

'Enemy Slayer' musically stunning

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SALT LAKE CHORAL ARTISTS AND ORCHESTRA, Libby Gardner Concert Hall, University of Utah, May 2

The Salt Lake Choral Artists, under music director Brady Allred, finished their season Saturday with the Utah premiere of Mark Grey's "Enemy Slayer: A Navajo Oratorio."

With a libretto by Navajo poet Laura Tohe, the work tells a compelling story of Seeker, a Native American returning home to the reservation from the war in Iraq. He is emotionally scarred by what he has been through, including the death of his brother who was killed in action. Plagued by these inner demons, he undergoes a traditional Navajo healing ceremony to be cleansed.

The oratorio itself is the actual ceremony, and underscoring that, Seeker, sung by baritone Gary Sorenson, was dressed not in traditional concert attire but in everyday clothes: jeans, open shirt and sneakers. And Allred, symbolizing the medicine man in this ceremony, wore a ceremonial silver and turquoise necklace.

The visual element is quite forceful in this story, aided by Deborah O'Grady's photography taken on a reservation and projected on a large screen onstage to one side of the orchestra.

Seeker undergoes a powerful emotional journey in this work, taking the audience through a broad palette of feelings. At times intense, poignant, restless and ultimately soothing, the work finally resolves as Seeker is healed and finds peace within himself.

Musically, "Enemy Slayer" is stunning. It moves from breathtakingly beautiful and lush passages to sections that are stringently dissonant, and finally ends peacefully and simply. Yet everything is cohesive and quite seamless. It is a hypnotic work that makes quite an impression on the listener.

Sorenson, who has collaborated with Allred in the past, most recently in Tan Dun's "Water Passion," gave a luminous performance. He was in fine voice Saturday, and his rich, resonant baritone brought conviction and sincerity to his part.

The chorus, symbolizing the ancestral voices, is central to the work, and the Salt Lake Choral Artists gave one of their finest performances Saturday. They sang with lustrous expression and intense feeling.

The Salt Lake Choral Artists and Orchestra, assembled for this concert, played wonderfully. And Allred, who isn't afraid to take on large musically and vocally demanding works, captured the richly textured moods and characterizations of this work. His reading was nuanced, and he easily brought out the subtleties of the score.

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