

REQUIEM MASS IN D MINOR

- W.A. MOZART -

Few pieces in the history of music have been surrounded by so many myths, mysteries and controversy as Mozart's final work – his *Requiem Mass* in D minor. We will explore some of the intrigue around the work in a moment, but first let us set the work in the context of its creation.

When commissioned in July 1791, Mozart was living and working in Vienna and his financial situation, which had caused such distress the previous year, had finally begun to stabilise, with rich patrons in Hungary and Amsterdam supporting him. In the same month, the composer was commissioned by the Prague National Theatre to write *La clemenza di Tito*, to celebrate the coronation of Leopold II as King of Bohemia, with early September as the deadline for completion. Whilst his personal circumstances had begun to settle, his wife Constanze continued to suffer from ailing health, requiring regular medical support and financial commitment.

The mystery surrounding the *Requiem* begins with its very inception: In mid-July Mozart records in his diary the approach of a grey-coated footman, a messenger, who requests the composition of a Requiem Mass for his anonymous patron. We know now that this patron was Count Franz von Wazlsegg-Stuppach, whose wife had died in February that year. The Count was a talented amateur musician, known for his practice of commissioning new works and passing them off as his own. With this in mind, all contact with Mozart would be via the mysterious messenger. Asked his price and the amount of time he would need, Mozart replied asking for 100 Ducats and four weeks – he was promptly paid the full amount and left to start work. It was not to be as simple as planned!

Whilst he began work on the Requiem immediately, Mozart's own health was rapidly failing – a combination of religious fervour, fever and his own deeply superstitious nature convinced Mozart that this *Requiem* was some sort of message, a mass for his own impending demise. This idea would stay with him throughout his final months, convinced as he became that he had been poisoned.

Work on the Requiem progressed slowly, with Mozart leaving for Prague on the 25th of August having completed *Tito*, then conducting the premiere on the 6th of September. This was followed by spending the rest of September revising and completing *Die Zauberflöte* for its premiere on the 30th. Early October sees him working on the Concerto in A major for clarinet, which was completed on the 7th – at this point he finally returns his attention to the *Requiem*, working solidly through to the 20th of November when his health failed, leaving him confined to bed.

Whilst Mozart continued work on the Requiem after this point, he became frustrated by his severe illness and his wife's conviction that the work would be his end – she is known to have hidden it from him, leaving him to work on sketched notes separate from the manuscript score. Finally, on the 5th of December, Mozart died of acute rheumatic fever.

Suffering not only from the loss of her husband, but also sudden financial panic and the knowledge that the patron would not accept an

unfinished commission when he had already paid for it, Constanze sought help getting the work finished – passing it to Joseph Eybler (who added just two bars in the *Lacrymosa*) and then Maximilian Stadler who made some worthy notes on orchestration but little substantive contribution. Now desperate, she gave the incomplete manuscript to one of her husband's most gifted young students, Franz Xaver Süßmayr. This composer, who had spent much of the last year at Mozart's side, had played through the completed parts and also discussed the instrumentation with Mozart and would seem to have been the logical first choice for a completing composer – we can only assume Constanze sought someone with more status in Vienna before realising his musical value and unique position.

Upon his death, only the opening *Kyrie* stood complete in Mozart's hand - for most of the others he had written the vocal parts and a figured bass line, leaving just the orchestration, for which he had left clear intentions. For reasons unknown, Mozart postponed writing the seventh movement, the *Lacrymosa*, until after writing movements eight and nine, but managed only the first eight bars before death at last overtook him. He left a number of other fragments, such as the trombone solo at the opening of the *Tuba Mirum*. Süßmayr completed the *Lacrymosa*, and composed the whole of the last three movements, left incomplete by his mentor's death.

Süßmayr used substantial parts of the orchestration begun by Stadler and Eybler, and for the closing passages he repeated Mozart's own music from the opening movement, an idea according to Constanze, Mozart had suggested. Much more daunting, however, was the task of writing the entire *Sanctus*, *Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei* himself, the prospect of which had defeated his reputedly more talented fellow-composers. Süßmayr was evidently made of sterner stuff, and by the end of 1792 he had finished this most challenging of tasks.

The score was duly handed over to Count Walsegg's envoy, having first been copied, with no mention made of Süßmayr's assistance in the work's completion. The complete score and Mozart's many original unfinished manuscripts survive, and are now securely housed in the care of the Vienna State Library. Comparison of these sources has shown quite clearly which parts Mozart either wrote down or indicated in the form of sketches and footnotes, and which parts were completed and composed by his pupil. However, the matter is not quite that straightforward.

Since Mozart is known to have played through and discussed the music with Süßmayr, it seems more than likely that he would have passed on ideas that he carried in his head but had not yet written down, and for this reason we can never be entirely sure of precisely what is Mozart's and what Süßmayr's. But all this conjecture is of little consequence as we listen to the music. It is Mozart's genius that shines through, his final work clearly displays both his huge talent, and his strong faith.

Performances of the work have marked many poignant occasions in history: In December 1793 it was performed as originally intended as a mass for the memory of the Count's wife; in 1809 Hadyn's funeral mass included a full performance of the Requiem; forty years later Chopin's funeral repeated the precedent; many performances marked the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005. Various modern completions have been attempted, with various degrees of success – Situation Opera perform the

'original' Mozart and Süßmayr version, as edited by Leopold Nowak based upon the two surviving original scores as well as Mozart's own notes and sketches.

It is clear from Mozart's other works that the *Requiem* would have been a true masterpiece if completed in the composer's hand. As it is, we can clearly see the hallmarks of talent and dedication, as well as the inevitable flaws that stem from collaborative work and the extremely elongated timeline of creation. There are suggestions that the trombones would have been used more widely (as they are in the also-incomplete *Große Mass in C minor K 427*), perhaps with the addition of horns. Though there is evidence to suggest horns would not have been used in this work, there is also the *Kyrie in D minor K 341*, thought to be a movement intended for an earlier Requiem Mass that was also not completed – it features both trombones and horns as a major feature of the scoring.

The piece that has come down as Mozart's *Requiem* is unlikely to ever cease being surrounded by mystery, though there is always the chance more information will come to light. However, Mozart's passion for intrigue, his faith and wallowing physical and mental health all suggest that some things were never meant to be known – he was a dedicated diarist when he had things he wanted recorded.

Whatever your faith or belief, I am sure that you will find some resonance in this wonderful composition. On a personal note, it brings a new level of musical understanding and knowledge each time I revisit it. It has had a relevance to several meaningful moments in life, leaving me with a passion for its performance. Whether you see this masterwork as one of mourning, of celebration or simply the epitome of musical genius, I hope that this evening's performance will mean as much to you as it does to us.

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