

Brown corrals Alabama Symphony, 150 singers for Brahms' 'German Requiem'

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For his "German Requiem," Johannes Brahms looked to passages from Isaiah to Matthew, Psalms to Revelations for inspiration. This expansive work demands excessive quantities of passion and drama, angst and sweetness, power and intimacy.

With 150 singers compacted onto the Jemison Concert Hall stage with the Alabama Symphony Orchestra Friday, it wasn't easy to express those extremes -- musically, at least. Music Director Justin Brown did a fine job corralling the large flock, with only a few instances of uneasy ensemble noticeable. In that regard, the decision to leave the choral balcony empty was a wise one. But with more elbow room -- physically and acoustically -- a good performance of this romantic-era masterpiece could have been a great one.

Some of the finer moments of the work approached greatness. Driven by Brahms' moody, heart-wrenching melodies, the combined Birmingham Concert Chorale and UAB Concert Choir delivered warmth in "Denn alles Fleisch," the tenors belting out a startling "Aber des Herrn Wort." They hit their stride toward the end of "Denn wir habe hie," blending beautifully with the ASO brasses and strings. For the most part, though, sopranos were unfocused, the tenors weak.

Baritone Eugene Brancoveanu, an expressive and penetrating singer, sang with bright-edged fervor in "Herr, lehre doch mich." Soprano Twyla Robinson, though less powerful, has an engaging sweet voice, perfectly suited to her solos in "Ihr habt nun Traurigkeit."

Before the "Requiem," Brown and 23 string players got a workout with Strauss' "Metamorphosen." Scored one to a part, the work allows each player their 15 measures (or more) of fame, with the additional challenge of blending in very exposed orchestration. It was a great exercise, and brought out these players' rich, lustrous sound, with only a few thorny passages invading the mostly silken textures.