

Beyond the old Requiem of fear, the music of hope: THE REQUIEM OF MERCY

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Abstract. After a brief survey of the most significant musical works on the old Latin text of the Requiem Mass, the reasons which have led the author to put in music a very different, *-post Concilium-* text (wholly taken from the Bible), are made clear and the meaning of the new Requiem is shown. The different parts of the work are explained so as to help the audience. The Requiem of Mercy, in memory of the great Pope Johann Paul II, is a hymn to the mercy of God and to the hope of Resurrection,

Key words: Sacred music, Requiem, Resurrection.

1 Introduction

The text of the Latin Mass for the Dead – known for short as the Requiem – and specifically the Sequence with the famous *Dies irae*, has always fascinated composers, spurring them on to deal with the difficult challenge of setting to music a text that is complex and fearsome in parts. From Mozart to Cherubini, and from Berlioz to Dvorak or Verdi (to name but a few of the most well-known), sadness and drama have always reigned, even if the overall impression conveyed during listening varies to reflect the composer's deepest sentiment, his reaction when faced with the theme of death and his faith in the world beyond – and which particular world beyond. It is not difficult to deduce whether the composer truly believes in the words he interprets through music, whether he deals with the text purely from a poetic and literary standpoint or whether he is sincerely moved by its contents.

Of course, in centuries past, common faith – this being that of the average man in the street (and in this context composers are average men) – was generally consonant with that of the Catholic Church. However, it was a faith that very often placed the accent on the fear of Hell rather than expectations of Paradise, offering an avenging God rather than a merciful one.

This is all very evident, for example, in Giuseppe Verdi's Requiem, where the *Dies irae* is the core the entire work revolves around. It is a core of fearful dramatic power, with Man terrified when faced with divine judgement. Because the Requiem text provides two alternating and interpenetrating aspects: collective judgement and personal judgement. There is first the awesome description of Universal Judgement with flames devouring all; this then passes to personal judgement – *Quem patronem rogaturus?* – and it is as if a sudden 'zooming in' starts from the enormous crowd, a 'zooming' that homes in on your face – yes yours personally – prompting a shiver of agonising terror.

The last part of Verdi's Requiem, the *Libera me Domine*, finishes on a tragic diminuendo, which not even the final major chord manages to alleviate. This part was in fact the first to be composed, as Verdi envisaged a group work rendered in Rossini's honour by various composers. However, the idea was later abandoned and upon Manzoni's death Verdi completed his Requiem alone.

Great tragic power also pervades Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's unfinished Requiem, which, among other things, presents moments of strong manly sentiment. In any case, the uneven 'sobbing' of the violins in the *Lacrimosa* is an unforgettable example of profound sadness.

Sadness, drama and tragedy: these are the dominant features in Verdi and Mozart – both

Catholic composers, albeit of different origins. It might have been a similar story for Beethoven too, who, in his later years, nurtured an intent to compose a great Requiem with an instrumental complex and a huge choir. This same idea was then taken up by Hector Berlioz, with his work suffering from gigantism and that is – in my opinion – very far from the intimacy of a truly felt faith. If we wish to identify a Catholic composer for whom the theme of God's mercy and hope takes on great importance, whilst still remaining with the text to the old Requiem, we have to stay in France, looking to a musician of genuine Christian faith such as Gabriel Fauré; his Requiem begins somewhat sadly – death is not a joyful event for anyone, and was not even for Jesus himself – to then proceed in a sweeter vein, until reaching the angelic Agnus Dei and the powerful song of Libera me.

Antonin Dvorak was also a man of faith, and his Requiem is direct evidence of this: it is a strong and complex work, inspired by a truly Christian vision of death.

Things went very differently in Protestant countries: the Catholic Requiem does not constitute part of the Lutheran faith. However, in Germany we find Johannes Brahms' German Requiem, referring to an entirely biblical text chosen by Brahms himself. This text is closer to the current Mass for the Dead than to the old Requiem; a more serene vision of death pervades, along with hope in divine mercy.

It took a good many years before, thanks to the Second Vatican Council, the text of the Mass for the Dead changed – with the disappearance of the fearful Sequence – to make way for less disturbing and more consoling texts.

Nevertheless, composers (whose knowledge of liturgy and theology is usually not overly expert) go on referring to the old dated text. It may be considered dated not only as it is completely excluded in modern liturgy but above all due to the concept of death held by the post-conciliar Catholic Church which – particularly through the guidance of the more recent Popes (from John XXIII to John Paul II to the current great theologian Benedict XVI) – sees death only in the light of hope in the mercy of God, who leads us to immortality.

The Requiem per le vittime della mafia – 'Requiem for mafia victims' – written by a group of contemporary composers and referring to the old text is a recent example of this genre. Marco Tutino supervised the collaboration and was the drive behind the work, thus reintroducing Verdi's original idea. Surprisingly, no mention has been

made, not even by the Church, regarding the obsolescence of such a project and its digression from the new teachings of the Catholic Church.

2 The Requiem of mercy

I personally consider myself perfectly in harmony with the modern vision of Catholic theology, and for this reason I decided to set to music the text of the Mass for the Dead as the Council and John Paul II saw it and the Liturgy has established it. I feel that this task is rightly mine since I am a composer with a not slim knowledge of theology and liturgy – a somewhat rare combination.

I should like to quickly dwell on a consideration in support of my project for a 'modern Requiem'. In the Gospel of John we find the sentence "Those who do not believe are condemned already" (John, 3-18). Therefore Man condemns himself by not believing in the dead and resurrected Son of God: thus Justice simply confirms what already is, unless the Mercy of God prevails for all, given that – as Paul states (First Timothy, 2-49) – "God desires all men to be saved". Hence, upon the day of Final Judgement, the resurrected Lord shall be accompanied in immortal resurrection by all those who have hoped and believed in him: it is therefore a day of joy, and not of wrath and revenge. We shall be alongside Christ, so why should we fear? "Have no fear!" was the phrase frequently repeated by the great John Paul II, using the words that Christ often said to his disciples. And so Requiems of fear are no longer pertinent, and the doors should be opened to hope in God's mercy!

This is precisely the concept present in all the readings alternating in the Mass for the Dead in modern liturgy. I chose a selection of these to be set to music, and they include the following: First Reading - from the Book of Knowledge (Chap. 3, 1-6); Psalm - from Psalm 42; Second Reading - First letter to the Corinthians, from chap. 15; the Gospel - John, chap. 11, verses 21-27.

However, I did not restrict my interpretation to these texts. In order to endow my work with a greater overall meaning and unity, I added a Prologue and an Epilogue. The Prologue is taken from the Gospel of Matthew (Chap. 21) and presents the parable of the vine growers – a parable describing the story of salvation until the death of the Son "killed outside the vineyard". However, I decided to enrich this with two verses from the Book of Job (Job, 19, 25): io so che il mio redentore è vivo e da ultimo sorgerà dalla

polvere ('For I know that my redeemer liveth and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth') – an obvious allusion to the resurrection of Christ. I also – and more noticeably – added a lengthy Epilogue including some prominent verses from the Apocalypse: *Io faccio nuove tutte le cose, Io sono l'alfa e l'omega, il primo e l'ultimo, il principio e la fine. Non ci sarà più la morte, né lutto, né affanno, perché le cose di prima sono passate* ('I shall make everything anew. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away').

Each of the six parts has a different structure, thus avoiding monotony and emphasising the specific meaning of every piece. The three soloists interpret the different characters present in the work: the tenor the reader, the baritone Jesus and the Father, and the soprano the female figures.

There are various recurrent themes. The most prominent of these is the resurrection one, which is present right from the beginning of the work and returns many times, particularly in the Gospel, and is taken to its greatest exaltation by the entire orchestra. Another recurring theme is that of thanksgiving, which emerges in the second reading, after the polyphony of the choir on the words *"Morte, dov'è la tua vittoria?"* – 'But where is your victory, Death?'

The theme of Christ's death, which opens the work, is present only in the first movement and disappears with the words *"Io so che il mio Redentore è vivo"* ('For I know that my redeemer liveth'). It is replaced by the appearance of the resurrection theme, initially introduced by the solo violin and later by all the strings. A feeling of expectation pervades the whole movement.

This directly flows into the First Reading, where the choir a cappella meekly sings *"le anime dei giusti sono nelle mani di Dio"* ('the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God'). The organ then makes its entrance, followed by the percussion in the last part, upon the words *"perché Dio li ha provati e li ha trovati degni di sé"* ('Because God tested them and found them worthy of himself'). This sets off an Allegro with the tenor accompanied by the impetuous rhythm of the timpani and drum: *"Perché Dio li ha provati come oro nel crogiuolo"* ('Because God tested them like gold in the melting-pot'). The ff organ rounds off.

Next comes the Psalm simulating the old psalmist accompanied by the cittern, which is replaced here by the harp. The soprano's song is

reiterated by the oboe and then by the flute, whilst the strings quietly begin playing a sweet melody evoking Gregorian tones.

The fourth movement – the Second Reading – is a dramatic one and draws on the entire orchestra, with accent placed on the percussion. The tenor cries: *"I morti risorgeranno incorrotti"* ('the dead shall be resurrected incorrupt') and his cry flows into a forceful fugato by the choir with the words *"Morte, dov'è la tua vittoria?"* ('But where is your victory, Death?'). The tenor stresses *"Dov'è il tuo pungiglione?"* – 'But where is your sting?' – and the music gradually approaches calm, reaching the sweet theme of thanksgiving, which goes from the clarinet to the tenor, to the choir, and lastly to the surge of violins, with a moving effect. The melody is repeated by the solo voices, which are followed by the orchestra's powerful return to the fugato. This then flows once again into repetition of the thanksgiving theme, which gradually dies out with the pizzicato of the last chord.

The fifth movement is the Gospel scene dealing with Jesus meeting Martha and proclamation of the woman's faith. The work strives to evoke the atmosphere of the ancient landscape of Judea, which is the backdrop to the two figures. *"Signore, se tu fossi stato qui, mio fratello non sarebbe morto"* ('Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died'), but Jesus, played by the baritone, replies: *"Io sono la resurrezione e la vita"* ('I am the resurrection and the life'). The music becomes increasingly pressing and, upon the high note of the violins, Jesus cries to the woman: *"Credi tu questo?"* ('Do you believe this?'). Martha's reply is a shout of *"Sì. Signore!"* ('Yes, Lord!'), which then continues with the song of *"Che tu sei il Cristo, il figlio di Dio"* ('That you are Christ, the Son of God'). Now the resurrection theme wells in the whole orchestra and resounds with a captivating effect becoming sweeter and sweeter, until the final chord is reached.

The last part, the Epilogue, is the longest of the entire work. It opens with a discordant and extremist style that seems to jar with the rest of the work. However, this is intentional, echoing the text stating *"Io faccio nuove tutte le cose. Non ci sarà più la morte, né lutto, né affanno, perché le cose di prima sono passate"* ('I shall make everything anew. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'). The initial music in this part in fact aims to represent 'things that have passed', and Man in the degeneracy of sin. Yet there is another facet: the 'things that have passed'

are also the terrible years of the merciless dictatorship that the great Pope John Paul II helped to demolish.

The lively twelve-tone fugato that follows strives to represent the slavery of sin and, in human terms, that of a people forced into complete and unnatural obedience: the timpani beats suddenly erupt into the great tonal chord (A flat minor) of the organ, with a contrast well expressing the changeover from the condition of sin to the freedom of God's children (but also the changeover from the slavery of dictatorship to freedom). This chord is like the hand of God stopping Man submerged in sin, to help him rise once again with Him.

A rhythmic staccato follows in the bass tones and this is picked up on various times in the piece, acting as a background to diverse melodic phrases using a variety of instruments, and these are with the majestic words: "Non ci sarà più la morte, né lutto, né affanno" ('There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain'). The central part sees the choir accompanied by the organ and presents the strongly chromatic subject of a fugue of some 130 measures on the words "Beati coloro che lavano le loro vesti così da poter mangiare dell'albero della vita" ('Blessed be those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life'). The orchestra and the choir alternate in a variety of 'divertimentos' during performance, until the repetition of the *ff* chord of A flat minor. The thanksgiving and resurrection themes are once again present in the finale, which is taken to the peaks of sonority. The mood gradually quiets down until, beneath the tremolo of the high notes of the violins, the soprano and the tenor are heard singing the words "Vieni Signore Gesù" – 'Come Lord Jesus'. The chorus seals the soprano's words with "Amen", while the entire orchestra comes together sweetly in the great final chord of B flat major.

And so, upon the last words of the Bible, the music gradually fades away with a *pp* B flat high note that, contrasting with the same note a few octaves lower and the *ff* at the beginning, guides the way from death to hope in Paradise.

Thus it is a work that is very far from the angst and fear found in the old Requiem. In fact, I decided to give my Requiem the meaningful title of *Il Requiem della misericordia* – 'The Requiem of Mercy' – to mark this difference and because this title well reflects the teachings and life of John Paul II.

3 The première

The première of this work, which I have dedicated to the memory of the great John Paul II, occurred, together with that of another piece of mine (Magnificat), in a special concert on September, 15, 2005. The concert was performed by the choir and orchestra of the Targu-Mures Philharmonica (Romania), directed by Maestro Romeo Rimbu; Edith Borsos, Zsolt Szilagy and Gheorghe Mogosan were the soloists. The music played here comes from that performance.

The concert was a great success and the music was met by critics with extreme favour.

Carmen Mihaescu wrote in Rumanian newspaper Cuvantul on October 1st 2005:

"An unforgettable event at the Philharmonica.

The program of the opening concert of season 2005-2006 at the Philharmonica consisted in an evening devoted to an only author, with his presence: Luciano Simoni, well known to the people fond of music of our town. Maestro Simoni dedicated the concert to the memory of John Paul the 2nd, proposing as premieres two exceptional works: "Magnificat" and "The Requiem of Mercy". This latter work is far from the anguish and the fear of the ancient Latin Requiem, and this is the reason of the title. The two works of the Italian Maestro impress for their amplitude, proving that the author has succeeded in combining intelligently the expressive possibilities of the two great Sections, vocal and instrumental.

As we could verify also in the previous works performed in Targu Mures, the composer well uses the orchestration technique, as he has shown in this occasion, too, by means of the research on instrumental timbres and the contrast in dynamics and agogics of the two scores. The language is sincere, direct, and makes use of simple melodic elements which, however, by an elaborate metamorphosis, become effects worthy of masterpieces of the 21st Century."

The CD with the "Requiem della Misericordia" and "Magnificat" shall be made available in Autumn 2006 by the INEDITA record label, which has already released other works of mine.

The CD can be obtained directly by visiting the site

www.ineditacd.com