



Requiem Redux

LEON BOTSTEIN AND BBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA RESURRECT A MASTERPIECE

A **mystic**, pacifist, and socialist, the British composer John Foulds (1880–1939) was too much the stubborn individualist to fit in with the musical milieu of his time. Yet his monumental tribute to the dead on all sides of the Great War, *A World Requiem*, struck a plangent chord with the public when it premiered at the Royal Albert Hall in 1923, on the occasion of the first British Legion Festival of Remembrance. The work, which comprises a staggering 20 movements, and whose choral sections include lines from John Bunyan and a poem by Kabir as well as Biblical references, was embraced by an audience still very much in mourning for its fallen soldiers. For the next three years, it was performed annually, on Armistice Day. And then, abruptly, it was dropped from the festival, and never performed again.

“Never,” however, came to a ringing close on November 11—Remembrance Day—2007, when Bard College president Leon Botstein led the BBC Symphony Orchestra and its chorus, along with three other choirs, in a triumphant resurrection of Foulds’s long-neglected magnum opus. Fittingly, the concert took place in the Royal Albert Hall, the last (and only) venue to host this music, more than eight decades ago.

It was an ambitious undertaking, but Botstein—the music director of the American Symphony Orchestra—and his musicians carried it off with aplomb, more than satisfying the tough London critics. Reviewing the concert for the *Guardian*, Tim Ashley wrote, “Botstein conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra with eloquent gravitas and the choral singing, from the combined forces of the Philharmonia, BBC Symphony and Crouch End Festival choruses, was superb in its mixture of hushed grief and exaltation.” The *Daily Telegraph’s* Ivan Hewett remarked that it was a “wonderful occasion,” with “the conductor Leon Botstein, who held this army together with a sure hand, [deserving] special mention.”

Paul Hughes, executive director of the BBC Symphony, was responsible for engaging Botstein for this project by Roger Wright, director of BBC Proms and long-time controller of BBC Radio 3, the UK’s preeminent cultural radio station. The choice of the right conductor to restore this long-shelved epic to the rosy glow of the concert hall was no accident. Now in its 19th season, Botstein’s annual Bard Music Festival has made a practice of “rediscovering” lost or little-known works by greater and lesser composers. (Some recent examples have included works by Ethel Smyth, Herbert Howells, and Frank Bridge that are rarely performed in the United States, and Carl Czerny’s Fugue in C Major, Op. 177, No. 1, which exists only in manuscript.) In an interview with Jessica Duchon of *The Independent*, Botstein, noting that Foulds’s artistic concerns are a good fit with the growing popularity of “so-called ‘spiritual minimalist’ music,” went on to explain why he thought *A World Requiem* was ripe for revival: “[It] is a lush, intense, spiritual work with a strong mystical streak. I’m sure that audiences will respond to

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its lyricism. It’s clear that Foulds must have had a political commitment to accessibility in his musical style: the work is expressive, direct and idealistic, building on the post–First World War ideologies of pacifism and world cooperation.”

More than anything, the undeniable candor of the work makes it irresistible for a contemporary audience, a tonic for sensibilities that are steeped in irony. “We’re often a little allergic to anything that we feel is hypocritically exaggerated . . . anything oversentimental or kitsch,” Botstein said. “But I feel this work does not have that quality. It’s disarmingly, vulnerably authentic in its emotions. This was an honest man.”

Foulds, who immigrated to India in 1935, died of cholera there, just shy of his 60th birthday. During his four years on the subcontinent, he was engaged in trying to create a synthesis of Eastern and Western music, an idea that was very much in advance of his time. Although his lighter works continued to be performed in England, he was lampooned in the press and disregarded by the British musical establishment. He would no doubt have been astounded to see approximately 4,000 concertgoers turn out for his great Requiem on a chilly autumn day in the Third Millennium.

The first performance of *A World Requiem* in 81 years was recorded live by Chandos Records, which released it as two surround-sound SA-CDs in January. Audiences may never see another live staging of this prodigious work, but they will now have the opportunity, at least, to hear it as it was performed on the occasion of its glorious resurrection in November 2007.