

# Sublime Brahms From the Handel Society

**A** *German Requiem* by Brahms is one of the masterpieces of the choral literature. Upper Valley residents had the opportunity to hear it at Dartmouth's HOP Center on Saturday evening, May 19, in a superb performance by the Handel Society of the college led by the group's artistic director and conductor Robert Duff. Not surprisingly the 900 seat Spaulding Auditorium was sold out in advance. Area music lovers have come to know that Handel Society concerts are not to be missed.

Preceding the *Requiem*, the chorus offered Arnold Schoenberg's brief "A Survivor from Warsaw," for male chorus, orchestra and narrator, with texts by the composer drawn from accounts of survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto. Though no more than ten minutes in length, it is a work of tremendous dramatic effect. James Godwin Rice was the forceful narrator capturing the harsh brutality of the chilling text and Duff and his musicians were fully involved. This was a wise choice to precede the Brahms, giving us a starkly contrasting work also dealing with death.

The *Requiem* is one of hope and comfort, intended to console the bereaved. Brahms (1833-1897), an agnostic, did not believe in an after-life, and felt that the dead were beyond

any human act. He did not use the Latin liturgy, but chose his text from Luther's German translation of the Bible. That is why the composer called the work *A German Requiem*, though he said that calling it a Human Requiem would have been just as appropriate. It is comprised of seven movements and is scored for chorus, orchestra, and soprano and baritone soloists.

Duff led a vital, compelling account of the *Requiem*. Some conductors opt for slower tempos, which to my mind vitiates the spirit of the work, making it ponderous and funereal, instead of comforting and consoling, as Brahms intended. Fortunately, Dr. Duff's tempos were the right ones, and the result was a deeply moving performance of power, beauty and great dramatic impact.

The soloists were soprano Colleen Daly and baritone Paul Max Tipton, young artists destined for important careers who already have many impressive accomplishments to their credit in opera and concert appearances. After the two opening choruses, "Blessed Are They That Mourn" and "For All Flesh is as Grass," the baritone embarks on a somber exchange with the chorus, starting with a solo, "Lord, make me to know that there must be an end to me" and then is joined by the chorus in

"Ah, every man at his best state is altogether vanity." Tipton brought the requisite *gravitas* to the music, but his voice came across as a bit dry and lacking resonance.

Colleen Daly has a lustrous voice and sang admirably in her one solo in the fifth movement, which is again a dialogue between the soloist and chorus. It is quite different from the third movement exchange between baritone and chorus, for here the soloist sings of gentle consolation and reassurance, rather than the sadness and questioning found in the third movement.

The sixth movement text is the same one found in the third part of Handel's *Messiah*—"The Trumpet Shall Sound," with first the baritone and then the chorus singing the text, unlike *Messiah*, where it is a baritone solo. The seventh movement for chorus alone, "Blessed Are the Dead Which Die in the Lord," is one of surpassing beauty ideally realized by chorus and orchestra.

This was an evening of sublime music superbly performed by the Handel Society, and the excellent 50 member orchestra both led so brilliantly and knowingly by Robert Duff. The chorus was in top form, singing with authority, sensitivity, clarity, spot-on intonation and outstanding command of dynamics.

—William Dollard

the bard owl

theatre

## Of Music & Pride in the Summer Season

### 2012 New London Barn Playhouse

**N**ew London Barn Playhouse opens their 2012 season with the musical *Straw Hat Revue* introducing the 2012 summer intern players. These shows are free of charge and will be performed June 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> at the NLB Playhouse at 84 Main St in New London, NH.

The 2012 season that follows throughout the summer is a blockbuster roster of superb entertainment. *Ragtime* will play June 12<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup>; this is the Broadway musical based on E.L. Doctorow's superb book about the seismic shifts in American culture in the decade prior to World War I. We saw the musical when it was on Broadway, and it's a very fine one—entertaining and also thought-provoking, which is a nice blend. Richard Roland directs

the NL Barn production, with musical direction by Joel Mercier.

From June 26<sup>th</sup> to July 15<sup>th</sup>, NL Barn presents *Oklahoma!*, Rodgers & Hammerstein's first collaboration, and a rollicking good testament to the bounty of middle American life and farms. This performance will be directed by Robert Sella, with musical direction by Joel Mercier and choreography by Jesse Factor.

July brings both the hilarious musical adaptation of *Legally Blonde* and the quintessential New England drama *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder to the NL Barn. July 17<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> brings us the *Legally Blonde* twist on the Cinderella story, wherein fashion-focused sorority girl Elle Woods transforms herself from the appearance of an airhead into a successful, talented law student. Lillian King directs the NL Barn production. Choreography is by Sarah Case and Keith Coughlin, with musical direction by Joel Mercier. *Legally*

*Blonde*, originally a movie starring Reese Witherspoon, was born to be better as a musical, and this will be a joyous evening of entertainment and one-upmanship.

Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* opens July 31<sup>st</sup> and runs through August 5<sup>th</sup>. This is a signature drama of small town New England in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Julia Gibson directs the NL Barn production, which stars Gordon Clapp, of TV's *NYPD: Blue* fame, as the Stage Manager.

NL Barn brings us a surprise in August, when artistic director Carol Dunne directs their production of *Hair*. Joel Mercier will do the musical direction. This show comes to the season by popular demand, as it's the most-requested musical by Barn patrons! Musical classics highlight this raucous, iconoclastic musical set in the late 1960s. Recommended for audience members ages 14 and older, as both themes and presentations are—shall we