

# OPERA NEWS

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## **Saint-Saëns's Symphony No. 3 & Smyth's Mass in D | Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra**

**NEW YORK CITY**

**St. Bartholomew's Church**

**1/27/23**

**O**N JANUARY 27, conductor Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra performed at St. Bartholomew's Church on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where the orchestra's founder, Leopold Stokowski, began his career as choir director and organist. The church's celebrated Aeolian-Skinner organ featured prominently in the program, which paired Saint-Saëns Symphony No. 3, also known as the Organ Symphony, and Ethel Smyth's Mass in D. Both works were deeply personal to their composers; Saint-Saëns dedicated his to his late friend, Franz Liszt, and Smyth dedicated hers to Pauline Trevelyan, the daughter of a prominent Catholic family, with whom she was infatuated. As a result, both pieces have demonstrably emotional underpinnings, which Botstein drew out from the orchestra sensitively but without indulgence. He also did a masterful job of balancing the orchestra in the grand vaulted chamber.

The bipartite Saint-Saëns opened with celestial strings, beseeching winds in a dialogue among themselves, and mellow horns, with probing repeated notes reminiscent of the opening of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. It's a long wait for the organ, and when it does enter, it sneaks in with a low thrum like a comforting blanket. Organist Paolo Bordignon drew a range of colors from the majestic instrument, with notably sweet tones in the higher register. The organ part is not virtuosic, but ennobling, almost cleansing. Botstein particularly captured the moodiness and sunniness of the second movement. At one point, the organ burst through in triumphant major chords, with piano runs, triangle accentuations and crashing cymbals adding to the sense of apotheosis. The closing allegro fugue was peppered with surprisingly jazzy sliding chromatics and a smattering of *dies irae*, with the organ anchoring a big finish.

Smyth's Mass is bold, exuberant and full of ideas, with inventive orchestration and soaring vocal lines. Given the cavernous acoustics, diction was never going to be at a premium, and it was inevitable that the chorus would be overwhelmed at times. Even so, the Bard Festival Chorale sang with plush, well-balanced sound, and in the more lightly accompanied moments, one could fully appreciate the beauty of each section of the chorus. Smyth builds the Kyrie from the bottom up, layering the voices from bass to soprano, altering the mood of the repeated text with each iteration. There's a powerful unison restatement, an exciting

rhythmic recurrence, and a game of catch, with the “k” of Kyrie passed among sections. The operatic, optimistic Credo sounds like a declaration of love, with plenty of orchestral and choral interest, ending with a buoyant fugue and exultant “Amen.” The excellent solo quartet (soprano Anya Matanovič, mezzo Eve Gigliotti, tenor Joshua Blue and bass Adam Lau) blended so well, you could always hear each voice as they intertwined. They also invested their solos with dramatic intent. Gigliotti shaped the Sanctus expressively, while Matanovič sang with glowing tone and brilliant high notes in the aria-like Benedictus; both were tenderly supported by the women’s chorus in hushed tones. Blue brought an Italianate sound and heroic gloss to the Agnus Dei, preparing the choral entrance with a thrilling crescendo on “miserere nobis.” In the jubilant Gloria, Lau demonstrated a sonorous, sizable bass, and he paired wonderfully with Gigliotti in their duet section of this excellent performance of Smyth’s rich, complex and satisfying Mass. —*Joanne Sydney Lessner*