Joseph Flummerfelt is preparing the New York Choral Artists for two dramatically different works being performed by the New York Philharmonic this month.

“S
ewell the full chorus.”
— From Handel’s Solomon

The month of March sees two major collaborations of the New York Philharmonic and the New York Choral Artists, the professional chorus that has worked with the Orchestra for decades. One — grounded in tradition, deeply and humanly spiritual, set with the immortal words of the Bible — involves Brahms’s momentous A German Requiem, which Christoph von Dohnányi is conducting March 3–8. The other, which Music Director Alan Gilbert is leading in its New York Premiere, March 17–19, is by Esa-Pekka Salonen, the Philharmonic’s current Marie-Josée Kravis Composer-in-Residence and one of the most unpredictable composers of our time. This collaboration centers on Karawane, set with a gibeish text by Hugo Ball, founder of the relentlessly secular Dadaist movement, and hinting at the influence of the Balinese Ramayana Monkey Chant.

With these two wildly disparate projects, Joseph Flummerfelt crowns a 44-year run as chorus preparer for the New York Philharmonic. Beginning with Leonard Bernstein in 1971 — a Liszt program featuring Psalm 13 and A Faust Symphony — Flummerfelt regularly prepared the choirs from Westminster Choir College for Philharmonic performances that involved chorus. In 1979 then Music Director Zubin Mehta inaugurated a significant and lasting change by asking Flummerfelt to found a fully professional choir: the New York Choral Artists. Flummerfelt would continue chorus preparation with both ensembles until he retired from his position at Westminster in 2004, and has continued with the Choral Artists through this season. No one is better positioned to help audiences understand the nuances that go into preparing choruses for performances of these highly contrasting pieces.

“The Brahms,” Flummerfelt says, “is written in a harmonic language that permeated the whole Romantic period. The Salonen is more chromatic, a bit more challenging. The anchors from which the chorus gets their pitches are a bit more elusive.” Tempos and dynamics, he explains, are subject to tight controls in the new work, and in terms of vocalism, “it is not in any sense a melodic work. The choral parts tend to be very rhythmic and declamatory. The voices are used in an instrumental, sometimes percussive, way.”

Then there is the text itself. “The Brahms requiem is a part of my being,” he says, “in a way that a new work is not — certainly not one that is in a synthetic language. For me to probe deeply into a work is to ask the question, how does the music reflect the human textual gesture? This factor is changed in the case of Karawane, which is set on a made-up language. I needed to live with the work a lot in order to understand it fully.” Salonen’s described image of “a circus lost in time and space” opens up a universe of sonic possibility to the composer, and his score does not disappoint. Los Angeles Times critic Mark Swed saluted its “mischievous, madcap” nature.

This isn’t the first Philharmonic commission on which Flummerfelt has collaborated: the recording of John Adams’s On the Transmigration of Souls (2002) received three Grammy Awards. Nor is it the first time he has prepared the chorus for A German Requiem. Perhaps the most notable performance took place nine days after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Flummerfelt recalls: “Kurt Masur chose to mount a performance of this great work which has been called a ‘requiem for the living.’ It is a work about comfort, in many profound respects. We were grateful to have some way to minister to this horror which had enveloped us. None of us will ever forget that evening.”

Preparing choruses for orchestral performances offers the special challenge of rehearsing for a variety of conductors —
at the Philharmonic the list includes all Music Directors since, plus Claudio Abbado, Giulini, Shaw, Chailly, Muti, Colin Davis, and many others — most of whom, as Flummerfelt explains, are not available to meet with him before having to make subjective decisions about everything from tempos to diction. He therefore approaches the work as if he were going to conduct it himself. “If the concept grows from one single — hopefully deeply felt, and understood — musical point of view that succeeds in engaging and penetrating the score, the result is an essential flexibility that allows the chorus to respond immediately to the wishes of the conductor.”

Then the time arrives for the chorus to take the stage with the Philharmonic and its conductor for the week. When the concerts for which he’s been preparing for weeks finally begin, Flummerfelt says, with a smile, “I just sit in the box and love the performance, be proud of the singers, love their involvement in the work, and love the audience’s response.”

Flummerfelt credits great artistic growth and vitality to the literature itself — the experience of getting deeply into the masterworks of the Western choral canon — and to the conductors with whom he has collaborated. “You learn so much just from being a part of these performances conducted by the giants of a century.”

More fundamental still, and inherent to the choral field, is what Joseph Flummerfelt describes as “a capacity to become vulnerable. To let go, and get to the source. Breath is one source of that. To breathe is implicitly to open, to let go. It leads you to connect more deeply with the creative force, the human spiritual impulse that is the source of all great music.”

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