



Seraphic Fire offers a program of solace and remembrance

By Lawrence Budmen



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Seraphic Fire returned to First United Methodist Church in Coral Gables, its former home, after a two-year absence Friday night with a program featuring music of remembrance. Two French requiems were the evening's major offerings with a powerful new score providing an interlude.

Music of Maurice Duruflé bookended the concert. The soaring melody of "Ubi Caritas" from *Quatre Motets*, a work often sung by church choirs was clothed in mellow choral textures. The requiems of Duruflé and Gabriel Fauré are reflective scores. Neither the Italianate fire and brimstone of Verdi's *Requiem* nor the stoic lyricism and thunder of Brahms' *German Requiem* populate these Gallic masses.

The high-ceilinged sanctuary was a fine setting for the two requiems. Nathan Laube, a professor at the Eastman School of Music, was at the console of the church's pipe organ and his command of the instrument was an integral element of the program's superb music-making.

Artistic director Patrick Quigley led an intimate and subtle performance of Fauré's masterwork, bringing out the work's soulful character. There was weight and power in the score's opening organ bars. In the Kyrie, Quigley adroitly balanced the male voices. The choir's beautiful sonority and Laube's varied and transparent range of dynamics imbued the score with an aura of hushed mysticism.

Quigley drew out the long thematic threads of the "Offertorium" with baritone Steven Eddy bringing tonal warmth and eloquent phrasing to his solo. One of the most sensuous melodies ever created for a sacred score forms the main motif of the Sanctus. This pivotal movement also brings one of the few loud climaxes in Fauré's work and the 17-member choir's voices rang out resplendently. Brenda Wells' high soprano and firmly placed intonation, with Laube's accompaniment, took the full measure of "Pie Jesu," perhaps the score's best-known melody.

In the declamatory phrases in the “Libera me” bass-baritone Charles Evans’ top notes were firm and secure. In the climaxes Laube’s organ took on a trumpet-like brilliance yet the choral sound always remained pliant and bereft of harshness. The evocation of heaven in the final “In Paradisum” was voiced in finely conceived waves of sound.

The premiere of Douglas L. Cuomo’s *The Fate of His Ashes: A Requiem for Victims of Power*, one of Seraphic Fire’s eight commissioned works for its fifteenth anniversary season, added a dose of reality to the evening.

The concert marked the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks in Paris. Cuomo’s striking score is dedicated to the “victims of violence and oppression.” Musical lines are austere and there is an aura of desolation running through the ten-minute opus. Repeated cries of “human daily fragments,” “preserve the living” and “in silence” form short fragments that occasionally break into longer melodic patterns. Cuomo’s organ writing is spare and all the stronger for its outward simplicity. A final organ blast leads to a plea for remembrance with the soft ending fading away. The choir’s diction, highly important for the work’s powerful text, was outstanding. Thoroughly contemporary yet accessible, Cuomo’s work was highly moving.

Durufié’s Requiem, completed in 1947, melds Gregorian chant with modernist harmonies. It is a tricky piece to bring off and Quigley directed a beautiful and evocative reading. He emphasized the melodic flow beneath the music’s varied timbral palette. In the “Domine Jesu Christe” the choir was equal to the louder, more angular outbursts.

There was a touch of fire in James Bass’s solo declamation, his rich bass smooth and stentorian. Laube’s colorful shaping of the organ lines in the Sanctus and the choir’s flowing sound gave vivid feeling to the score’s hit tune, almost a pop melody. Quigley took the big climax at full force and the singers may have set a new decibel level for a chamber choir.

The only debit was Margaret Lias’s heavy and edgy mezzo, which sounded out of place in the “Pie Jesu” solo. Taube’s extended introduction to the “Lux aeterna” was eloquent and Quigley played up the dramatic contrasts in the “Libera me” to the fullest.

The soothing harmonic textures in the “In Paradisum” brought catharsis with the female voices especially well integrated. There was an appropriate moment of silence after the quiet conclusion before a well-deserved standing ovation for Quigley, Laube and the singers.

Seraphic Fire repeats the program 7:30 p.m. Saturday at All Saints Episcopal Church in Ft. Lauderdale and 5 p.m. Sunday at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C.

seraphicfire.org