

Commemorate Armistice Day with The Washington Chorus This Sunday

The Washington Chorus's season-opening concert on November 18, will feature one often-performed choral work (Brahms' A German Requiem) and one that is rarely ever heard (English composer Benjamin Britten's Ballad of Heroes). Christopher Bell conducts.

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This November, as Americans prepare for Thanksgiving and the start of the holiday season, arts organizations across the Washington area will commemorate a more somber occasion: the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day, recognized as Veterans' Day in the United States, which marks the official end of World War I. Among the musical tributes planned is The Washington Chorus's season-opening concert on November 18, with a program featuring one often-performed choral work (Brahms' *A German Requiem*) and one that is rarely ever heard (English composer Benjamin Britten's *Ballad of Heroes*).



The Washington Chorus. Photo by Shannon Finney.

Christopher Bell, Artistic Director of The Washington Chorus, designed the program partly to introduce this Britten work to audiences. “*Ballad* is an extraordinary piece with very profound texts by [W.H.] Auden and [Randall] Swingler,” said Bell, “Audiences who know the music of Britten will recognize many of these essential characteristics, and even hear where other choral pieces like *Rejoice in the Lamb* and *War Requiem* came from. It’s not often performed, and I really don’t know why.”

Ballad of Heroes was first performed in April of 1939 at a concert honoring British soldiers who died during the Spanish Civil War. But running through the entire piece is an undercurrent of anger at the general waste and horrors of war, which had already consumed Europe earlier in the century and was about to do so a second time: World War II was officially declared in September of the same year *Ballad of Heroes* premiered. This is an emotional work with rage running alongside fear and uncertainty for Britten’s home country.

Further politicizing *Ballad of Heroes* is the choice of texts Britten used as lyrics for the piece, including pacifistic poems by W.H. Auden and words by Randall Swingler, the editor of the Communist Daily Worker newspaper, exhorting Englishmen to not merely stand by and shrug their shoulders at the imminence of war: “You who lean at the corner and say ‘We have done our best,’ ...To you we speak, you numberless Englishmen, To remind you of the greatness still among you...Your life is yours, for which they died.”



The Washington Chorus. Photo by Shannon Finney.

DC Metro Theater Arts: “Commemorate Armistice Day”

Seventy years earlier, Johannes Brahms’s *A German Requiem* premiered. Inspired by the death of his mother, Brahms wrote a Requiem, a traditional Catholic form, in his own language rather than the usual Latin. While the text has sacred undertones, ultimately the work is more humanistic in scope; Brahms once said that he gladly would have titled it “A Human Requiem,” as it was meant to comfort all who heard it.

“I hope [audience members] are moved by the words, challenged to contemplate the consequences of war, and then comforted by the music of Brahms,” Bell responded when asked what he hoped to achieve by pairing these two pieces together. Many of us may share the same feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence that Britten felt as he wrote *Ballad of Heroes*. Ultimately, The Washington Chorus’s concert program aims to provide solace to its audience, while also asking them to consider the sacrifices of those who came before.

Running Time: Two hours

The Washington Chorus performs on Sunday, November 18, 2018, at 2:00 pm at the Kennedy Center Concert Hall with Artistic Director Christopher Bell, soprano Laura Choi Stuart, and baritone Rob McGinness.