

Canadians Present Dubois Premiere at Carnegie Hall

by Michael Sherwin

Carnegie Hall was the site of a noteworthy United States premiere of a Mass by Theodore Dubois on June 12. Conductor Michel Brousseau brought a contingent of Canadian choristers, plus distinguished soprano and baritone soloists, to Carnegie for this Dubois debut, where they joined forces with the New England Symphonic Ensemble, which provided able orchestral support throughout the evening's program.

The French composer Theodore Dubois (1837-1924) is remembered today primarily for his oratorio "The Seven Last Words of Christ" (1867). While performed in churches, it is rarely encountered in concert. (A CD of its first recording, made in Symphony Hall by the Boston Chorale under Willis Page for Emory Cook's "Sounds of Our Times" label in stereo in the early 1950s, is still available by special order from the Smithsonian Institution.)

Dubois was closely associated with some of the leading French composers of his period, among them Franck, Faure, Saint-Saens, Gounod, and Ambroise Thomas. Dubois succeeded Franck as choirmaster at Ste. Clotilde, replaced Saint-Saens as organist at the Madeleine, and succeeded Gounod at the Academie des Beaux-Arts and Thomas as director of the Paris Conservatoire. On the strength of the Mass performed at Carnegie Hall, Dubois' music is worthy of comparison to these more famous figures, bearing many similar stylistic traits, among them balance, taste, and proportion, as well as a refined sensibility that is quintessentially French.

The current rediscovery of Dubois's forgotten works is due to two Canadians, baritone Marc Boucher and conductor Michel Brousseau. In 2007, Brousseau paid an extended visit to the composer's great grandson, Francis Dubois, at the family home in France, combing the archives and bringing back numerous compositions for his choirs to sing.

For his Carnegie Hall appearance, Brousseau chose to conduct Dubois' "Saint-Remi Solemn Mass," a six-movement work of approximately 33-minutes' duration, dedicated to Saint Remi, who reigned as archbishop in Reims during the Fifth and Sixth centuries. Although a vocal score had been published in 1900, the printed full score had been lost. However, a manuscript of the full score was discovered in the family archives, and the orchestral parts were painstakingly recopied from that source.

Brousseau had previously performed both the "Messe Solennelle de Saint-Remi" and the equally unknown "Messe de la Delivrance" in Canada and recorded them in Montreal for the ATMA Classique label. The CD was released in April of this year; the first in what is projected to be an annual series that will include Dubois' violin and piano concertos and additional choral works. Whereas Brousseau's recording utilized 130 choristers and a reduced orchestration consisting of brass, percussion, and organ, for the Carnegie Hall performance he had the luxury of 200 singers and a full orchestral complement including strings and winds. It was indeed fortuitous that Brousseau was able to bring such a large group to Carnegie Hall to enable the Dubois Mass to make its full impact in New York.

Brousseau was fortunate to have a soloist of the stature of Maria Knapik. The Polish-born Canadian soprano has been seen in New York in the lead role of staged productions of both Puccini's and Leoncavallo's "La Boheme" in the same season, and has appeared in Carnegie Hall as soloist in works of Gorecki, Koprowski, and Beethoven, as well as in Verdi's operas "Alzira" and "Giovanna d'Arco." Recently, she sang the title role in Moniuszko's "Halka" with the Polish National Opera and Sarasota Opera.

Although Dubois' score allows the substitution of a tenor soloist for the soprano, upon hearing Ms. Knapik's performance it was impossible to think of her solo being sung by any voice other than hers, due to her tonal variety and contrast with the baritone soloist, as well as the spirituality she imparted to her solos. Ms. Knapik sang with a vulnerable, feminine quality; her bright and vibrant voice soaring to the highest reaches of Carnegie Hall. The supplicating quality she achieved throughout the Mass was particularly memorable.

The excellent baritone soloist in the Mass was Marc Boucher, who sang with an attractive timbre and expressivity. Boucher is an experienced performer of Dubois, having recently recorded a collection of 25 of Dubois' songs ("Musiques Sur l'Eau et Autres Melodies"), released on CD by XXI-21 Productions in June 2009.

Brousseau conducted with assurance and firm control, an astute ear for balance, and considerable emotional fervor. Brousseau is music director of all four choruses heard in the Dubois. They comprise the New World Philharmonic Choir, the Chanteurs de Sainte-Therese Choir, the Tremblant Choir, and the Ottawa Classical Choir, the combined forces of which tour outside Canada under the rubric "The International Choir."

They sang with transparency, clarity, and the support necessary to sustain long phrases while maintaining accurate pitch, as well as dynamic flexibility, focused tone production, and, at times, thrilling and majestic power, which moved the audience to spontaneous, prolonged applause between movements.

The Dubois was the centerpiece of a concert that began with orchestral works by Beethoven and Schubert and ended with Brahms' monumental "German Requiem." Israeli conductor Amos Talmon opened the program with a classically proportioned reading of Beethoven's "Consecration of the House" Overture, followed by a leisurely but lovingly nuanced performance of Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony that caressed the yearning melodies, revealing such beauties that the work sounded fresh and new.

Swedish-trained conductor Ragnar Bohlin ended the concert with a conscientious performance of Brahms' Requiem. He has prepared the San Francisco Symphony Chorus for Michael Tilson Thomas' concerts and recordings since 2007. On the present occasion, Bohlin employed a combination of six choruses from California, Sweden, Florida, New Jersey, and New York. Although Bohlin paid meticulous attention to detail, his performance was at first too understated and restrained, finally taking wing in both the fifth movement, radiantly sung by the conductor's sister, Ingela Bohlin, and the sixth, which the admirable Metropolitan Opera baritone Stephen Gaertner and the capable chorus built to a stirring climax.

But it was the Dubois that provided the principal interest of the evening. Not only did it reveal music of considerable worth, but the audience's enthusiastic reaction to this neglected and unfamiliar composition suggested that the time for a well-deserved revival of Dubois' works has most definitely come.

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