

Schick and La Jolla Symphony fearless in Berlioz Requiem

With help of Gay Men's Chorus, ensemble triumphs in over-the-top masterpiece

By [James Chute](#) [\(/staff/james-chute/\)](#) 11:27 p.m. March 13, 2015



Steven Schick rehearses the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus for its performances of the Berlioz Requiem. Photo: Bill Dean

Steven Schick has made his reputation with the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus with his thoughtful, thematic programs juxtaposing the old and new music.

In Friday's La Jolla Symphony & Chorus program at UC San Diego, however, the new and the old could be found in a single piece: Berlioz's 1837 "The Grande Messe des morts," Op. 5, best known as the Berlioz Requiem.

Consider that Berlioz wrote this astonishing masterwork, which set new standards in orchestration, the spatial dimension of music, choral writing, and musical extravagance, Beethoven had only been dead for 10 years; Mozart for 36. And yet this monumental, over-the-top piece seems light years removed from either of those composers.

It's new music whenever it's played, and that's not often despite its considerable reputation and importance, largely because of the huge orchestra (with beefed up brass and percussion) and chorus needed to perform the 90-minute work

If Schick has proven anything during his eight years with the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus, it's that he's fearless, and the ensemble has taken on that quality as well. It brought in extra brass players to staff the four separate brass ensembles, and the members of Schick's percussion ensemble, red fish blue fish, helped with the eight timpani parts (and bass drum, gongs, and who knows what else).

But what proved to be Schick and choral director David Chase's masterstroke was to engage the 70-member San Diego Gay Men's Chorus to augment the approximately 100 voices in the La Jolla Symphony Chorus.

The result was a triumph.

Every chorus in town dreams of having a tenor and bass section that sounds like this combined chorus did Friday, especially in the opening movement, "Requiem et Kyrie."

The tenors sang with warmth and rare focus while the basses produced a well-supported, full-bodied sound. Add to that a touch of adrenaline and a sense of occasion, and that first movement contained some of the most accomplished and communicative choral singing I've heard in a long time.

The second movement, the "Dies irae," is literally where all hell breaks loose, with the orchestra, chorus and all that extra brass and percussion going full bore. Schick had everybody working together and the effort sent chills up your spine, just as the first movement brought tears to your eyes.

But here's the real challenge in this piece. Now what? You've peaked, and you have eight more movements to go. Only the sixth movement, the rollicking "Lacrymosa," in which Schick and his forces effectively ratcheted up the tension, offers a dramatic payoff similar to the "Dies irae."

In contrast to some other "event" pieces, such as Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, there's no big buildup and a dramatic ending. Berlioz does just the opposite. The music gets increasingly subtle, exposed, personal, and in some aspects, out there.

Certainly the piece didn't fall apart; far from it, but the seams started showing. The excellent-sounding chorus, oddly enough, seemed most tentative in the a cappella fifth movement, "Quaerens me." The orchestra, which also played at a high level, had some intonation problems when Berlioz started using some of his most unusual instrumental combinations (flutes and trombones, for example) and exposed individual sections.

And tenor soloist John Tiranno didn't do anybody any favors in the work's single vocal solo, the ninth movement, "Sanctus." He sounded strident at best, and you wondered why he seemed to be yelling when the orchestra was playing so quietly.

Still, the program, which will be repeated Saturday and Sunday, has to be considered a huge success. There were moments of wonder and genuine emotion. Most importantly, Schick, the orchestra and chorus captured the work's humanity. That's the bottom line, no matter what era of music you are dealing with.

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