

Florilegium Chamber Choir
March 2010

Tomas Luis de Victoria *Missa Pro Defunctis (1603)*

Lieder arranged by Nicholas DeMaison for a cappella chorus

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) *Der Tod und das Mädchen*
Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) *Der Tod das ist die küble Nacht*
Hugo Wolf (1860 – 1903) *In der Frühe*
 Verbogenheit
 Verlassene Mägdelein

Tædet animam meam vitæ meae.
My soul is weary of this life.

Excerpted from the Office of the Dead, a prayer cycle to be recited once a year on All Souls Day, this line makes for a somewhat unusual beginning to a Requiem Mass (the *Missa pro defunctis*, or Mass for the Dead). Long before the religious kitsch of the 18th and 19th centuries (one thinks of Mendelssohn's oratorio's as a prime example – concert music dressed in religious garb for the sake of heightened dramatic potential), Victoria's Requiem of 1603 was composed for the specific occasion of the death of Empress Maria. As it did in 1603, the Catholic Church still maintains strict codes governing such important rites; one doesn't add to or subtract from the prayers that constitute the "Requiem" willy-nilly.

It is somewhat odd, then, that this Requiem does not begin with the traditional intonation of *Requiem æternam (eternal rest, grant them)*, but rather with a preemptive motet that is almost a musing of sorts. This opening *Tædet animam* grabbed me immediately not only because it is an anomaly, and not only because it is of a substantially different musical style from the rest of the Requiem, but also because of its first line: *My soul is weary of this life*. Beyond the musical "sigh" on the word *Tædet (weary)* with which the motet opens, Victoria does not particularly dwell on the notion of weariness. However its very presence strikes me as something of a seed for the idea of *Weltschmerz (world weariness)* that would come into full poetic blossom 200 years after Victoria and a bit to the east of Spain.

My natural inclination for programming, then, was to seize on this small oddity and compile a program around it. Culling a representative sample of 19th century *Lieder* that explores the idea of the soul weary of life was not difficult – the real challenge was keeping the set within a reasonable time-frame for concert performance.

The songs of this set were all originally composed for solo voice and piano accompaniment and are here newly arranged for the Florilegium Chamber Choir. The four composers represented provide fascinatingly diverse perspectives on both song writing and the idea of *Weltschmerz*, as well the closely linked ideas of physical weariness and sleepiness, the longing for sleep but and the need to stay awake, the craving of the break of day after a night of insomnia, and the haunting of dreams upon waking. For these ideas, Hugo Wolf (1860-1903) was an obvious first choice. His catalog is perhaps the most overwhelmingly depressive in the history of music and his life one of the most tragic. (Wolf spent his final years attempting to compose between bouts of crippling syphilitic insanity, eventually dying in an asylum.) Each of these three songs have, for want of better description, a fleeting quality, almost embodying the very

impermanence they depict. Each song is trapped (via its harmony and rhythm) in a very particular and very personal moment. Capturing this myopic view of the world was perhaps what Wolf did best.

The only composer predating the late Romantic era (1797-1828), Schubert's inclusion was something of a wink and a nod to the *Lieder's* most prolific proponent. "Death and the Maiden," one of his most famous, stands quite apart from the others. Its musical materials are very much of the Classical era; we don't find the same freedom of harmony and rhythm as in the other songs on the program. In terms of narration, the piece is more like a very brief opera in miniature than a song, complete with a dialogue between two characters – a battle between Death and the maiden for the maiden's soul. Since Schubert on occasion turned his more popular songs into instrumental chamber works, it seemed like a fun and not wholly arbitrary decision to create a choral arrangement that blends together "Death and the Maiden" the *song* with "Death and the Maiden" the *string quartet*. With apologies to the purists, that is what we will present today.

Brahms and Mahler in many ways sit on the opposite end of the spectrum from Wolf. Whereas Wolf's songs are introspective, personal, and fleeting, "Death is a cool night" by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) and "I am lost to this world" by Gustav Mahler (1860-1911), move from a starting point of introspection outward toward something more universal and more eternal – toward something more like the sentiments of Victoria's Requiem. Both composers are well known for their work in the "long form" – the symphony – but both manage in these songs to bend their long form compositional expertise to the scope and time frame of the "short form" – the song – and in so doing create complete poetic and harmonic universes. From the first note to the last, it is as though the composer places us inside a sad little snow globe of his own making, and all we can know and feel is all that the composer allows us to know and feel. For me, as a composer and conductor, the vastness and completeness of two such short and comparatively insignificant compositional efforts (insignificant, that is, compared to their combined fifteen symphonies) is mind boggling.

And so we move on to Victoria's Requiem. Like "I am lost to this world," the Requiem is a late life work that strikes one as somehow peculiarly aware of the impending great leap. All of the longing for rest, the desire for abandonment, the need for comfort beyond the known world, all of the weariness of the soul expressed in these *Lieder* finds fulfillment in the Requiem. This is not a piece of lament or mourning, it is an expansive meditation on what comes next, a calm and knowing smile at the thought of the bliss (and, finally, the good night's sleep) awaiting us all.