

Choir concert a fitting finale for Mendelsohn music director

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Robert Page's final concert as music director of the Mendelssohn Choir on Sunday evening was a glorious and unforgettable musical feast, a fitting climax to 26 years of memorable music making.

The opening selections from "The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom" by Sergei Rachmaninoff featured the choir singing "a capella," without accompaniment.

The drama inherent in religious music was powerfully projected, with ensemble singing of such well-balanced sensuous beauty that listeners might have thought themselves already in heaven. The low basses were striking, but so to were the shapeliness of the inner voices and the thrust of the sopranos on top. Page's decision to conclude his Mendelssohn tenure with the world premiere of Nancy Galbraith's "Requiem" reflected his unflagging artistic vitality. That he prepared so accurate and emotionally perceptive a performance of the challenging score demonstrated the beautiful harmony within him of technical mastery and expressive artistic vision.



The conductor's program notes called attention to both Galbraith's eloquence and some of the means she employed, such as polytonality, layered textures and spatial imagination, as well as such nearly unique features as the absence of vocal soloists -- except for one passage sung by a member of the choir.

The "Requiem" demonstrates Galbraith's increasing mastery of large-scale form, which enhances the impact of her vibrant imagination. This text has been set many hundreds of times, and by the greatest of composers. Yet Galbraith creates her own distinctive expression for the many liturgical themes, such as the soft metallic percussion that glistens like the stars in the sky which she uses to introduce the section "Et lux perpetua."

Galbraith's setting of the text is also distinguished by rhythmic flexibility, often achieved with changing meters -- the size and number of beats per measure. Latin never sounded less square.

Above all, Galbraith's expressive range includes music that touches the souls of her listeners, especially but not only in the "Lacrymosa" section.

Galbraith's "Requiem" is a masterpiece that had the audience members on their feet at the end, cheering with tears in their eyes.

Page will remain active in Pittsburgh musical life as professor of music at Carnegie Mellon University and will assist the Mendelssohn Choir during its transition year before his successor is in place.

Mendelssohn Choir chairman Ron Schiller says the search committee for a successor to Page has several very strong candidates and is hopeful of finding a worthy successor. Sunday night's concert reaffirmed, however, that Robert Page is irreplaceable.

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