

A Certain Vagueness

Donald Runnicles conducts the Berlin Philharmonic

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Hector Berlioz is the only composer of importance that may be struck with the black Romanticism of the 19th Century – that literary undercurrent which manifestly concerns itself with the fantastic, shadows and shudders – while keeping the escape routes of the transcendent open. His "Grande messe des morts" stands as far from a function of a dead-serious commemoration, from consolation, or from an enticing portrait of the hereafter as a vampire of Resurrection. Berlioz in his composing stressed above all the vision of the *Dies irae*, the Last Judgement. He passed this along to the public in the rattling attack of four brass ensembles encircling the listener.

The other pragmatic as well as completely insane side of this Requiem concerns its scoring. It is notoriously huge – the score specifying 50 brass and more than 100 strings – and to assert that had Berlioz gone somewhere else other than the unleashing of unprecedented towers of sound would be even Protestant. Berlioz knew that the tumult, noise only in contrast to silence, would bring about rest. The outbreaks are extremely calculated in form, as well as the music for this huge body of sound so roughly timbered that the inevitable inaccuracies in the framework hold their own. Berlioz knew very well what he did: when the intended performance venue was to be in Les Invalides in Paris, and with more than a three-voice polyphony, a tempo faster than *Andante* need not be set, lest it be devoured by the hall's space.

Five years ago in the Berliner Dom, Marek Janowski with the Radio Symphony Orchestra and Rundfunkchor Berlin realized this piece to impressive effect. On Thursday in the Philharmonie Donald Runnicles conducted the Berlin Philharmonic and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus - and in this room, the music sounded a bit empty. Unlike the Berlin Cathedral, the Philharmonie did not support the creeping-through-the-space sound that Berlioz composed in the slow developments of his music. It centralizes the sound, setting it under an aural microscope with its clearly identifying acoustic and so mercilessly reveals what would become blurred in a Cathedral's vault: inaccuracies. Certainly an estimated 100 meters distance between the offstage bands can cause coordination problems, as the loud sound travels slower than the 8th-note triplets of the "Tuba mirum." But a certain vagueness marked the entire performance.

Why import from America the huge choir – placed next to the orchestra podium and above in Section C [sic] – would Runnicles, the Principal Guest Conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, care to explain; the light hanging intonation of the choir does not explain it. And even Runnicles, last fall named General Music Director [designate] at the Deutsche Oper, whom we would like to receive with greater enthusiasm, however in such good form was unable to effect his interpretation.

There are, as I said, rather rough means of which the piece consists, but they should remain. Runnicles presents in the first movement after the narrowly spaced chromaticism and fearful trembling rhythms in the opening an upturn like the "luceat" out of that which the violins traverse in their two octave D major chord, giving the movement its most important contrast. And the great orchestral fugue in the "Offertoire" developed no formal dynamics, but always came up short, running towards the two whimpering tones of the choral setting.

The short movements were the best, especially the "Sanctus." The tenor Joseph Kaiser sang the work's only solo movement with ardent but pure ecstasy, the orchestra weaving a time-rapt, brightly flickering carpet of sound.