

Requiem

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 1791)

Requiem Aeternam – Kyrie Eleison
Dies Irae
Tuba Mirum
Rex Tremendae Majestatis
Recordare
Confutatis Maledictis
Lacrymosa
Domine Jesu
Hostias
Sanctus
Benedictus
Agnus Dei

When great works of art either remain unfinished or come to fruition only after some heroic struggle on the part of their creator, they frequently become surrounded by romanticised stories of the most exaggerated kind, and none more so than Mozart's *Requiem*. Those facts of which we can be sure are indeed remarkable. The mysterious commissioning of the work; the dying Mozart's vain struggle to finish the piece; the problems encountered by the composer's widow, Constanze, in ensuring its completion for publication; the controversy over its authenticity; the disappearance and subsequent rediscovery of the manuscripts; and the uncertainty which remains to this day concerning the true authorship of parts of the work – all these aspects of the story are well documented. When considered in conjunction with the composer's astonishing achievements during his short life, it is perhaps not so surprising that the *Requiem* has generated more melodramatic legends than any other piece in musical history.

Just a few weeks before his own death in 1791 at the age of only thirty-five, Mozart was approached by a gentleman acting on behalf of an anonymous patron who wished to commission from him a Requiem Mass. This person we now know to be Count Franz von Wazlsegg-Stuppach, whose wife had died in February that year. The Count, who was a keen and able amateur musician, wished to be regarded as a major composer and saw in this commemorative commission an opportunity to further his own ends by passing off the Requiem as his own. He therefore conducted all business transactions with Mozart in secrecy so as to preserve his own anonymity; hence the subterfuge of sending a business agent to act on his behalf. On several occasions this gentleman arrived unannounced at the composer's house. To the dying Mozart, well known for his superstitious nature and quite possibly sensing his own impending demise, these mysterious visitations had all the hallmarks of the supernatural.

By the time he started work on the *Requiem* Mozart was already terminally ill, and parts of the composition were actually written whilst on his death-bed. In the event, he died before he could complete it, to the great consternation of his widow Constanze, who as a consequence of her husband's death was facing destitution. Payment for the work had already been received, and she feared that if it was handed over incomplete the commissioning patron would refuse to accept it and expect his money to be returned. In desperation she decided to elicit the help of some other composer who might be able and willing to finish it for her, but despite several attempts being made, notably by Joseph Eybler and Maximilian Stadler, none came to fruition. Eventually Constanze approached Franz Süssmayr. There were obvious advantages to this arrangement; Süssmayr was one of Mozart's more able pupils and had been with him a good deal during the final year of his life. According to Constanze, Süssmayr had several times played through the completed parts and discussed the instrumentation with Mozart. Why, then, had he not been Constanze's first choice, despite the fact that he had apparently been the composer's closest musical confidante and knew what his intentions were in respect of the Requiem? One possible answer is that Süssmayr's relationship with Mozart was in fact a lot less close than Constanze had led everyone to believe. There is little evidence to support her claim, other than her statement to this effect in a letter to the music publisher Breitkopf, and in fact it would have been very much in her own interests to inflate Süssmayr's status in order to add authenticity to the completion that she was hoping to sell to Breitkopf. This is but one of several intriguing questions, the answers to which we will almost certainly never know, but which will no doubt continue to fascinate musical historians.

Of the work's twelve movements Mozart had only managed to complete the opening Kyrie in its entirety. For most of the others he had written the vocal parts and a figured bass line (a kind of harmonic shorthand), leaving just the orchestration, for which he had clearly indicated his intentions. These movements may therefore be regarded as essentially the work of the master. 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, Mozart having passed away before he could even begin these sections.

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 which according to Constanze, Mozart himself 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. Eybler, for instance, despite contributing some worthwhile orchestration, had managed only two very unconvincing bars of the Lacrymosa before giving up and returning the entire portfolio to Constanze. Süssmayr was evidently made of sterner stuff, and by the end of 1792 he had finished the task. Opinions differ as to the quality of the Süssmayr movements, though it is generally agreed that the Agnus Dei is the most successful.

A copy was made of the completed score before it was handed over to Count Walsegg's envoy, but no mention was made of Süssmayr's part in its composition and for many years it was generally believed that Mozart had indeed written the entire Requiem. Amongst Mozart's circle, however, it was common knowledge that the composer had not lived to see its completion. Consequently, some considerable controversy later ensued as to the work's authenticity, compounded by the fact that Count Walsegg's score disappeared for nearly fifty years, to be rediscovered only in 1839. Fortunately, this complete score and Mozart's original unfinished manuscripts did both survive, and are now securely housed in the Vienna State Library. Comparison of the two 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.

programme notes by John Bawden

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