

Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and the Vancouver Bach Choir make the most of Mozart's Requiem

By Lloyd Dykk

A Vancouver Symphony Orchestra presentation, featuring the Vancouver Bach Choir. At the Orpheum Theatre on November 14 and 16

Some people think that, because its authenticity is in question, the number of performances Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Requiem* gets is inexcusable. But Ludwig van Beethoven said, "If Mozart did not write the music, then the man who wrote it was a Mozart."

The work remains shrouded in mystery and has been the subject of fiction, including the hysterical and musically inflated Peter Shaffer play and movie, *Amadeus*. The story goes that an overworked and mysteriously ill 35-year-old Mozart was visited one

night at his sickbed by a thin, tall, caped and masked visitor who offered him a commission for a new requiem mass. It was an agent acting for Franz Count von Walsegg, who was in the habit of signing his own name to music written by others, which he did with the *Requiem*.

This last year of his life was busy for Mozart, who wrote, among other things, his operas *La clemenza di Tito* and *The Magic Flute*. His work on the *Requiem* was intermittent and ultimately unfinished: less of it survives in his own hand than does of his *Mass in C Minor*, only the first two movements being entirely his, plus the later repetitions.

The commission was no favour to Mozart and may even have hastened his death. He was convinced his visitor was a satanic omen and that he was essentially writing music for his own funeral.

And the last bit represents two centuries of urban folklore, life and death rarely being that dramatic.



Tenor Benjamin Butterfield

The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and the Vancouver Bach Choir, conducted by Bramwell Tovey, played the generally favoured version by Mozart's friend, Franz Xaver Süssmayr, who had sat by his bedside and completed the orchestrations.

A choir as big as the 150-member VBC is a lot of voices for the *Requiem*, and though I happen to favour a smallish period-instrument take on it, like the one by Les Arts Florissants under William Christie, there are many ways to hear the music.

The important thing is that it be clear and have a familiar resonance with what we know of Mozart's music, like those fateful opening bars with their tragic syncopations and suspensions, and the masonic woodwind chords, which are pure Mozart and evoke no one else. Large as the forces were, it was a beautiful performance, the choir solid and flexible except for a little soprano strain in the "Kyrie eleison". The quartet of soloists was superb: soprano Kathleen Brett, mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Turnbull, tenor Benjamin Butterfield and especially baritone John Relyea. The audience was large and rapt: Mozart brings them out.

All the music chosen for this program was from the last year of Mozart's life. The only thing missing was his *Ave verum corpus*, a late, brief, and sublime work. But we heard the orchestral overtures and arias from *The Magic Flute* and *Clemenza*—a nice alternative, and there was nothing wrong with the performance of either.

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