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## Solzhenitsyn gives Brahms' lesser-known work a hearing

By David Patrick Stearns

Inquirer Music Critic

You'll never hear this from me, but certain quarters of the classical music community wonder if those all-too-durable Brahms concertos and symphonies deserve a rest - if only to give lesser-known Brahms a chance.

That's what Ignat Solzhenitsyn laudably accomplished in the season finale of his Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia Monday at the Kimmel Center - and nobody should have been surprised. The guy likes missions (Mendelssohn's early string symphonies, for one). Also, the size restrictions of Chamber Orchestra promise a sound envelope (leaner strings, more clear winds) closer to what Brahms heard.

The first half had choral signposts that stand on each side of Brahms' beloved *Ein Deutsche Requiem* (1868) - the *Begräbnisgesang* (1858) and the excellent, better-known *Schicksalslied* (1871). Maturity gave the composer quality consistency. But young-ish Brahms had the courage to confront.

Accompanied mainly by bassoon-dominated winds, the earlier work has an organic directness that grows marvelously out of the funereal text, but that also exposed individual sections of the Choral Arts Society, revealing some unsteady male voices and solid, purposeful female ones. The *Schicksalslied* has the more homogeneous choral writing of the requiem - and had a positive effect on Choral Arts - but at the service of a high-impact, hope-deprived Friedrich Hölderlin text about the unending misery of mankind.

Brahms' word settings made it all seem so current; the performance was such that you were reminded of the death of Solzhenitsyn's friend and mentor Mstislav Rostropovich only weeks ago. You joined in the grief. The piece also left a clue why Brahms' major works were instrumental. What he had to say was beyond words, and maybe too unbearable when spelled out.

The second half's *Serenade No. 1* (1859) came as a shock, and not just because the composer sounds so uncharacteristically carefree. The usually relaxed tempos for the ever-tuneful first movement were more brisk than I've ever heard - making the piece seem more vital and cogent (an issue with early Brahms) while successfully leading one's ears through the piece's less-consequential movements. Even though Solzhenitsyn the pianist has a history of slow Brahms, this performance wasn't the first time Solzhenitsyn the conductor administered successful shock treatment to a familiar composer.

Might he do the same with the symphonies? He already did with Brahms' *Symphony No. 1* three years ago with the Hudson Valley Philharmonic in Upstate New York. So rapturously received was that bracing, distinctive performance that an archival recording of it has circulated among collectors. And yes, it was quite something. Will that ever happen here? We wait with arms folded, eyebrow arched and foot tapping.