

Wachner's 'Proud' Debut With Washington Chorus

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What was originally scheduled as a guest appearance proved to be an inauguration. Julian Wachner's program with the Washington Chorus at the Kennedy Center on Sunday afternoon was his first concert as the group's music director-designate.

As I noted when he was appointed a few weeks ago, Wachner was a striking choice. In Washington's active but traditional choral scene, dominated by music directors who have worked with their ensembles for many decades, he is something of an exotic bird: a conductor who has, and plans to keep, a career in opera and the orchestral repertory as well as choruses.

Sunday's program, of course, was planned well in advance of Wachner's official designation. Still, it gave an interesting idea of where the chorus and its new director might be headed. It was certainly refreshing to see a choral conductor who knows how to handle an orchestra so well. Wachner is at home on the podium, cuing the responsive strings (the concertmaster was Nurit Bar-Josef, who holds the same position with the NSO) with an understated motion of his hand, or focusing the beat with a jab of the baton.

The \$64,000 question is what kind of long-term relationship Wachner will be able to establish with the chorus itself. Choruses tend to benefit from intense, loving attention by devoted music directors -- at least, that has been the paradigm established by such luminaries as the late, great Robert Shaw. Whether this chorus can ever feel it comes first in Wachner's heart remains, after Sunday's concert, uncertain. Since it was my first time hearing this group, which has undergone considerable transition and some loss of personnel since the dismissal of its previous director, I cannot say how it compared to its own past incarnations, but while all sang with a will, they needed some more work in terms of balances -- the Fauré Requiem opened with a thicket of distinct voices rather than a yielding cushion of sound -- and the sopranos, in particular, sounded a little brittle.

Of the afternoon's three pieces, there was no question which one most interested Wachner: "Proud Music of the Storm" by Carlyle Sharpe, which he commissioned in 2001 and has performed several times since. Advocacy of new music is rightly accounted a virtue in a young conductor -- Wachner let the audience know he has commissioned more than 100 works -- but this piece was not a particularly striking specimen. Big and showy, it is almost ostentatious in its prettiness, but unimaginative in its execution, following the lines of Walt Whitman's poetry with a sweet literal-mindedness. It calls for, but underutilizes, four vocal soloists, and altogether adds up to more sugar than substance. Brahms' "Gesang der Parzen," which followed, sounded miraculously profound by contrast. But it also felt sluggish, with something slightly routine in the execution.

The afternoon's showpiece, the Fauré, was an interesting test for Wachner given that it played to none of his strengths: He appears to revel in the grand gesture, and this work is a masterpiece of delicate sensitivity. Rather than the dark agony of many Requiems, this one

offers wistful, loving regret; even its "Dies Irae" is redeemed by a shimmering view of Paradise in the final movement.

The two soloists were better suited to this piece than to Sharpe's, especially Aaron Engebret, a baritone, who was audibly out of his element in Sharpe's bass line. Jessica Muirhead, the soprano, sang with beauty, though a little too much drama for the childlike purity of "Pie Jesu."

And the chorus had some strong moments: a wonderful intimacy at the start of the "Offertoire"; the dark amber of low women's voices at the "Libera Me." But overall the piece didn't quite have the limpidity, the soaring shine, it called for. As in the Brahms, there was a touch of routine beneath the glow. One hopes that Wachner can move beyond the heady excitement of a new relationship to find the beauty in small things, the allure of the moment, that will both illuminate and sustain this partnership into the future.