

SONOS provided an evening of intelligence, imagination, grace and gorgeousness, fulfilling its mission to present little known works.

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Music of Mourning and Consolation – Four Requiems: Music of Jon Leifs, Johann Christian Bach and Fredrik Sixten

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Bass Eric Jordan and SONOS conductor and co-founder Erik Eino Ochsner

On June 8, in the high, white, spare space of St. Peter's Church at 619 Lexington Avenue, the SONOS Chamber Orchestra gave a concert of "music of mourning and consolation," presenting works by Jon Leifs, Johann Christian Bach and Fredrik Sixten. Though occasioned by reflections on death and mortality, the program's four pieces nonetheless proved to be luminously life-affirming.

The first half of the program consisted of an orchestral piece by Icelandic composer Jon Leifs followed by the New York premiere of a *Dies Irae* by Johann Christian Bach and then by an *a capella Requiem* by Leifs.

The music of Jon Leifs (1899-1968) deserves to be much better known than it currently is. As a composer, Leifs sought to create a fusion of Icelandic musical folk traditions with European music, hoping to create a recognizable Icelandic national music. Though Leifs' incorporation of harmonic folk motifs such as the *tvisöngur*, a polyphonic motion in parallel fifths, was considered disconcertingly daring during the years between World Wars I and II, it is now an integral, even comfortable, part of the musical aesthetic of the "Nordic Renaissance" of mid-twentieth century Scandinavian music.

The first piece on the program was Leifs' 1962 *Elegy for String Orchestra* (Opus 53), composed in memory of his mother after her death in 1961.

Beautifully played by the SONOS Chamber Orchestra, Leifs' *Elegy* opened poignantly and delicately with a melody that was then passed around the orchestra from instrument to instrument and section to section before merging into broad, impressionistic swelling chords. This music of sadness was touched by memories of beauty; the solemnity was lyrical and haunting. Grief, here, was not torturous or anguished, but reflective and wistful. The sounds of remembrance were sensuous and gentle. The music of this elegy evoked an impressionistic landscape of unrestrained spaciousness, capable of both calm and storm. The quiet close of the piece presented the possibility of acceptance even while death's meaning might still remain mysterious.

The sounds of Johann Christian Bach's *Dies Irae*, following Leifs' *Elegy*, came with a hearty sense of arrival back into familiar territory which rapidly shifted to a sense of surprise.

The 1757 *Dies Irae* of Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782), written in Italy when he was a young man and a recent convert to Roman Catholicism, takes three parts of a requiem mass – the *Introit*, *Kyrie*

and the full *Dies Irae* text, broken twelve movements – to create the whole work. The text is completely traditional and liturgical, but the work as a whole is innovative and, in some places, quite dazzling.

J. C. Bach's *Dies Irae* is not psychologically speculative or intellectually meditative. It is a work of unstoppable theological certitude: death will come to us all, bringing with it the roiling wrath of final judgment. Choral fugues explore themes of God's power and of human prayers. The last movement, the richly textured *Lacrimosa* chorus, presents mourning in all its facets and pleads for a peace whose beauty might soften grief.

The soloists sang individual movements of the *Dies Irae* with skill and fluidity, apparently reveling in the flourishes of ornamentation with which J. C. Bach concluded most solos. Their virtuosic *Confutatis Maledictis* quartet illuminated each nuance of J. C. Bach's musical elaborations on the awful confusions of the truly cursed who are "consigned to the fierce flames."

J. C. Bach was only fifteen when his father Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) died. The musical context and formation of the son in young manhood were Catholic and Italian. Occasionally, in some passages of J. C. Bach's *Dies Irae*, such as the *Mors Stupebit*, the choral tones echoed the profundity of some of his father's later works; simultaneously, the music of the mezzo-soprano in that same movement anticipated more operatic treatments of the requiem mass of the next century.

The final work of the first half of the concert was Leifs' *Requiem*. The astute placement of this work after the J. C. Bach *Dies Irae* rather than after Leifs' own *Elegy*, provided a useful context within which to hear Leifs' *Requiem*. The audience "met" Leifs at the concert's beginning and then became reacquainted with the traditional *Dies Irae* text of a somewhat unconventional Baroque piece. In this way, the audience was prepared to listen to Leifs' *Requiem* with attentiveness to what was familiar and what was new simultaneously and in both music and text.

Leifs' *a capella Requiem*, written in 1947 after Leifs' seventeen-year-old daughter's accidental drowning, does not use the traditional Latin text of a requiem mass, but, instead, a compilation of anonymous folk poetic fragments and portions of *Magusarchoia* by Icelandic poet and naturalist, Jonas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845). Leifs' resulting text has little to do with any traditional requiem until the intentions and requests at the poem's very end: here, the composer hopes the young girl will "see in dreams/The city of light/Where the believing shall live" and he commits her to the "Lord's keeping."

Leifs' music in this *Requiem* is hard to categorize, and a number of music historians and critics have suggested that, in fact, attempts to categorize it should not be made. The music is not abrasively atonal or primitive; it is not gratingly experimental. It is, instead, an exploration of ways in which human voices carry harmonic possibilities and challenges, and this exploration perfectly matches the task of understanding how existential meaning and human emotion will meet and mix.

The refractions of beauty in Leifs' music are not those to which most of us are accustomed. It is Leifs' gift that he made his audience feel so at home in this particular beauty. The tones and angles of the music reflect the psychological work required to arrive at any sort of acceptance after the cruel and unexpected death of a loved one. The piece conveys the father's sad and terrible understanding that peace has come for his daughter before it has come for him.

The entire second half of the program consisted of contemporary Swedish composer Fredrik Sixten's 2007 *Requiem* in its United States premiere. Over the last decade, Sixten (b. 1962), now Organist at the Cathedral in Harnosand, has become an increasingly important composer of sacred music in his own country and beyond.

Sixten's *Requiem* is indeed an eloquent and powerful work.

By his own account, Sixten incorporates into his work the gifts of many divergent musical inheritances, including Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Bach, Brahms, Durufle and Debussy together with American pop, jazz and blues. But Sixten is in the process of creating a music that is entirely his own. His *Requiem*, with neither presumption nor ostentation, presupposes the history of requiems that have come before it; as a composer, Sixten attaches modernity to the old with ease and has produced a major work that, extending beyond its liturgical origins, is gorgeous.

The text of Sixten's *Requiem* as performed at St. Peter's Church was the product of a collaboration among Sixten himself, distinguished Swedish poet Bengt Pohjanen and Scottish musician and translator John Hearne.

At Sixten's request, Pohjanen, a priest of the Patriarchal Exarchate for Orthodox Parishes of Russian Tradition in Western Europe, wrote additions to the ancient liturgical text of the requiem that focus on themes of "anger and gratitude ... guilt and forgiveness ... consolation, love and hope." Overwhelmed by the 2007 death of a close friend at the young age of thirty-seven, Sixten turned to Pohjanen, with whom he had worked in the past, and asked him to expand on the Latin requiem text. The result, translated into English, is a statement that describes, in Sixten's words, "mankind's yearning for unity and perfection ... borne forth to the God whom Bengt describes as being 'Wisdom deep and loving. Stronger than death'."

Under the direction of SONOS conductor and co-founder, Erik Eino Ochsner, the orchestra and chorus performed magnificently, responding warmly and comfortably to Ochsner's musical leadership as though they had been working with the score for years.

The soloists, mezzo-soprano Teresa Buchholz and bass Eric Jordan, were marvelous.

Buchholz' singing in the *Pie Jesu* movement, both when she sang alone and when she sang with the chorus, was marked by a stunning combination of sensuality and tenderness. In her prayer, no piece of her soul was withheld. No matter how ethereally she allowed her voice to soar, it never lost its sultry richness.

If Buchholz carried sacred song to a stunning intimacy, Jordan unflinchingly displayed his own prayer in a deep and dense interior of emotion. Jordan's *Lux Aeterna*, beginning with the desperate fear of an eternal night and concluding with a passionate plea for light, conveyed the raw dignity of faith confronting terror.

Throughout the piece, the chorus provided both context for the soloists' imprecations and commentary on them. The penultimate *Libera Me* chorus was a call for liberation that moved swiftly back and forth among single voices, voice groups and sections. Fearful cries approached wails; syncopated rhythms felt like fear in the streets. No one could doubt the terror of that harrowing day from which God alone, in his mercy, can rescue us.

In the final movement, *In Paradisum*, text and music together promised us peace: in the end, our souls will not have been claimed by death. Here, in Sixten's music, grace is lush and beauty knows no boundaries. At the very end of the piece, the concluding 'amen' was sweet; it had been refined and distilled into simplicity.

The entire evening was moving and exhilarating. SONOS' important mission of exploring "repertoire that is not heard" and programming "concerts that spark interest and thought" was wonderfully fulfilled.

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