

Tribute to war sacrifices deeply moving

REVIEW

Afghanistan: Requiem for a Generation

Music by Jeffrey Ryan, Libretto by Suzanne Steele
Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra,
Calgary Philharmonic Chorus,
Cantaré Children's Choir, conducted
by Roberto Minczuk.

STEPHAN BONFIELD
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

It was a moving evening of tributes to the fallen, remembrance of sacrifice, and commemoration of the daily grief experienced for loved ones by those left behind.

The cornerstone work at the Calgary Philharmonic's War and Peace Festival featured the world premiere of composer Jeffrey Ryan and librettist Suzanne Steele's emotionally powerful *Afghanistan: Requiem for a Generation*.

It is rare to have a commission of this magnitude, the largest in CPO history. Ryan was supported by the Canada Council and Steele, chosen as the first official War Artist in the Canadian Forces Artist Program, was embedded with the 1st Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in Afghanistan.

The Requiem intermixed the Latin text headers for each movement with Steele's English poetry, and included some French and Pashto. Images taken from the Afghan missions were projected upon two large screens over the stage. Ryan offered a balanced score, with equal opportunity for all participants to shine, including



Calgary Philharmonic

Calgary Philharmonic conductor Roberto Minczuk conducts the orchestra at the world premiere of *Afghanistan: Requiem for a Generation* on Saturday at Jack Singer Hall.

four vocal soloists and orchestra members, with particularly outstanding contributions from the CPO Chorus and the Cantaré Children's Choir.

The mood of the work swings broadly from the meditative to the dramatic, and even to the operatic. The libretto connects personalized imagery taken from the soldiers' minds, always casting back to the homeland, and this in turn is superimposed onto the text of the Requiem throughout all its movements. Steele's words were often beautiful to hear, rang-

ing from the sublime to the disturbing, and always maintaining an intrinsic sense of poetic metre. In turn, Ryan breathed a natural flexibility and elasticity into the poetic phrases, successfully aggregating them into a well-paced but coherent, large-scale structure. The result was a compositely clear sense of these soldiers' lives, the hallmark of a collaboratively successful musical-poetic narrative arc.

The words always expressed the soldiers' characters in very specific, but also richly symbolic

terms, set in beautifully sonorous narrative poetry, but always in a freely cast dramatic shape. For example, in the Kyrie, (Can you hear me?) a soldier in a letter to home cries out from the freezing cold of the Afghan desert, set against a pointillistic hue of quiet orchestration and murmuring chorus, and is particularly chilling at the words "it's raining ice".

Tenor Benjamin Butterfield was perfect conveying the soldier's yearning for the winter fire of the family home. The Offertorium symbolized the agony parents

experience as they wait and fret over the safety of their sons and daughters, expressed as a bottomless lake ("de profundis lacu"), here sung beautifully by contralto Rebecca Haas. The chorus "if we could give you two days, just those two days," written for the soldier who died 48 hours before his tour of duty was to have ended, formed a moving artistic centrepiece for this remarkable movement that should ensure its place as a cornerstone of the Canadian music repertoire. It ought to be played every Remembrance Day.

The sublime *In Paradisum* featured soloists calling out the lists of battles Canadians have fought: Ypres, the Somme, and so on, and as the movement dissolved into a lush choral setting depicting fields of flowers, the names of our dead scrolled on the screens above. While the chorus softly called out the words "May the chorus of angels conduct you to heaven and grant you rest", the last word "Requiem" concluded the work on a gorgeous cluster chord, as though the soldiers collectively petitioned for eternal rest.

Finally, the greatest applause from the appreciative audience was reserved for the choirs, who, in a way, played the role of all the soldiers, their families, and those of us who remember them. Maestro Roberto Minczuk was heartily cheered for his remarkable effort in pulling together this excellent compositional essay about wartime sacrifice and the aftershocks felt long after the last soldier has fallen.