

BPO's awe-inspiring 'German Requiem' makes concert-going a must

You hear this question a lot, pertaining especially to classical music: Why go to concerts?

Why not stay home and listen to music on your own?

This weekend's Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra concert is why.

The concert's main feature is Brahms' "A German Requiem." It's a massive choral work, rich and warm as only Brahms can be, and it was created to be heard live, in the company of others. Brahms thought of calling the piece "A Human Requiem," because it honors our shared humanity. It will never sound as good at home, or in headphones, as it sounds performed beautifully in a hall full of people.

That is to say, as it sounds at Kleinhans Music Hall this weekend.

BPO Music Director JoAnn Falletta is conducting the piece, and Saturday's performance was something to celebrate. Truth to tell, it was awe-inspiring before the music even started. To see the forces arrayed on the stage, ready to take on this challenge – the gigantic Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus, the orchestra primed and ready – it all cues you in that you are ready to witness a bold venture.

Adding to the excitement, the audience was bigger than you would have thought, with a lot of young listeners. Somehow this concert was on people's radar. Anticipation was in the air.

The music didn't disappoint. It was gripping from the word go. The orchestra was hushed and intense at the start of the opening chorus, and the music built in volume and power. Falletta paced it well, giving it room.

It was such a full, satisfying, cathartic sound. Kleinhans was built for music like this. The orchestra and chorus seemed to meld into one, which is what is supposed to happen with this piece. A big "Bravo!" has to go to the Philharmonic Chorus – celebrating its 80th anniversary this year, by the way. The singers were splendid. They were flawlessly together and well-modulated, and their articulation was tremendous. Their voices soared.

The soloists, Deborah Selig and Darren Stokes, also brought both beauty and gravity to the occasion. Stokes has a commanding presence and a resonant voice that seems up to any challenge. Selig's voice lives up to her name – it means "blessed," and it is the first word heard in this piece, in the first chorus. It was full and shining and carried well. Both soloists put soul into the music and gave it depth.

As a whole, the piece packed tremendous power. This is extremely affecting music. Listening to it beforehand on YouTube, I saw a lot of comments from people who had performed it, in orchestras and in choruses. It seems that nobody who takes part in this piece ever quite gets over it. They all wrote of how much it meant to them. I found myself thinking of that listening to the music at Kleinhans. I think this performance will be something we will remember.

The first half of the concert was all music of Zoltan Kodaly. We heard the "Marosszek Dances," a colorful creation first heard at Kleinhans 60 years ago, conducted by Josef Krips. It was followed by the "Peacock Variations," based on a Hungarian folk song.

Both these pieces are a delight, with varied textures and real loveliness. One whimsical interlude featuring flute and piccolo was especially enchanting – time seemed to stand still, as it does on a summer afternoon. The rest of the musicians also enjoyed their moments in the sun. There was a lot of color and light.

The concert repeats at 2:30 p.m. Feb. 19 at Kleinhans Music Hall.

