

VERDI: *Requiem; Choruses*

Susan Dunn, Diane Curry, Jerry Hadley, Paul Plishka; Atlanta Symphony & Chorus/ Robert Shaw – Telarc 80152 [2CD] 113 minutes

Few critics know their Verdi better than Ralph Lucano, who reviewed this classic recording when it appeared (M/A 1988). I thus felt a bit intimidated when I was assigned the mid-price re-release of what remains the very finest recorded account of this mighty masterwork ever achieved by all-American forces. I can't find much, if anything, to dispute in his review. His discussion of the soloists from a multitude of recordings is particularly broad. Between that and our current choral overview (N/D 2000, listing this one near the top), there's not much left to say.

I have sung this three times, and I prepared by listening – score in hand – to several famous recordings, including Giulini's matchless account (EM I 67563), widely considered the best ever. It captures the deepest, truest essence of the work, despite its unlikely English chorus and orchestra and non-Italian soloists. I studied it for its spirit and intensity. But when I wanted to concentrate on fine points of choral artistry, there was no possible alternative to the wizardry of Robert Shaw and his Atlanta Symphony Chorus: probably the greatest symphonic choir ever – anywhere.

As they demonstrate here, there's no aspect of big-band choral singing that these artists haven't mastered with absolute supremacy. From nearly inaudible pianissimos to overwhelming, shrieking fortissimos, no dynamic gradation eludes this group. I've never heard such smooth and uniform choral diminuendos and decrescendos (among any choir's ultimate challenges). The complex eight-part and contrapuntal sections have never come off so effortlessly or with such clarity and precision. Diction is perfect, as are balances. It's as if we were hearing a particularly rich-sounding professional chamber choir rather than a huge, mostly amateur municipal chorus.

Interpretively, Shaw and company outdo most of their other recorded efforts here. Considering their often cool, sometimes even bland impression (a by-product of Shaw's obsession with technical perfection), this effort is a relative paragon of heartfelt emotion and outright passion – though no match for the Giulini in that department.

Shaw's soloists are superb, though not quite as esteemed as Giulini's. Soprano Susan Dunn, in particular, is very hard to beat; and tenor Jerry Hadley – then on the brink of his distinguished career – sounds thrilling. Mezzo Diane Curry and bass Paul Plishka leave almost nothing to be desired. But these singers shine the brightest as a team: the exquisite balance and sheer beauty of their ensemble singing in this piece is unmatched on record. No operatic superegos stand out; no voice gets lost in the fray. I like to think that the pragmatic, cooperative American spirit is at work here. And it's entirely likely that the chorus taught them a thing or two about vocal ensemble.

Shaw held his orchestra to the same lofty standards he demanded from his singers, and it shows. Their playing is wonderfully precise and lucid, if a mite insipid in places.

This one can still claim to be one of the very best on CD in terms of sound quality, too. Telarc had already been recording digitally for nearly a decade when this recording was made, not to mention their long association with Shaw since his days as Szell's deputy in Cleveland. Played back on the best equipment, you can almost blow your friends away with this 'Dies Irae'! The filler pieces – five of Verdi's best-known opera choruses – pale by comparison. Shaw, despite his triumph with the Requiem, wasn't particularly at home in Italian opera, and these choruses are certainly less exalted material than the main fare. Performances are chorally impeccable, but lacking in the kind of punch and panache we've just heard in the magnum opus. The concluding 'Gloria all' Egitto' from *Aida* sounds positively pedestrian.

But this *Requiem* is one for the ages. No finer account has emerged since. I wonder if anyone will ever improve on it chorally. I'd be perfectly content with just this and the Giulini on my shelf.

[Lindsay] KOOB