

Antonin Dvorak – Requiem (2006)

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Disc 1: 1. *Requiem aeternam* 2. *Graduale* 3. *Dies irae* 4. *Tuba mirum* 5. *Quod sum miser* 8. *Recordare, Jesu pie* 7. *Confutatis* Disc 2: 1. *Lacrimosa* 2. *Domine Jesu Christe* 3. *Hostias* 4. *Sanctus* 5. *Pie Jesu* 6. *Agnus Dei*

Peter Dvorsky - Tenor Magdaléna Hajóssyová - Soprano Jozef Kundlák - Tenor Peter Mikulás - Bass Richard Novak - Bass Vera Soukupova - Alto Slovak Philharmonic Choir Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra Zdenek Kosler – conductor

Like many of the composer's choral works, Antonin Dvořák's Requiem, Op. 89, remains rarely performed outside the Czech Republic. While reasons for the relative dearth of performances range from the work's length -- about 95 to 100 minutes -- to the Czech sensibility of the work (whatever that means), the fact is that Dvořák's Requiem is only about 15 minutes longer, on average, than Verdi's work on the same text. Furthermore, Dvořák intended the piece for an English-speaking audience; a frequent visitor to Britain -- he visited the island nine times -- Dvořák conducted the piece at its premiere in Birmingham in 1891. (N.B. Large-scale, religiously-influenced choral works dominated classical music in late nineteenth-century England. The choral societies that performed these works would easily dwarf even the 230-voice BCCO!)

Written after the rustic Eighth Symphony, the Requiem is divided into thirteen movements and two parts traditionally separated by an intermission. Although Dvořák was a fervent Catholic, he was also a very practical musician; he accepted that the Requiem would find its home on the concert stage, not the choir loft. An hour-and-a-half long Mass requiring a quartet of solo singers, an enormous choir, a full complement of brass and an assortment of percussion on top of a standard late-Romantic orchestra, he reasoned, would not be performed in toto at anyone's funeral. (More recently, though, excerpts from the piece were featured at the funeral of Václav Havel, the Czech dissident and politician.)

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In the Requiem, Dvořák employs a recurring motif to bring primary-level unity to the work. Chromatically twisting up then down before settling on the home note, the motif defines no firm key and acts as a destabilizing force throughout the piece. Symbolically, the motif carries a dual meaning; on a sheet of paper, the notes trace out a cross, or chiasmus figure, symbolizing the hope placed in Jesus' resurrection. (Among composers, Johann Sebastian Bach was also extremely fond of chiastic figures; in German musical notation, Bach's last name traces out a cross, as "B" is our B-flat and "H" is our B.) At the same time, however, the motif is a representation of death; Dvořák's student and son-in-law, Josef Suk, employed the motif in his *Asrael* Symphony, a work written in response to both Dvořák's death and the death of his daughter, Suk's wife. (*Asrael* is the angel of death in the Islamic and Sikh traditions.)

On a larger scale, Dvořák creates unity through the two main choruses; the "Dies Irae" in the first half and the "Quam olim Abrahae" fugue in the second half. Repeated twice, the "Dies Irae" chorus forms a pair of pillars that anchor the first part of the Requiem. The piece opens with a somber, extended first movement for chorus ("Requiem aeternam") that flirts with joyfulness, but ultimately sinks back into seriousness. While the "Graduale" offers hints of comfort -- after a series of exchanges between soloists and chorus, the tenors and basses cadence in the bright key of G major -- the illusion is shattered with the arrival of the "Dies Irae." As cellos grumble, horns blare and trombones blast, the chorus utters the beginning of the Sequence, a medieval Latin poem describing the horrors of the day of judgment, where the damned are cast into the eternal flames of hell. Although the emotional temperature is lowered slightly in the "Tuba mirum," a nervous motif in the winds serves as a reminder that peace is not yet at hand; Dvořák reprises the "Dies Irae," albeit slightly altered to portray the summoning of all souls before the glory of God's throne.

A mood of solemnity returns with the fifth movement, "Quid sum miser." A plaintive duet between the sopranos and altos reminds the listener that no one is sure whether they will receive God's mercy; in turn, the soloists -- who sing as a quartet for the first time in the piece -- lead the choir to beg for salvation in front of God's throne. The next movement, "Recordare, Jesu pie," features only the soloists, at once a musical and pragmatic move for Dvořák. This section of the Sequence is not only the most introspective, which lends itself to solo writing, but given the poem's length, it also allows Dvořák to set a large amount of text in a relatively short amount of time. But the choir's respite is short; the "Confutatis maledictis" that follows, with the strings portraying the licking of the flames, features the choir alternating between depicting the sentencing of the cursed and the calling of the blessed. Finally, the "Lacrymosa" ends the first half with the soloists singing individually and as a quartet before the chorus comes in with a long meditation on the word "Amen."

The second half opens with a peaceful instrumental introduction from the woodwinds, followed by the basses' entrance on a melody that harkens back to Gregorian chant, some of the

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earliest music of the Church. The movement is generally optimistic, in keeping with the text of the Offertory, before closing with the second main chorus of the piece: the fugal “Quam olim Abrahae.” With a subject based on a 15th-century Czech folk tune, the fugue features the chorus in a vocal tour de force, with various voice parts entering with the hymn tune at different times. After relentlessly moving through various keys, the fugue ends triumphantly as the entire chorus declaims the promise given to Abraham and his descendants in the joyful key of F major. The chant melody at the beginning of the “Offertorium” returns in the “Hostias,” serving as a recurring motif as the soloists and chorus offers prayers of praise in memory of the departed. Just as the “Dies Irae” was repeated in the first half to create a sense of return, the “Quam olim Abrahae” is repeated as well, strengthening the earlier sense of triumph.

While many other composers opt for a majestic or triumphant “Sanctus” (think Mozart or Verdi), Dvořák’s version is, first and foremost, lyrical. While there are moments of triumph in the movement, Dvořák emphasizes the breadth of God’s glory rather than its immediacy. This emphasis on God’s mercy is reinforced by his inclusion of the “Pie Jesu,” an optional text that asks for eternal rest to be granted to the dead. (Most famously, Fauré included the text in his Requiem, creating one of the most sublime movements in the repertoire for solo soprano.) Ultimately, this mood is carried into the peaceful final movement, the “Agnus Dei,” which ends quietly on fragments of the cross motif, leaving the listener to ponder about the mystery of life and death. --Derek Tam, bcco.org

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