

CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

'Requiem' celebrates life of symphony

By **Valerie Scher**
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Ten years ago in downtown's Copley Symphony Hall, then-music director Yoav Talmi conducted Brahms' "Ein Deutsches Requiem" ("A German Requiem") during an ambitious Requiem cycle that also included works by Faure, Mozart and Verdi.

Over the weekend, however, it was Jung-Ho Pak who put his imprint on Brahms' beloved, 1868 masterwork as part of his final season as artistic director. If Pak's performances didn't always bring out the full measure of drama and spiritual profundity, they still conveyed the ever-potent essence of the seven-movement score for orchestra, chorus and vocal soloists.

The Symphony Hall program featured soprano Virginia Sublett and baritone Robert Gardner — different soloists than those a decade ago — plus about 140 singers from the San

Diego Master Chorale and La Jolla Symphony Chorus.

English translations of the Requiem's German text, which Brahms based on Lutheran Bible scriptures rather than on the traditional Catholic Mass for the dead, were projected on a screen above the stage, a welcome aid.

Conducting in his usual, baton-less manner, Pak marshaled the combined forces with confident leadership. Though one wished for greater fervor, and a better balance between orchestra and singers, Pak was particularly good at pacing and phrasing. Slow tempos never became tedious. Solemnity never turned ponderous.

In response, the chorus and orchestra performed with spirited determination, despite a struggle for cohesiveness in the third movement's challenging fugue. The opening movement, "Blessed are they that mourn," was suitably sonorous,

for example, and the orchestra brought rich, burnished tones to the second movement.

Baritone Gardner made reliable contributions though his voice could have projected more forcefully. Nowhere was the performance lovelier than in the soprano's ethereal section, where Sublett's high, crystalline passages carried the promise of maternal love and comfort.

Unlike the 1992 program, which paired Brahms' Requiem with the composer's elaborate "Variations on a Theme by Haydn," the weekend's offerings didn't include another hefty composition. Instead, Pak announced a surprise addition — "When the Angels Came" — a brief work composed by the late symphony violist Gary Cole Syroid. Orchestrated by principal French horn player John

Lorge, the soothingly sweet piece combined a minimalism reminiscent of contemporary composer Philip Glass with hints of the late-romanticism favored by Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler.

The approximately 75-minute program, presented without intermission, was unusually short by symphony standards. Yet the music was packed with meaning and audience members were duly appreciative. Though Brahms' "German Requiem" is about death, it affirmed the vitality of the once down-and-out orchestra.

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