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Wednesday, November 5, 2014

Vegan eagle

SYMPHONY REVIEW: Bruckner's 'Te Deum' soars benignly at LSO
choral blowout

by **Lawrence Cosentino**



At Saturday's choral concert, conductor David Rayl dialed the music from hushed reverence to earthquake. Courtesy photo.

WEDNESDAY, NOV. 5 — Conductor David Rayl had a grand design for Saturday's Lansing Symphony Orchestra choral extravaganza. He wanted listeners to gear up for Bruckner's towering "Te Deum," rarely performed live in these parts, by hearing the music of three composers who influenced him. The climb was a little arduous but worthwhile, and the mountain view was glorious when we got there.

The popular "Hallelujah" from Beethoven's "Christ on the Mount of Olives" got things going by knocking at the door of heaven firmly — but not demandingly, as a Jehovah's Witness might — and announcing itself with a surging choral fugue.

The voices sounded great, but the gross imbalance of males and females in MSU's massed chorus was hard to ignore. With a three-to-one advantage, the women overpowered the men so decisively that when the music split into eight parts, I could swear that one lone tenor was left, holding on to his own filament of melody. (He sounded great, though, and totally unfazed by his predicament. I'd have that guy in my platoon anytime.)

I'm not sure what can be done about the problem, short of barging into local brothels and taverns and impressing males into service, as English navy officers used to do. But it can be a distraction, especially when the choir is tackling Beethoven's manly-man stuff. Fortunately, the composer foresaw that his sex would shirk its vocal obligations a century hence, so he had the cellos and basses in the orchestra double the vocal bass and baritone parts.

The cream center of the evening was Franz Schubert's "Mass No. 2." The soloists, often a mixed bag at these concerts, were magnificent, whether they were singing alone or together. Soprano Elizabeth Toy Botero, a recent MSU grad with a voice like a sunlit sycamore tree, was the embodiment of luminous mercy.

After the orchestra gave the choir a smoke break with a fine and delicate reading of Mozart's "Linz" Symphony (No. 36), it was show time.

As soon as Bruckner's ceiling-to-floor octave jumps started caroming up and down in the strings, it was clear that Rayl's fiendish plan was working. The

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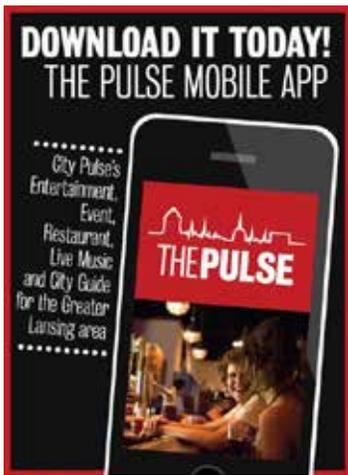
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studied, civilized works heard to that point set us up perfectly to appreciate the freshness and the power of Brucker's simpler, stronger, less fussy brand of exultation.

The titanic columns of sound were overwhelming, but not intimidating. The music's power and tenderness were part of a greater unity. Somehow, Rayl was able to dial the music up and down, from hushed reverence to earthquake and back, without jarring the ear. Hammer blows and caresses got the same loving care. Despite the mob on stage (with super-duper brass, just for Bruckner), the textures were all crystal clear and the timing was phenomenal. Three or four times, concertmaster Tsung Yu Lee popped into lovely duets with stalwart tenor soloist Andrew Crane and you could hear every detail. Lee's fiddle fetchingly jumped out from the mass of sound all around him, like ivy curling up the wall of a cathedral.

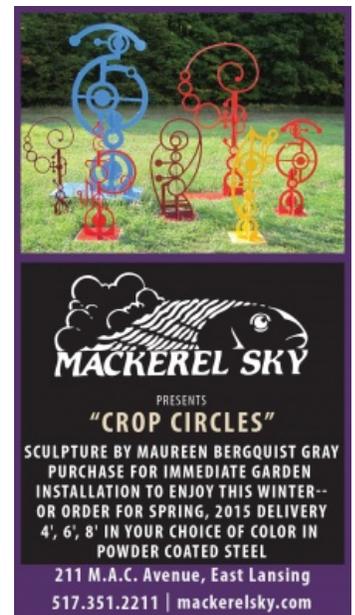
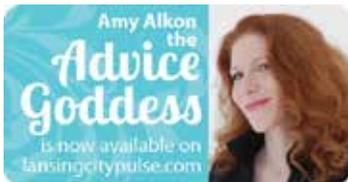
With its sustained high notes, this music is a notorious chorus killer, but the chorus evinced no strain at all. On the contrary, it was pure joy when the orchestra cut the jets and let the chorus glide on the thermals like a vegan eagle. (They couldn't possibly be predators in paradise.)

After the concert, I overheard a lady in the lobby complain that there was an awful lot of "praising Jesus" in Saturday's program. She ought to have known that if you're receptive to great music, regardless of doctrine it pushes, you'll maximize your pleasure in life. You don't have to agree with the Beach Boys about California girls to like a song.

The lady had a point, though. Christianity had a strong night Saturday, going three-for-four, not counting the text-less Mozart. Few pieces for orchestra and four-part chorus exalt Mohammed, Buddha, Zeus or Zoroaster, but there are alternatives to white bread. In 2010, Rayl and the LSO served up a grand reading of Ernst Bloch's "Avodath Hakodesh," based on the Jewish Sabbath morning service. Next year it might be time to reach for the pumpnickel again, perhaps even a secular masterpiece like Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem," just for variety.

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