

Program Notes

Mozart: Requiem Renewal

Less than half of Mozart's *Requiem*, his famous Mass for the Dead, was written by the composer before he died. Reimagined by classical conductor/composer Dr. Emily Isaacson, indie-rock singer-songwriter Don Mitchell, and film composer Joel Lindberg, *Mozart Requiem Renewal* uses every note that Mozart penned and realizes the rest to create a 21st-century celebration of life.

Historical Background

In July 1791, an unknown man presented Mozart with a commission for a Requiem Mass. The stranger would not reveal his name or the name of his patron. Some letters from the time show that Mozart was unnerved by the commission and grew to think of the stranger as a messenger of death, a supernatural figure. When Mozart became ill during the fall of 1791, he asserted that the Requiem was destined to be his own funeral piece and worked on it with both fear and feverish tenacity. By December, Mozart was bedridden and, as reports have it, called upon three close friends to sing through portions of the piece.¹ Hours later, Mozart died; the piece was nowhere near completed.²

Mozart left his widow, Constanze, in precarious financial straits. She needed the fee from the Requiem commission and was fearful that the patron would not pay for an unfinished composition. Constanze turned to Mozart's students to complete the piece, but the first three former students she approached either refused the task (Johann Georg Albrechtsberger and Abbé Maximilian Stadler) or, upon accepting it, found it beyond their capability (Joseph Eybler).³ Finally, Constanze turned to Franz Xaver Süssmayr (1766-1803).⁴ Süssmayer was left to deduce his teacher's intentions. At the time of his death, Mozart had completed in full only the first movement (see chart below). For the next six movements, Mozart wrote only the vocal and basso continuo (keyboard and lower string accompaniment), leaving the orchestration unclear. In the "Lacrimosa," Mozart sketched just the first eight bars of the choral part, along with the first two bars of the violins and viola. Notwithstanding all these sketches and instructions, four movements of the Requiem did not exist when Mozart died. Süssmayer freely composed

¹ Floyd Slotterback, *Mozart's Requiem: History and Performance* (Journal of the American Choral Foundation, April 1984), pg. 13.

² Otto Erich Deutsch, *Mozart: Die Dokumente seines Lebens* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1961), pg 525.

³ Floyd Slotterback, *Mozart's Requiem: History and Performance* (Journal of the American Choral Foundation, April 1984), pg. 7.

⁴ Floyd Slotterback, *Mozart's Requiem: History and Performance* (Journal of the American Choral Foundation, April 1984), pg. 8.

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the "Sanctus," "Benedictus" and "Agnus Dei," - and felt unqualified for the task, writing to the music publisher:

I owe too much of the teaching of this great man to allow me to be silent when a work, which is largely of my composition, is to be published as his, for I am convinced that my part is unworthy of this great man. Mozart's compositions are so unique, and I dare assert that they so far surpass those of almost all living composers, that any imitator, especially with direct falsifications, will fare much worse than the magpie who donned a peacock's feathers.⁵

As the below chart shows, less than half of "Mozart's *Requiem*" was written by the famous composer.

KEY	M	Written by Mozart			
		Written by Süssmayer			
Movement	Voice	Figured Bass	Strings	Winds	Brass
1. Introitus/ Requiem	M	M	M	M	M
2. Kyrie	M	M			
3. Dies Irae	M	M			
4. Tuba Mirum	M	M			
5. Rex	M	M			
6. Recordare	M	M			
7. Confutatis	M	M			
8. Lacrimosa	mm. 3-8	mm. 1-8			
9. Domine Jesu	M	M			
Quam olim Abrahae	M	M			
10. Hostias	M	M			
quam olim abraham	M	M			
11. Sanctus					
12. Benedictus					
13. Agnus Dei					
14. Communio: Lux Aeterna					
Allegro					

⁵ William Pole, *The Story of Mozart's Requiem* (London: Novello, Ewer & Co., 1897), pp.8-9

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Süssmayer offered one musical solution to the “Requiem problem.” Since then, other composers have tried: Sigismund von Neukomm (1819), Ignaz von Seyfried (1827), Marius Flothuis (1941), Hans-Josef Irmen (1978), Franz Beyer (1971), Richard Maunder (1988), Duncan Druce (1991), Knud Vad (2000), Gordon Kerry (2005), Michael Finnissy (2011), Gregory Spears (2013), Masato Suzuki (2017) and more.⁶ And yet, Süssmayer’s version is the most commonly performed.

Artistic Background

Grief was largely an abstract concept to me, until last year. Too quickly, I had to confront death — emotionally, intellectually, and logistically. How do we honor the dead? How do we keep their memory alive? What happens to them next? As I planned a funeral and navigated grief, I sought out ideas and concepts, from my faith, my friends, and my music, so often a source of comfort and spiritual synthesis. Mozart’s Requiem Mass, K 626, was among my sources.

The Requiem Mass comes from Catholicism, the dominant religion in Western civilization for the last 2,000 years. The Catholic funeral ritual is to hold a specific public ceremony — the mass — as an offering for the rest — Requiem — of the soul of the dead. Mozart’s Requiem Mass is perhaps the most famous musical setting of this Catholic rite, and one of my favorite works. As I revisited my score while in the depths of my own grief, I noticed that some of the music spoke to what I was experiencing — fear, confusion, despair, but other passages felt stiff. I have always found the later movements, which Süssmayr wrote, too formal, but now that I turned to these movements for solace, they felt so sterile and formulaic, not reflective of my experience. I was not worried about my loved-one burning in fiery hell (*Dies Irae*), but I did wonder what would happen next. I was not concerned about them being judged in heaven (*Tuba Mirum*), but I did think about legacy and impact. My tears were not for the Day of Reckoning (*Lacrimosa*) but for the future we would not have together. I did not want a mass for the dead, I wanted a celebration of life.

Grief emboldened me. I had the idea to join the ranks of composers and conductors before me to reimagine Mozart’s unfinished work.

Mozart: Requiem Renewal uses every note that Mozart penned but reimagines the rest to honor not just death, but life and love. Terrified of this project, I invited two incredible composers to collaborate: Don Mitchell and Joel Lindberg. Don and I were choir buddies

⁶ Simon P. Keefe. *Mozart's Requiem: Reception, Work, Completion*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012). p. 91.

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from our time at Williams College. When I went off to graduate school Don went on to launch an international career as a member of the Indie-rock band *Darlingside*. While I was studying fugue form, Don was writing songs heralded as “exquisitely arranged, literary-minded, baroque folk-pop” (*All Songs Considered*) that had “locomotive folk-pop confections so richly executed it's hard to tell if it's one voice or 12” (*Rolling Stone*). I wanted Don to contribute his characteristic style of wistful melodies, tight harmonies, and mesmerizing textures to *Renewal*. Joel Lindberg joined the project as a student in composition from the Berklee College of Music but quickly established himself as an elegant composer and nimble orchestrator who created prismatic textures.

Someone asked me, “What makes you think you and your buddies know what Mozart wanted more than his own student?” We do not, although in the places where Mozart inferred certain harmonies or texture we have realized his intentions in more modern musical language. The goal of this project is to be in conversation with Mozart and the cultural legacy of the Requiem, but also to expand its musical and emotional vocabulary to speak to a wider audience. I hope it will speak to you.

Looking back, I feel ridiculous for taking on such an audacious project, but it did not feel like a choice. I have found grieving to be an intensified version of living; loss has made me acutely aware of the scarcity of time and the privilege of opportunity. I am deeply grateful to Don, Joel, the Classical Uprising team, and Mozart for this opportunity to reflect on mortality and to celebrate living through this music.