mass performed before with Orchestral accompaniment, and it is spectacular. Apparently it was originally scored for a smaller venue with only an organ. Listening to the performance last night, with organ, the chorus often singing a capella, was a profoundly different experience than I expected from the Dvorak work. I think of Dvorak's choral works on a grand romantic scale – this was more definitely contained, almost austere at times. It seemed to have a simpler, more religious sensibility which was almost haunting at times. Although most of the movements were fairly simple and straightforward in their treatment, the Credo was unusual. It began with responsorial singing followed by the soloists, and then the movements opens up and doubles back on itself revisiting earlier themes and combining them with homophonic choral statements that were really quite complex and beautiful. All of that, combined with the triple meter of the movement seemed to coalesce much of the power and transience of belief – powerfully felt yet hard to pin down, unexplainable. After this intricately woven (and sung) movement the work continued in a straightforward manor, almost framing the Credo at the center of the work. The Sanctus lead beautifully into the serenity of the Benedictus. The Agnus Dei was almost spare in its opening simplicity but dynamically rose to almost ethereal ending.

One would think that nothing could top the Dvorak, but I believe the Stravinsky piece, the Symphony of Psalms, which followed after intermission, was my favorite work of the evening. The Stravinsky certainly sounded like the most “modern” work although it was not, remember it was written over 70 years ago. I think we need to rethink how we define “modern”.

The work opens with the closing verse of Psalm 38, “Hear my prayer, O Lord” and it begins with what I can only describe as a typical Stravinskian chord. I really don't know how to describe what Stravinsky does with the music but the opening chord is so striking it grabs hold of your attention and holds you in its grip. I believe the opening movement starts in E minor, but with a very unusual emphasis on G, which gives it an unsettling expression. This builds and then slows for the entrance of the chorus, singing in a classic pattern of lamentation. Somehow, through the increasing dynamics of the work the movements concludes in G major, settling our nerves from the opening notes in a very powerful way.

The second movement, based on the opening verses of Psalm 39, is a relief following the intensity of the first movement. There seem to be several different themes or variation on themes working their way through the movement simultaneously. The music of the orchestra is quite modern, or modernist, with a little atonality thrown in. Generally however it flows quite beautifully. In interesting contrast with the orchestral work, the choral music is much more traditional, as is fitting the human voice, neatly combining with the orchestral themes, complementing them, sometimes contrasting, and sometimes bridging the gaps between the different themes. Very interesting.

I thought the Alleluia, from psalm 150, was the most traditional of the movements. It is elevated and stately in the manner of many religious themed choral works. It seems like a summary of the church-going religious experience. Somber gathering together, stately hymns, elevation through music, chariots of fire, and the calm serenity of final peace.

The final piece was by John Rutter, a British composer, written in 1974, GLORIA. Judging from the applause, it was the most popular work, and I can see why it was. It was a grand, romantic, rousing, jubilant work with timpani and organ. This is not to imply it was simple, it was not, and there seemed to be eclectic references in the work but overall, it did not strike me as having the interesting subtleties of the first two works. Perhaps I was just tired by that point.