

The Washington Post

Lost heroes return in two local concerts

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Published: November 19, 2018



Antony Walker leads the Washington Concert Opera in Gounod's "Sapho," with leads (from left) Addison Marlor, Brian Vu, Kate Lindsey and Musa Ngqungwana. (Don Lassell)

Only a small fraction of classical literature is regularly played. On Sunday, two D.C. groups reminded audiences how much more is worth hearing by opening their seasons with two obscure works by famous composers.

Charles Gounod's first opera, "Sapho," got its American professional premiere at Lisner Auditorium thanks to Washington Concert Opera, which has a track record of notable exhumations. Like Gounod's better-known "Faust" (coming this spring to the Washington National Opera), "Sapho" is eminently tuneful, but it's also dramatically static, making it an ideal subject for a company that presents opera without sets or costumes, on a concert stage.

“Sapho” is not a paean to same-sex love; in this version, following the playwright Menander, the great poet throws herself off a cliff for love of Phaon, a man. Phaon, at the start of the opera, is choosing between two women, Sapho and the vampish, spoiled Glycere, but Sapho swings the balance in her favor with a resounding victory over another man, Alcee, in a poetry competition, a la “Die Meistersinger.” The baritone Brian Vu was elegant in both sound and appearance as Alcee; while the tenor Addison Marlor brought an old-style sense of rakish fun to Phaon. Even more unusually, Marlor, to his credit, flirted with a semi-falsetto, a sweet gentle croon, on some of his high notes — a sound used by the tenors of Gounod’s time, but rarely heard in the opera house today.

Amina Edris brought a fitting petulance and fiery vocal ornamentation to Glycere, who, jealous of Sapho, manages to wangle her out of the picture (hence her suicide), in a stirring duet and later trio in Act II. Musa Ngqungwana as Pytheas, also enamored of Glycere, had a foggy sound but an appealing manner. The orchestra is not top-flight, but Antony Walker coaxed sweetness from its strings.

Gounod wrote the title role for the legendary 19th-century mezzo Pauline Viardot, famous as a consummate actress as well as singer. On paper, this made Sapho a good fit for Kate Lindsey, who looked every inch the proud poet, and who furrowed her brow and hunched her body under the weight of the character’s suffering. But while her singing was generally lovely, some vocal depth, or support, was missing, and there was a tinge of metallic stridency in the high notes. Sapho’s final aria, “O ma lyre immortelle,” is the one part of “Sapho” that the opera world has to some extent remembered, and she did it full justice before flinging herself into the ocean.

The Washington Chorus opened its second season under Christopher Bell with one in the crop of Washington-area concerts marking the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. Their exhumation — “a jewel,” Bell rightly called it — was Benjamin Britten’s early “Ballad of Heroes,” written in 1939 to memorialize the Spanish Civil War. A distant forbear of the mighty “War Requiem” (which the National Symphony Orchestra and the Choral Arts Society will offer under Gianandrea Noseda at the end of the month), this short work made a strong case for itself. Set to poems by W.H. Auden and Daily Worker editor Randall Swingler, the piece moves from a hushed invocation of the inaction of people who think they’re powerless to stop war, through a frenzied whirling “Dance of Death” angrily writhing around Auden’s words, to a final antiphony between soprano soloist (Laura Choi Stuart) and chorus in which a shining ascending trumpet leads in the whole chorus’s plea to “honor them all.”

The chorus offset this with thrice-familiar fare, the Brahms Requiem, in a perfectly respectable reading, adding the warm baritone Rob McGinness as second soloist. Bell is a competent and efficient conductor who seems to savor getting his own turn on the podium, though there were persistent coordination issues possibly stemming from unfamiliarity with the Kennedy Center Concert Hall. What stood out was the excellent preparation of the chorus, whose diction was immaculate and who showed a kind of inner resilience even at moments when they were singing so quietly as to make hardly any sound at all.