



The Berkshire Review

Looking Back at the Boston Winter and Spring Music Season, 2010-11

Posted by [Charles Warren](#) • June 20, 2011

Part II—Opera and Other Events

Soon after the BSO presented its Bartók and Stravinsky short operas, the Cantata Singers under Music Director David Hoose continued their “Ralph Vaughan Williams Season” with that composer’s one-act *Riders to the Sea*, from 1936, almost contemporary with *Oedipus Rex*, based on the J.M. Synge short play about Aran Islanders and the loss of fishermen at sea. Vaughan Williams restrains his own atmospheric-evocative powers here and fashions a work focused on Synge’s beautiful and suggestive words, letting the words come to the fore. The semi-staged performance was fine—soloists, chorus, and orchestra, with mezzo Lynn Torgrove especially effective as Maurya, the mother who loses a son. Unfortunately, the hall (Jordan Hall) was made too dark to follow the words printed in full in the (elaborate and informative) program book. One can never make out aurally most of the words in opera sung in English. Familiarity with a piece can allay this. But *Riders to the Sea* is exceptional in that the words come so fast and are so central. More light or projected titles were really needed here. The first part of the program gave us beautiful a capella choral songs by Vaughan Williams, Holst, Elgar, and Gerald Finzi (and plenty of light to follow along).

In March the Cantata Singers performed Bach’s *Mass in B-Minor*—a favorite work of Vaughan Williams and an inspiration to him. The performance showed some of the strain and difficulty of singing and pacing such a work, but in a good way. There was strain evident, but also a sense of difficulty overcome. The performance was a remarkably joyful one, full of an impulse to praise. The emphasis fell not on the huge, grave opening *Kyrie*, the mystical *Et incarnatus*, the slow, arresting *Crucifixus*, and plangent *Agnus Dei*—these moods were there and acknowledged, but the *raison d’être* here to be the brightness and high energy of the *Christe eleison* (Christ a more accessible and hopeful aspect of the primal God?), *Gloria*, *Et in terra pax*, *Cum sancto spiritu* (positively manic here), *Et resurrexit*, and *Sanctus*. The Bach *Mass* can take different emphases; here the center was joy. Among the roster of good soloists, soprano Karyl Ryczek stood out as especially strong and convincing.