

The Chautauquan Daily

Sensational, terribly moving music making

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Photo | *Megan Tan*

The Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus and Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of guest conductor Doreen Rao, perform selections from Britten, Bach and Bernstein Saturday evening in the Amphitheater.

John Chacona | *Guest Reviewer*

After electrical power was restored to a darkened Chautauqua Institution, conductor Doreen Rao restored a different sort of power — the power of an idea — to the Amphitheater stage with a program that may have been the most demanding of the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra season. Ranging from the high Baroque of Bach’s 18th Century “Magnificat” to Leonard Bernstein’s 1971 “Mass,” an omnium gatherum of styles, Saturday’s program covered wide historical and stylistic ground.

But it also ranged just as far intellectually, exploring humankind’s relationship with the divine, precisely the kind of inquiry that Chautauqua was founded to pursue and that animates this place to this day.

The opening “Fanfare for St. Edmundsbury” by Benjamin Britten had three trumpets positioned behind the chorus where each played, in turn, a searching motif, a hunting call and a martial theme. It was a reveille, a muster call to attend to the evening’s lessons, and Rao, clearly intending a sense of ritual, followed the fanfare by giving the downbeat without a pause for the “Air” from Bach’s Orchestral Suite in D, BWV 1068. A bit slow after the historically informed performances I have been listening to for weeks, the familiar melody was nonetheless a balm and an invitation to enter a sacred space.



Bach’s “Magnificat” opens with the declamation “Magnificat anima mea Dominum,” which means “My soul doth

magnify the Lord,” as close to a statement of purpose as one could write for the master.

Rao took the magnificent five-part chorus at a broad tempo, allowing it to achieve its full weight. Soprano Tony Arnold and mezzo Natalia Kojanova wore body microphones and their solos suffered from tentative balances, though by the end of the piece, the issue had been resolved. Soprano Leah Schneider appeared to have no sound reinforcement, and her “Quia respexit,” while a bit on the operatic side, rang out with a juicy, vibrato-laden ardor.

The men also were fervent. After the chorus’ vigorous “Omnes generationes,” which means “all generations,” bass Brian Zunner, bouncing on his feet, swung his only solo, “Quia fecit,” and tenor Jeffrey Thompson, after covering Ms. Kojanova in the “Et misericordia” duet, was rhythmically alert for his “Deposit.” The orchestra was fine, if lacking in the ultimate measure of Baroque style, with heroic work by the principal cellist — not Chaim Zemach tonight — and the three flawless trumpets.

In its original version, Leonard Bernstein’s “Mass” is a messy piece, as messy as the man. Bernstein contained multitudes and in “Mass,” folk rock, Renaissance vocal music, show tunes and counterpoint collide and eventually coexist, embraced with the sweaty hugs the composer was fond of giving backstage following performances. There is a roiling energy, restless and hot, that boils through much of the piece — the energy of the late ’60s and early ’70s — and in it, you’ll hear all of the dreams, foolishness, yearning and hope of that unruly time.

But “Mass” is not comprehensively inspired. There are pages of filler, some of them embarrassingly dated (“West Side Story” and other works proved that Bernstein “got” jazz, but for all the man’s raw, almost animal energy, rock eluded him). There are, for instance, passages that seem to be the musical inspiration behind the baleful folk masses that became the music of choice in many Roman Catholic churches (Stephen Schwartz, who contributed much of the text, was the composer of “Godspell,” which premiered five months before “Mass”).

Rao, to her great credit, has retained some of this fluff (the “Responsory: Alleluia” movement that sounds like a Swingle Singers soundtrack to a Charlie Brown special) in her performing edition of “Mass,” and it was the right decision. “Mass” is a work very much of its time, and the time was riotous.

Rao made the arrangement so that community, school and church choirs could perform the very long — nearly two hours in Bernstein’s own recording — and complex piece. Under her baton, it approached greatness.

Her canny musical choices in the performing edition were part of this, but it was her utter commitment and the lively energy of her Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra Chorus, the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra and her two soloists that lifted this performance into the extraordinary.

“Mass” opens with a noisy, contentious “Kyrie,” where the soprano — Ms. Schneider, in the choir loft and wearing a microphone — quarrels with clattering, disjunctive percussion. This is no polite request for mercy, but an ultimatum given to God by a people who are fed up and want a quick answer. It sounded terrifyingly appropriate to the present moment.

The noise is interrupted by “Simple Song” a gentle-lilting folk-rock melody song by the celebrant, reed-thin tenor Joseph Mikolaj, wearing a black cassock with a Roman collar. On the lines, “I will sing God a simple song,” he opened his arms wide, hinting that Bernstein’s original designation of “Mass” as “a theater piece” would be observed.

Mikolaj certainly has a theater voice. It’s not big, perhaps, but his tenor is true and wondrously expressive. He sang the text from memory, and delivered his sometimes-dopey lines, “I’ll believe in God if He believes in me,” with complete sincerity. Mikolaj was sensational all evening long and had star-quality presence, even from his distant perch with the chorus. Bernstein would have been lucky to have him on his recording.

The CSO played with a crispness and vigor that I have not heard all season. Ensemble was, for the most part, precise and the playing had great lift and Bernsteinian energy. The chorus also was completely engaged, twice delivering a very moving “Prayer for the Congregation.”

In Bernstein’s hands, “Dona Nobis Pacem (Give Us Peace),” is less a request than a demand, a gospel a shout chorus delivered in pounding, insistent rhythms by frequently unison voices. It’s the last part of the ordinary of the Tridentine Mass, but Bernstein appends a final movement he subtitled “Secret Songs.” Reprising the “Lauda laude” melody from “Mass” opening, it is the answer to the order given in the “Dona nobis pacem,” a placid and inspiring resolution to the clamor that preceded it. When the “laudias” melted into the a capella choral prayer “Almighty father” — taken by Rao at a daringly slow tempo — it was a moment of shattering musical drama, perhaps the most moving thing Bernstein, a Promethean man of the theater, ever wrote.

During this prayer, several members of the Buffalo Philharmonic Chorus, which was magnificent throughout the work, left their seats. They emerged in the wings to go among the audience and offer their hands to the audience, as Bernstein directed. A gesture that could have been corny was transformed into a sort of benediction.

“The mass is ended,” the celebrant (or was it Marty Merkley?) said. “Go in peace.”

It was a sensational 35 minutes of music making and terribly moving. The performance was broadcast live on WNED in Buffalo and WQED in Pittsburgh, and it is my hope that orchestra programmers worldwide were listening. By the time of Bernstein’s centenary in 2018, Rao’s performing edition should be widely heard by audiences everywhere, though it might be foolish to expect a better performance than the one Rao gave tonight. It deserved a big, sweaty hug.

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