

CONDUCTOR'S NOTE

A good, even an excellent musical experience is fundamentally an acoustical one. Musical quality derives from a relatively simple equation involving the combined impact of meaningful repertoire, a committed and persuasive performance, and an attentive audience. The more fully these criteria are satisfied, the better the experience will be. At its best an excellent musical experience can be entertaining and informative; electrifying, edifying, or scintillating.

A *great* musical experience, on the other hand, is fundamentally a moral one. Here the forces are more complex and less knowable, touching not just our ears and minds, but also our core. As a moral experience, music reaches beyond itself to the world and illuminates our relationship to it.

Here's a concrete example of the difference: an excellent performance of Claude Debussy's *La Mer* is in tune, well-balanced among the instrumental voices, and full of propulsive phrase shapes and melodic gestures. It is, of course, an accurate rendering of the score and compares favorably to other performances we have heard. However, a great performance of *La Mer* bids us to imagine what the sea means: as a site for science or leisure, as a canary in the well of climate change, or as the promise of passage to a better life. Who can now listen to a great performance of *La Mer* without imagining overcrowded dinghies foundering in the Mediterranean, without hearing the cries of refugees as they sink by the thousands beneath the waves? I cannot.

With this in mind, we, the musicians and music-lovers of early 2017, must ask ourselves what we need from music. We have at our fingertips—thanks to recordings, video clips, and scores of Web Sites—more excellent musical entertainment than we could consume in a dozen lifetimes. But perhaps, in this time and place, what we crave is not more entertainment or even a higher standard of musical excellence, but greater moral clarity.

For this purpose, the requiem is an important genre, and Giuseppe Verdi's extraordinary *Requiem* stands above the rest. A requiem functions along an extended scale of intimacy. It is music that can comfort the loss of a single person. Verdi himself sought solace and moral guidance in this music as he mourned his friend, the great Italian poet and novelist, Alessandro Manzoni, in whose memory the work was created. Or, it can function on the vast scale of world war. Rafael Schächter organized sixteen performances of the *Requiem* in the Terezín concentration camp. Imagine the extraordinary scene, memorialized in Murry Sidlin's "Defiant Requiem" project: of rehearsals after excruciating days of forced labor, of musicians who memorized their parts from a single vocal score, of a chorus constantly morphing with the arrival new prisoners and the departure of others to the death camps.

Whether we mourn a single person or an entire generation, a requiem allows us to hear the voices of the departed through the voices of the living musicians on stage.

This poetic formulation notwithstanding, I believe that we musicians are too quick to apply the balm of great music as a cure-all to every grievous social problem, as though ever greater artistic excellence were somehow the solution. Leonard

Bernstein wrote in the aftermath of the assassination of John F. Kennedy, that his goal was “to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly, than ever before.” Perhaps that was enough for Bernstein and a nation united in grief. But it seems like a hollow dictum now, since at this moment we are not united, but rent by savage crosscurrents of contention, bigotry, and cruelty. What would it mean to go further than Bernstein? Or as one local church posted recently on its marquee: “What would you do if you were brave?”

For starters, as we seek greatness, let us not give up on goodness. Our rehearsals for tonight’s performance have been mostly about sharpening excellence, about learning to play and sing well together. Can we find just the right bass drum sound for the terrifying “Dies Irae?” (At the moment we are leaning towards combining two drums for greater profundity.) Does weighting the first note of the “Lacrymosa” phrase make the melody more keening? (Yes.) Is a critical B-flat minor chord in “Lux Aeterna” well balanced? (It will be by the time you hear it.)

But we need much more than that now.

After tonight’s performance, I will drive in my safe and comfortable car to my safe and comfortable La Jolla home with my beautiful and loving wife at my side, and I will fall gently asleep to the memories of extraordinary music. But I will not forget that the voices on stage stand for the voices we can no longer hear.

I will hear, as I ask you to hear, the voices of the doomed singers of Terezín, and I will hear, as I ask you to hear, the desperate cries of refugees within sight of the Italian coastline, yet just out of the reach of rescue. It’s America in early 2017, so I also ask us to hear the fearful voices in local synagogues and Jewish Community Centers as the damnable virus of anti-Semitism makes a comeback in our midst. And I ask us to hear the voices of immigrants in our very city—our neighbors and our friends, our brothers and sisters, who are now living in a penumbra of uncertainty and fear.

I hope I will drift off tonight in the knowledge that we have made Verdi’s *Requiem* into something great. But this can no longer just mean playing in tune and on time. Making music today must be about nothing less than asserting moral force. It must be about how we—who have so much and who live so fully—can act responsibly in a world where so many have so little. It must be about the voices we cannot hear.

Steven Schick