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Noseda gives new lightness to powerful and familiar Requiem

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Gianandrea Noseda leads Leah Crocetto, Veronica Simeoni, Russell Thomas and Eric Owens, along with the NSO and the combined forces of Choral Arts and the Washington Chorus, in the Verdi Requiem on Thursday night. (Scott Suchman/Scott Suchman)

Powerful, dramatic and familiar, Verdi's Requiem is supposed to be a specialty of the National Symphony Orchestra's new music director, Gianandrea Noseda. It's one of his signature pieces, in fact: a calling card he's left at his various international way stations in the course of his career. But the piece is so well known, and so often done — especially in Washington, this chorus-filled city — that I confess I harbored a certain skepticism. At least, I did until Thursday night, when he conducted the

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Requiem with the NSO at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall, and completely won me over.

The wonderful thing about this Requiem was that it was entirely unexpected, without being obviously showy. When you think of an Italianate Verdi Requiem — this piece that began as a tribute to the Italian patriot Alessandro Manzoni, too theatrical for any church — you might expect a certain kind of heart-on-the-sleeve, thundering drama. Nosedá delivered drama aplenty, but it was organic rather than melodramatic. His line was fluid and supple, his touch light, so that even the thwacks of the bass drum in the “Dies Irae” were forwardly propulsive and part of a bigger picture.

Nosedá is also a born opera conductor, as he showed anew Thursday with his careful attention to the singers, the words, and their meaning. The joint forces of the Washington Chorus, in its first months with its own new music director, Christopher Bell, and the Choral Arts Society of Washington sounded warm and glowing and responsive, from the resilient whispers of the “Kyrie” to the full-throated near-shouts of the “Dies Irae.”

Three of the four soloists were leads in the Washington National Opera’s “Don Carlo,” which finished its run here Saturday. Eric Owens, the bass, brought dignity and a warm, crumbly sound that sometimes seemed to land between the notes, but was deeply felt. Russell Thomas, the tenor, is still unfolding his potential as a Verdian; his voice is on the light side, but he has some good instincts about how to approach the big moments, although a hint of fixedness, a lack of flexibility, slightly constricts the middle of his range.

Leah Crocetto, the soprano, sings Verdi as if every word were written in capital letters, with some lovely notes but a steady focus on vocal size rather than the limpidity of sound that is part of a great Verdian’s arsenal. She made quite a contrast to the one member of the cast that hadn’t come from the “Don Carlo,” the mezzo Veronica Simeoni, whose voice was not large, but whose singing was straightforward and honest and heartfelt, if sometimes drowned out in the waves of sound from the orchestra. It was

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quite a feat for the two women to merge so well in their one unison line in the “Recordare,” although in the “Agnus Dei” they sounded as if they were inhabiting different planets.

The orchestra did some fine playing of its own, particularly the responsive strings and the flutes. The showstopping moment when the trumpets of judgment sing down from the balconies of the auditorium, building to a climax that was huge and yet allowed the voices rather than the instruments to dominate, was somehow executed with ease rather than effort under Nosedá’s light hand. It was so fine that it made up for the unfortunate final chords, when the chorus sang with taut silence dissolving into nothing, like gelatin, but the brass had trouble keeping its voice down to match.

The palm, though, went to Nosedá, for making something memorable and vivid and sincere out of this oft-heard and deservedly beloved work. The evening confirmed that the NSO has selected a very fine music director.

The performance repeats Friday and Saturday at 8.