

# Review: Premieres, a Tribute and an Anniversary at Carnegie Hall

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI - NY Times - MAY 1, 2016



The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra made its Carnegie Hall debut in 1971, four years after Robert Shaw had taken charge as music director.

Mr. Shaw, who died in 1999 at 82, would lead the Atlanta Symphony a dozen times at Carnegie Hall during his acclaimed 21-year tenure with the orchestra.

So, it was appropriate that on Saturday night, the exact day of his centennial, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, conducted by the music director Robert Spano, paid tribute to Mr. Shaw with a program offering impressive performances of Jonathan Leshnoff's "Zohar," in its New York premiere, and Brahms's "A German Requiem," a score Mr. Shaw revered.

The orchestra has made fairly regular appearances at Carnegie over the years, unlike the Utah Symphony which, before Friday night, had not performed at the hall in 41 years...

...For the Atlanta program, Mr. Leshnoff, 42, wrote a 30-minute choral work, "Zohar," scored, as with the Brahms requiem, for soprano and baritone soloists, chorus and orchestra. The text for "Zohar" — a pillar of Jewish mysticism, the composer suggests — is a commentary upon the Five Books of Moses, here presented as six movements reflecting on the nature of man, Judaism and life.

Mr. Leshnoff has been called a leader of the contemporary American lyricism, though Neo-Romantic would be a simpler description of his stylistic approach in "Zohar." The opening movement was somewhat pontifical, with ominous, weighty orchestral chords and repeated choral exclamations. I was more drawn into the reflective, poignant sections of the score, like "What is Man?," when piercing harmonies and delicate orchestral textures cushioned supple, lyrical writing for the fine soprano soloist, Jessica Rivera.

Another movement, about a shepherd boy who cannot read, began with tender music for the baritone, here the earnest, youthful Nmon Ford, and built to a pummeling outburst for the full forces. If not innovative, "Zohar" revealed the composer's technical skills and personal voice.



Shaw, who founded the Atlanta Symphony's volunteer chorus in 1970, would have been proud of the remarkable contribution the choristers made to the Brahms requiem performance. Their sound was full-bodied, warm and penetrating without ever seeming forced. Inner details of the music came through with clarity and crispness. Ms. Rivera and Mr. Ford sang affectingly. Mr. Spano drew a glowing, spacious performance of this Brahms masterwork from the orchestra, marking a great return visit for both him and this essential ensemble.

