

American Record Guide

independent critics reviewing classical recordings and music in concert

Cello Overview

Bernstein
Festival

Doctor Atomic
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MINNEAPOLIS

Siegel: *Kaddish*

WORLD PREMIERE



A strong sense of mission contributed to the success of Lawrence Siegel's *Kaddish*, an hour-long work for chorus and orchestra given its world premiere by Philip Brunelle's VocalEssence on November 15 in Mann Concert Hall on the University of Minnesota campus in Minneapolis.

Although *Kaddish* is about the Holocaust, the darkest chapter of 20th Century history, Siegel calls the work "a mourner's celebration of life" because the cycle of 15 songs in three parts looks beyond the realm of death to the affirmative posture of those who survived the Nazi camps.

The authenticity of the score, superbly performed by a chorus of 150 and an extended chamber ensemble with full percussion, comes from the texts that Siegel fashioned largely from interviews with people once held prisoner in Auschwitz and other sites of inhuman terror. Through the primacy of text, *Kaddish* engages its audience by bringing them face to face with a tragedy all too easily forgotten as the last survivors who bear witness to it are dying off.

Kaddish open with the gentle, lyric 'World Before', a setting of a Yiddish folksong, while 'Holocaust', the second section, has harshness that borders on dissonance. In 'Auschwitz', the darkest section, males of the choir echo the rhythm of a locomotive as they portray arrival in the camp. Most original is Litany that opens 'Tiklun Olam' (To Repair the World), the final third of the score, where choir members speak victims' names from Yad Vashem archives. Their voices grow in volume and then give way to a single speaker.

"I mean to grab you by the heart and shake you up", Siegel says about *Kaddish*. The work

did precisely that. Founding music director Philip Brunelle and VocalEssence made almost every word understandable without reference to the libretto printed in the program. The ensemble is obviously a shining jewel in the Twin Cities' musical crown.

The premiere was made poignant by the presence of Naomi Warren, an 89-year-old survivor of Auschwitz, whose words both open and close *Kaddish*. Siegel speaks of his "verbatim" approach to the score, which he defines as "shaping song out of the actual speech of ordinary people". It brings "you-are-there" immediacy to the story. At the dress rehearsal Warren told the musicians of her 2003 return to Auschwitz, which enabled her to say, "*Hineni!* I am here!"

A work with the weight of *Kaddish* was quite enough for an evening. Opening the concert with Doreen Roa's "performing edition" of Leonard Bernstein's Mass (1971) added little to the concert's significance. Although the Mass pales when paired with the profundity of *Kaddish*, school and community choirs will welcome the accessibility of Roa's version (she is head of choral music at the University of Toronto).

Bernstein did his utmost to bring music to the masses, and with her reduction of the score, marking the 90th anniversary of the composer's birth, Roa sought to do the same. Premiered at a Disney Hall choral festival in 2007, it is true to the intentions of the original. Especially touching was Maria Jette's off-stage solo of the Lord's Prayer. Tenor Paul Garth Pruitt brought rock-star energy to the performance.

WES BLOMSTER