

A massive ensemble for a mammoth piece

By Cecelia Porter November 23, 2015

An island nation with a storied naval past, Britain knows the seas. British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (who died in 1958) expressed this in a very special way — through his mammoth 70-minute paean “A Sea Symphony,” set for a soprano, baritone, children’s voices, a massive chorus and a symphony orchestra.

On Sunday afternoon, the Washington Chorus and Orchestra, conducted by Julian Wachner, performed the piece, occupying the entire stage of the Kennedy Center’s Concert Hall. The symphony’s text, poems from Walt Whitman’s soaring “Leaves of Grass,” furnished a sense of infinite space and lofty perspective in every movement. Williams also couldn’t hide his allegiance to Gustav Mahler’s choral-orchestral textures, use of children’s voices or even Wagner’s Rhinemaidens’ insistent calls.

Wachner is a commanding, dramatic conductor, and the chorus responded with full confidence to his every gesture. Nevertheless, the first movement never rose above the maudlin and bombastic, with Wachner somehow propelling the chorus, especially the women’s voices, to screech over the orchestra to the back of the hall. Words were indistinguishable, and the orchestra sounded inconclusive.

But from the second movement on, the voices and instruments seemed to settle in, and soloist Dana Whiteside’s baritone maintained a noble clarity both powerful and resonant. In the Scherzo movement, Wachner’s lighter strokes made much of Vaughan Williams’s toying with the waves — musically depicting Whitman’s anthropomorphic vision of the sea. By the time the final movement (“The Explorers”) had rolled around, the chorus — most notably the tenors and sopranos — delicately but surely engaged in the easy flow of Vaughan William’s counterpoint. And Wachner had finally managed to balance all his forces precisely, giving the piece a driving sense of the inevitable.

Soprano Colleen Daly’s voice was ample enough to ride clearly above the chorus and yet remain vibrant. The voices of the Washington National Cathedral Choir of Boys and Girls came through with luster, lucidity and perfect timing.

Although the performance was billed as a “Washington Chorus” event titled “Behold, the Sea,” Wachner delayed performing the Vaughan Williams until after the intermission and after paying homage to the world’s “great seamen.” Instead, Edward Elgar’s “Enigma Variations, Op. 36” — totally lacking in water symbolism — opened the concert. The work is filled with abstract musical codes and none of the visual imagery of “A Sea Symphony.” The conductor’s vehement motions drew from

the orchestra both Elgar's full-throated passion and the melodiousness that has marked British music since at least the Norman conquest.

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