

## ASO energized for Verdi's Requiem, even as the future of orchestras in jeopardy

By Pierre Ruhe

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A week after the Atlanta Symphony officially ended its 65th season, the orchestra took the stage a few more times to perform its specialties for an audience of special guests.

Two service organizations are in town, the League of American Orchestras and Chorus America, holding their annual conferences. For their entertainment and edification, the ASO and Chorus offered Verdi's Requiem on Wednesday evening, and recent works from the so-called "Atlanta school" on Friday, presenting four active composers whose music has been championed during the decade-long tenure of music director Robert Spano.

Orchestras across America are in deep financial trouble, and the ASO is no exception -- spending much more to perform concerts and pay its staff than it can bring in from ticket sales and donations.

"What makes an orchestra matter in the 21st century?" was a question that dominated the opening session. Yet as one conference platitude put it, "there are no crises, only tough decisions."

From the sessions I heard, there are sharp analyses about the problems and a few can-do remedies. Although in a straw poll the delegates voted for "change," most discussion revolved around tinkering with the status quo.

It's starting to seem like a parallel to our dependence on oil: even as we see its devastating effects and know its long-term effects, we can't break from our habits. Likewise, the orchestra community can't muster the will to address what's the fundamental problem that leads to the others: the old and wonderful classical repertoire doesn't connect with the broader culture.

Twittering about yet another performance of a Mozart symphony won't lure a new generation of audience and patrons. Cutting the size or salaries of the musicians and staff is more akin to medical life-support than artistic innovation.

The ASO's new-music "Atlanta School" points in the right direction, but its goal thus far has been to cultivate composers who appeal to the converted, to folks who already come to concerts.

What is not the problem is the industry's core product -- revivals of time-tested masterpieces -- which remains at a giddy high level.

The ASO last performed Verdi's Requiem in April, part of its regular subscription series. Wednesday the star was again the ASO Chorus, fastidiously and soulfully prepared by Norman Mackenzie. The quartet of vocal soloists was the same as heard in April, except for soprano Christine Brewer, her huge voice unspooled as silk.

But even if the conference didn't have any answers, it can serve many purposes. The Cobb Symphony, an excellent semi-professional community orchestra in Atlanta's northern suburbs, is scouting and interviewing for a new executive director to replace Brian Hermanson, who resigned in March to take charge of an orchestra in California.

If all goes as hoped, the results of the Cobb Symphony search should be announced in the coming weeks.

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## **CONCERT REVIEW**

Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Wednesday in Symphony Hall. [www.atlantasymphony.org](http://www.atlantasymphony.org)