

Soul music

For All Souls' Day, Alex Hodgkinson puts together a special Mass made up of movements from different Requiems

ON THE RECORD

To mark All Souls' Day on 2 November, I present a hybrid Mass comprised of movements from a number of different, perhaps less-familiar Requiems, which, when listened to as one, should provide for a suitably powerful and moving experience.

Introitus and Kyrie

(*Officium Defunctorum*): Victoria

Written in 1605, just six years before his own death, this shows the venerable composer at his height. The *Introitus* (actually the second movement) has enchanting harmonic interest from the off, with gentle but elongated clashes subtly illustrating grief and sorrow. Victoria's six-voice vocal texture gives great breadth. The imitative melodies loop around the plain-song *cantus firmus* in the second soprano part, and the choir's centre of gravity seems to rise with every phrase.

After a stately, grandiose *Kyrie*, the texture thins for the *Christe*. While the voices are pared down, the passion and intensity rise. The vocal writing has a weeping quality and, as is characteristic of Victoria's music, the phrases always travel further than expected.

The second *Kyrie* is a glorious synergy of scale and emotion, garnished with stirring suspensions. The Tallis Scholars' performance (Gimell, 1987) has a beguiling melodic flow.

Sequence

(*A Polish Requiem*): Penderecki

Powerful and expressive, Krzysztof Penderecki's *Polish Requiem* was written in several stages over 35 years, with each section given a different dedication to events and figures, including Ss Maximilian Kolbe and Pope John Paul II.

The *Dies Irae*, composed to commemorate the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, opens the eight-movement *Sequence*. The shrieking glissandi sound like the sky is falling in, a stark contrast to the devilish whispering in the *Mors stupebit* a little later. Martial brass heralds the

Tuba mirum, a brawny tenor solo. Throughout the work, explosive percussion is used to terrifying effect.

Penderecki's *Recordare* theme is derived from *Święty Boże*, a Polish prayer in time of danger. These melodic siblings are intertwined in the fifth stanza. This is the focal point of the Requiem, both musically and ideologically; a highly chromatic, somewhat haunting fusion of the nationalistic and the universal.

The 2004 recording by the Warsaw National Philharmonic, conducted by Antoni Wit (Naxos), is a highly impressive account of the composer's response to this text.

Offertorium

(*Missa pro defunctis a 8*): Lôbo

Like his Spanish counterpart Victoria, Portuguese composer Duarte Lôbo benefitted from the generous patronage of King Philip II of Spain in the late 1500s.

The scale of Lôbo's *Requiem* is lavish, with seven voices flowering around the *cantus firmus* (like Victoria, in the second soprano part). The voices mostly sing independently with the occasional feeling of two four-part choruses – as at the opening of this movement. The sense of insistence brought by this *alternatim* is particularly effective when describing the *profundo laco* (bottomless pit).

There are some beautiful melodic gestures (*omnium fidelium defunctorum*, for example) and colourful dissonances. Like the Mass itself, the recording by the William Byrd Choir (*Masterpieces of Portuguese Polyphony*, Hyperion, 1987) has charm and dignity.

Sanctus

(*War Requiem*): Britten

Composed for the consecration of new Coventry Cathedral in 1962, after the destruction of its predecessor by the Luftwaffe, the *War Requiem* is a powerful articulation of the devastation of war; it combines traditional texts with poetry by Wilfred Owen (1893-1918).

The *Sanctus* is one of the most striking movements. A rapid alarm jolts us to attention, introducing a stark, declamatory call from the soprano. The chorus builds from a whisper, culminating in a grandiose *Hosanna* complete with fanfares in the brass. Despite the celebratory shout, the foreboding bass thuds remind us that danger is never far away.

As an appendix to the Mass text, Benjamin Britten sets Owen's haunting poem *The End*. His own recording of 1963 has recently been remastered and rereleased (Decca, 2023).

Agnus Dei

(*Requiem*): Verdi

Verdi's noisy, earth-shattering *Dies Irae* is known throughout the Western world. The fifth movement, the *Agnus Dei*, adopts a more contemplative quality. The soprano and mezzo soloists open with a unison, chant-like melody. The chorus joins, enriching the texture while maintaining the solemnity. The *Agnus* blends the sacred and the theatrical, creating a powerful plea for redemption and repose.

The repetition of the opening phrase, this time in a minor key, has poignant orchestral countermelodies, a foretaste of the soaring strings in the final *Agnus*. For this movement, I really like Claudio Abbado's sense of scale in his 1980 recording with La Scala on Deutsche Grammophon.

In Paradisum

(*Requiem*): Duruflé

Maurice Duruflé's *Requiem* of 1947 (revised 1961) is spellbinding. The final movement, *In Paradisum*, is a transcendent coda to a work emphasising comfort and hope rather than judgement and fear.

It would be remiss to finish with anything but the musical pride of the Catholic Church: Westminster Cathedral Choir. Conducted by James O'Donnell, the choir's 1995 recording of Duruflé's *Requiem* is rightly acclaimed (Hyperion). Chant is woven into the fabric of the piece, and here the plain-song floats above a lush organ accompaniment. The music gives us a sense of spiritual ascent as the *chorus angelorum* ushers the soul into paradise. The Mass finishes on a dominant 7th chord, sounding incomplete, as if to say this is not the end: there is hope and peace in the world to come. **CH**

Alex Hodgkinson is Director of Music at St Theresa's Church, Trumbull, Connecticut

