

KASTALSKY: *Requiem for Fallen Brothers*

CD Dennis; Beutel; Cathedral Choral Society, The Clarion Choir, The Saint Tikhon Choir, Kansas City Chorale, Orchestra of St. Lukes, Slatkin. Texts and translations. Naxos 8.574245



ALEXANDER KASTALSKY'S

SUMPTUOUS *REQUIEM FOR FALLEN*

BROTHERS had its world premiere in 1917—and then lay forgotten until a few years ago, a casualty of the Bolshevik regime. This Naxos offering is its first-ever recording. Kastalsky, who studied with Tchaikovsky, composed the work as an anguished response to World War I. Accordingly, he incorporated the prayers for the dead from the liturgical traditions of Allies Russia, Serbia, France, Italy and Britain. Additional movements honoring the U.S., Japan and India were added after the first performance, when those countries joined the war. Often, the cultures are juxtaposed—the “Kyrie eleison” movement incorporates Catholic, Serbian and English melodies; the “Lacrymosa” intersperses Gregorian chant themes and Russian folkstyle laments. All of this is meticulously detailed in the informative notes, and also helpfully indicated in the libretto.

Those of us not fully conversant with Anglican hymn tradition, or with the fine distinctions between, say, Serbian and Romanian Orthodox

melodies, may not fully appreciate the composer’s skill at intermingling all these liturgies. We can, however, get at least some idea of his method from the fourteenth movement, wherein Kastalsky skillfully juxtaposes “Rock of Ages” with Chopin’s funeral march, both of which he had been told were played at funerals in America. In the “Hostias” movement, the notes tell us, a Russian Orthodox *Znamenny* chant and a Gregorian chant dovetail with one another. Whatever it is, it’s ravishing, and it sounds perfectly homogeneous, although here, as elsewhere, a more forward placement of the chorus in the soundscape would have helped. As is, the sound is pleasant but hazy, and diction is muddy.

The two soloists contribute memorably to seven of the seventeen movements. We first hear soprano Anna Dennis in “Ingemisco,” singing verses from “Dies irae” in English translation (“Guilty now I pour my moaning”). It’s a haunting and mournful section, and Dennis gives it a thoroughly soulful rendering, maintaining a pleasingly rounded edge to her sound even as the movement grows in intensity. The notes credit the melody to Anglican hymnist John B. Dykes, but a quick listen to the original confirms that it has been considerably personalized by Kastalsky. Dennis also provides a mellifluous performance of “Beati mortui” (Blessed are the dead), which features a juxtaposition of two Romanian melodies—one quite chromatic—in an unexpectedly upbeat arrangement, with texts in Latin and French. (The composer provided the option of using Latin, English or Russian texts in his Requiem; this recording incorporates all three, in addition to some in French and Italian, thus enhancing the composer’s clear multinational intent.)

Bass-baritone Joseph Beutel kicks off the proceedings in the opening movement with a powerfully inflected delivery of an Italian text imploring listeners to pray for the fallen soldiers. Beutel is also particularly compelling in “What Sweetness in This World,” a Russian text set to what’s listed as a funeral hymn by St. John of Damascus, except the probing extended harmonies again indicate that Kastalsky transformed it considerably from the original. Beutel’s darkish tone is opulent and expressive as he delivers this passionately surging melody in one of the work’s standout movements.

The cumulative effect of the hour-long piece is potent. Kastalsky’s ineluctable Russianness is, in the end, the pervasive spirit of the work, but his embrace of world traditions in the name of peace is truly visionary: Mohammed Fairouz’s *Poems and Prayers*, Osvaldo Golijov’s *Ayre* and Robert Aldridge and Herschel Garfein’s *Parables* are a few pieces from recent memory that make similar musical pleas for understand among cultures. *Requiem for Fallen Brothers* predates these works by almost a century. Additionally, it’s heartfelt, profound and consistently beautiful. Leonard Slatkin masterfully marshals the large forces, including the renowned Orchestra of St. Luke’s (in top form here) for the loving resurrection of this important piece. —*Joshua Rosenblum*