

MUSIC REVIEW

Tovey and the BSO deliver a bracing Brahms 'Requiem'



HILARY SCOTT

Bramwell Tovey led the BSO and soprano Rosemary Joshua and bass-baritone Bryn Terfel.

By Jeffrey Gantz | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 25, 2014

J.S. Bach's Cantata No. 82, "Ich habe genug," is so well loved and so often recorded, it's hard to believe the Boston Symphony Orchestra's performance of the work on Thursday was its first ever — particularly since the piece goes so well with Brahms's "Ein deutsches Requiem," which the BSO has programmed many times. Both works look at death as a release, in expectation of the life to come. The same key words turn up in both: "selig" ("blessed"), "ruhe" ("rest"), "freude" ("joy)."

The BSO's English guest conductor, Bramwell Tovey, brought with him a pair of Welsh soloists, soprano Rosemary Joshua and bass-baritone Bryn Terfel. Tovey led a small ensemble of 21 in the original 1727 version of the cantata, which Bach composed for solo bass, oboe, and strings. (There were later versions for soprano and mezzo-soprano.) The anonymously written text is a rhapsody on the Song of Simeon, his ardent desire to depart this life after witnessing the arrival of Jesus.

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Right from the beginning, the oboe writhes and flutters, as if it were a soul looking to escape from the body. But where BSO principal oboist John Ferrillo was heartbreaking, Terfel was a little hearty, a mighty oak against Ferrillo's lilting willow. Terfel's enunciation was crisp, and he did show sensitivity to the text. Tovey's accompaniment was elegant, though at times, with its heavy continuo line, it bordered on square. He was at his best in the zippy concluding "Ich freue mich auf meinen Tod," which is, like the opening "Ich habe genug," in 3/8 and C minor, but speeded up into a dance toward death.

"Ein deutsches Requiem" waxes eloquent in its three fugues, which proclaim the glory of the Lord. But elsewhere, especially in the first and last movements, it offers lukewarm comfort, addressing itself primarily to those left behind. This performance, however, was a blaze of ecstasy. Tovey kept it moving without rushing. The orchestra was pungent; Terfel's two solos were well suited to his stentorian dramatics; Joshua was affecting if a bit strained. But the star of the evening was John Oliver's Tanglewood Festival Chorus, massive in "Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras" and "Aber des Herrn Wort," sprightly in "So seid nun geduldig," swinging in "Die Erlöseten des

Herrn,” sweet and swaying in “Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen,” an irresistible force in “Herr, du bist würdig,” and crystal clear everywhere. In short: heaven on earth.

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Symphony Hall,

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