

CMU Choir and Philharmonic mesmerize crowd

Powerful performance of Mozart's *Requiem* brought audience to their feet last Thursday

It isn't common to see both philharmonic and choir billed on the same program, but visitors to Oakland's Carnegie Music Hall had the rare treat of enjoying vocal and instrumental student talent on Thursday night. The addition of Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (PSO) music director Manfred Honeck as guest conductor — ultimately the biggest selling point for the event — sealed the deal on a crowd-drawing and star-studded evening.

Thanks to dogged advertising by the School of Music, the combination of choir and orchestra, and Honeck's loyal Pittsburgh fan base, the hall was filled up to the second balcony, with available seating on the orchestra level scarce if existent at all. Community members older than Carnegie Mellon affiliates poured through the doors at the concert's beginning, populating the seats with greying perms and combers.

The evening began with a surprise announcement: The two pieces on the program were to be switched, Dvorák's *New World Symphony* performed first rather than Mozart's *Requiem* — a wise choice on the part of the program organizers. Though both works are well known and promised excellent execution by student performers, it isn't unreasonable to think that if the Mozart was performed first, the audience might have thinned after intermission.

President Suresh took the stage next to introduce Honeck and expressed his appreciation of continued collaboration between Carnegie Mellon and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, citing the 25 PSO musicians currently mentoring Carnegie Mellon students. "We very much appreciate the partnership," Suresh said.

Without a word, Honeck launched the Dvorák with a performance that immediately distinguished itself with crisp phrasing in the violins and unified, moving dynamics. Honeck took the famous second movement at a faster tempo than usual — unsettling, at first, but ultimately refreshing: No one could even remotely accuse the rendition of dragging. Meanwhile, master's student in music performance Ian Woodworth established himself as star soloist of the night with enchanting renderings of classic passages on English horn.

Honeck proved himself an emotive and engaged leader of the orchestra, unafraid to crouch to the musicians' level rather than conducting from above and afar. During the gentle prairie-reminiscent theme of the third movement, he fell into a kind of jovial, folksy, swaying dance, flicking his baton as if the musicians were wagonners rather than string and brass players.

While it generally met our expectations of excellence from the School of Music, the performance wasn't perfect: There were more than a couple missteps, the most prominent from solo talent in the horn section. And the third movement came to a shaky, uncertain conclusion as an overzealous violinist played a wrong line.

Despite the rocky end to the third movement, the orchestra compensated in the fourth, shaking off the transition and entering blaring, stomping, and strong, with well-controlled crescendos building toward a confident finish. The piece ended thunderously in an explosion of timpani and brass.

While the Dvorák featured minimal adaptation or embellishment, the Mozart infused a number of new elements. Between sections, CBS sportscaster Verne Lundquist read an excerpt of a letter from Mozart to his father (a welcome and chilling addition that richened the performance) and passages from the Book of Revelation (interesting but a bit overdone). The *Requiem* also brought professional vocal talent to the stage: soprano Lianne Coble, mezzo-soprano Amanda Crider, bass Tom McNichols, and tenor Kyle Stegall — by far the best and most musically self-aware of the four.

The overabundance of professional talent brings into question why more students weren't given the spotlight: Any

vocal performance major would surely have jumped at the opportunity for a solo, and even the narrator's role could have been filled by any of the gifted orators in the School of Drama. Here, the School of Music appeared to serve its own image more than the educational needs of its students. The professional element certainly seized more public attention for the concert, but seemed to deprive students of opportunities to learn and shine.

The student vocalists, however, didn't waste their limelight. Despite occasional imbalance with the orchestra and a little over enunciation (the sharp repetition of "et lux perpetua" pierced the soundscape with every pointed consonant), the choir excelled with controlled dynamics and rehearsed technique. The end of the "Requiem aeternam" dropped to a beautiful pianissimo, while the "Dies irae" made a thundering, unhesitating entrance on the heels of a reading from the Book of Revelation. In "Confutatis," the women's voices hovered lovely and angelic above the din, while the men gained vigor over time.

The most famous and best performed section, "Lacrimosa," was perhaps a little fast and stunted in its phrasing, but stylistic differences aside, it sounded impeccable.

After a high-energy, tumbling "Offertorium," Honeck concluded by signaling a series of solemn, solitary, barely audible chimes, offering only a gentle open and close of his fingers as a gesture to the percussionist, reveling in the drama in silence. This silence didn't last long, though, as Honeck lowered his arm and the audience erupted in standing cheers.