

Video Review

A Song of Remembrance

Somtow Sucharitkul: Requiem in Memoriam 9/11

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Forty years separate two of the most influential works in the long history of interaction between literature and music in the Requiem. Benjamin Britten's War Requiem premiered in 1962, has as its textual base the poetry of Wilfred Owens, while Somtow Sucharitkul's Requiem in memoriam 9/11, premiered on January 11, 2002 is based on poetry by T. S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman.

In their textual interpolations – Benjamin Britten's double dialogues between Owens poetry and the Latin Requiem text set within the framework of the musical interpretation vs. Somtow Sucharitkul's similar dialogues between the poetical universe of American writers and his moving musical score, both works in the interaction of their humanitarian messages over a span of 40 years invite reflections far beyond the spheres of their common genre and compositional similarities. Both are at once cultural, social and political statements, marking the last phase of the lament belonging as we know to the origin and early history of music and poetry in our civilization.

As we commemorate the fateful events of 9/11 and their consequences on the world stage we are again reminded of the intervening efforts of men and women artists of all disciplines and their incessant fight for a more humanized world. It is especially remarkable that Somtow's work was in fact commissioned and funded by the Thai Government shortly after the tragedy and could be seen as a warning and an appeal. The work has three sections: 1-Devastation, 2-Mourning, and 3-Hope.

The music begins with an orchestral apocalyptic vision of terror inspired by T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets, followed by a chorus and soloist incanting three poems by Emily Dickinson. The final movement built on a fugue evolves from depiction of the pain of human conflict to a message of reconciliation set to a poem of Walt Whitman sung by a soprano and ending in a peaceful choral setting of Emily Dickinson's On this wondrous sea.

Word over all, beautiful as the sky!
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost,
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again, and ever
again, this soil'd world:
...For my enemy is dead, a man as divine as myself is dead;
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin – I draw near,
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

Walt Whitman – Leaves of Grass

Maestro Somtow's work here performed by the World Peace Philharmonic Chorus and the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra on January 11, 2002 no doubt belongs among the most inspired and engaging of its genre, a worthy partner to Britten's War Requiem. The DVD is on sale at the Bangkok Cultural Center.