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Man, God, and Death: A Musical Analysis of Mozart's *Requiem* and Stravinsky's *Requiem Canticles*

The *Missa pro defunctis,* or Requiem Mass for the dead, is a traditional Roman Catholic Mass that has been scored by many composers throughout its history, from its original plainsong form to 21st Century interpretations. As a Mass setting, requiems consist of music set to liturgical text with deviations from the usual weekly proceedings; the joyous hymns are omitted in favor of text praying for deliverance, rest, and salvation (Landon 94). These prayer text settings provide valuable insight into the minds of composers and into the cultures in which they live – the music they write is a reflection of themselves, as well as a reflection of the audience and the community surrounding them. A commonality of all requiem masses is the religious unity under which they are offered, and we can gain insight into the relationships between man and God through an examination of the music and text. Requiem masses lend themselves neatly to analysis because many people turn to religion and to God in order to cope with the loss of a loved one, thus death acts as the link between human and divine. Death refers to both earthly death, honored by the requiem, and Final Judgment, which the text of the requiem explicitly refers to on more than one occasion. We have knowledge of the first through human experience, and the second through Holy Scripture, and use these sources as lenses for analysis. The text and the music each comprise one-half of a requiem, a work that exposes humans' interpretation of their relationship with God through juxtaposition of the two halves. By analyzing two case-study Requiems *vis a*

vis each other, we can observe changes through time in how humans view God in life and in death. The music of the past five-hundred or so years can be loosely divided into tonal and post-tonal music, with tonal music represented as a case-study by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Requiem* and post-tonal music represented as a case-study by Igor Stravinsky's *Requiem Canticles*. Mozart's Requiem, though Classical in structure, seems somewhat Romantic in its emotional presence, reflecting his own personal and trusting relationship with God, especially towards the end of his life. Through Mozart's music, 18th Century sentiments towards death reveal themselves as deeply introspective, with the collective community wholeheartedly placing their fate in the hands of God alone, but these sentiments shift towards increasing individualism in the 20th Century with Stravinsky, whose post-tonal *Requiem Canticles* employ a loose hexachordal structure in a work that models man's desire to shape his own fate, but leaves enough room for God's intervention.

Mozart's Requiem was not a typical piece of work by any means; death constantly surrounded him and influenced his composition. Mozart's father passed away in 1787, and though Mozart did not know the exact date, he knew his own passing was to come not long after. He died in 1791, before he was able to finish the Requiem, but left instructions to acquaintance Franz Xaver Süssmayer on the completion of his final work (Robertson 65). Upon learning of the illness that would cause his father's death, Mozart wrote him a letter, which reads, "As death . . . is the true goal of an existence . . . but is indeed very soothing and consoling! And I thank God for graciously granting me the opportunity (you know what I mean) of learning that death is the *key* which unlocks the door to our true happiness" (Robertson 64). The view on God and death he expresses here, one of praise and acceptance, will go on to be reflected in his final work in a bout of contained musical emotion.

This display of emotion was atypical of composers of the Classical period, which lasted approximately from 1750 until 1830, when the emergence of Beethoven on the compositional scene marked the beginning of the Romantic era. Repeated listening to works by Mozart, Haydn, and their contemporaries reveals several musical trends as characteristic of the Classical era, among them, beauty of form, orderly and predictable structure, and homophonic melodies – single melodic lines with one main rhythm whose harmonies formed aesthetically pleasing chords. Many aspects of music from the Baroque period, which preceded the Classical and lasted approximately from 1600 to 1750, such as the fugue and counterpoint, were also used in Classical compositions: "Having returned to the baroque for their [Classical composers] inspiration, and having combined this with the new principles of sonata form, a new type of music emerged . . . The fugue, for instance, was no longer an antiquated mode of expression: on the contrary, it represented the highest level of emotional and musical thought" (Landon 85). Fugue and counterpoint, made famous in the Baroque period by Johann Sebastian Bach, features multiple independent voices voicing the same melodic line at different times, but transposed to and overlapping in fourths and fifths. The fugal figure is indeed found in Mozart's Requiem, within the "Requiem Aeternam," "Kyrie," and "Domine Jesu" sections among others, but it is not only the fugue in Mozart's work that elevates its emotional level in his attempt to connect to God through the music of the requiem and impending death; rather, the strictly *Classical* characteristics of the work hint at an emotional preoccupation that would not be seen until the Romantic era.

The first instance of emotion hidden within Classical form comes in the first movement of Mozart's Requiem, the "Requiem Aeternam," which begins in the written key of D minor, where Mozart employs the choir's shift from fugue to unison to illustrate a somber prayer to

God. The strings' eighth notes in m. 1 call to mind a slow funeral procession, appropriate for an Introit to a requiem mass. Within the first five measures of the piece, Mozart's music is established as traditionally Classical, and he does what is expected of him in music for the dead, setting the somber tone for the remainder of the movement. Measure 7 sees the orchestra suddenly switch dynamics from *piano* to *subito forte*, in large, slurred interval gaps in the strings that evoke an image of crying or wailing. Only after the wailing begins does the choir begin to pray for peace in a fugue, "*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine*."[1] Mozart's decision to begin the first vocal notes of his work as a fugue give the listener the impression of scattered thoughts that rise up to console the weeping until m. 14, where the choir sings in unison for the first time, "*dona eis, Domine*." As one united vocal body, the choir pleas for God's attention and action, directly addressing Him and simultaneously seeing Him as a source of comfort. Mozart's shift from fugue to unison homophonic melody is an undeniably Classical motion, yet the image it produces is subtly emotional, reflecting his own view of God as one who teaches the comforting true nature of death. Alec Robertson argues otherwise, however, asserting that Mozart's presentation of the thematic material in the opening of his Requiem contradicts the sentiment expressed in his letter to his dying father: "The view of death expressed in the Introit is far removed from the serene approach to the dark angel Mozart so beautifully expressed in the letter . . . It brought into my mind the fevered beauty of the final movement (Allegretto ma non troppo) of his String Quartet in D minor (K. 421) – that quartet of tensions and poignancy . . . It is a movement like a dance of death" (Robertson 70). Though his analysis is sound, Robertson fails to consider the movement of the choir, citing only the orchestral accompaniment as a cause for tension: ". . . the stern entry for trumpets and timpani [in m. 7], before the wailing descending octaves on the violins that continue up to 'et lux perpetua', where another and flickering figure

breaks in, not one of heavenly light" (Robertson 70). Taken by itself, the orchestra accompaniment does seem to call to mind the high emotional tension of a death, but those tensions are subverted by the introspective praying in the choir that directly contrasts and tames the wailing into, not a flicker, but a triumphant burst of light.

The burst of light in m. 15 is accompanied by a shift from the original key of D minor to its relative major, F Major, but soon gives way to a choral line evoking a feeling of the introspective relationship that Mozart shared with God. A cadence hidden in the wailing of the violins a beat before m. 15 produces a sensation of arrival with the downbeat of the measure, where the homophonic choir melody continues into the prayer for eternal light, "*Et lux perpetua luceat eis*."[2] The *forte* prayer soon gives way to the same figure repeated a minor third above. The sixteenth notes in the strings interrupt, but are no means "flickering" forms. They are assertive and interrupt the choir, answering their prayer by denying them a harmonic resolution. The wailing returns in m. 17 and the prayer ends quietly in a subtle, unmarked key change to B ♭ Major. Though the prayer of the choir was not answered directly, their quiet acceptance of God's will is indicated in the one measure shift from minor to major in m. 18. The choir sings as a group, calling to mind an emphasis on collective, as opposed to individual prayer. This quiet introspective acceptance directly contrasts with the *forte*s of m. 14-15 – though man may try to influence God through supplication, deference to His will is always the better option. Thus, Mozart's emotions are subtly put on display, his music's Classical structure evoking emotion in a way that foreshadows the coming Romantic period.

Directly contrasting Mozart's quasi-Romantic Requiem is Stravinsky's hexachordal *Requiem Canticles*. In order to understand the mechanism behind his work, a mechanism completely unlike the tonality most listeners today consider recognize, a brief foray into his

method of serial composition is required. While tonal composers defer to a musical scale that, for the most part, determines the notes that can be used to stay within the key signature and avoid dissonance, post-tonal composers like Stravinsky defer to a system, or array, of six-note rows that are manipulated to determine which notes, called 'pitch classes' in serial composition, can be used in the work. The six-note row is called a hexachord. Six identical hexachords, with their pitch classes written out in order and placed one under the other, form a six by six square of pitches. The first row is left unchanged. The second row is rotated so that the last note becomes the first, and the remaining notes are shifted over to fill in the gap. The process is then repeated for the third row, using the rotated second row as a starting point. Once all rows have been rotated, each row is then transposed so that the new first pitch class is the same as the original in row 1 (Straus 193). The result is a mathematically defined array of pitch classes to be used in a serial composition. Further manipulations may be made to the array or to the hexachords to generate new notes or new sequences but preserve the serialism, if desired by the composer. Towards the end of his musical career as a "time-travelling musical tourist" who explored many different genres of music in his compositions, Stravinsky experimented extensively with serialism, the *Requiem Canticles* taking its place the last of these experiments in 1966 (Perry 237).

The *Canticles*, unlike traditional requiems, is not a full mass setting; rather, it consists of nine short movements, three of which are entirely instrumental, that bookend and splice the six remaining vocal movements. In contrast to Mozart's collective, quiet introspection, Stravinsky's partial setting honors the individual over the group through vivid musical imagery created in the instrumental movements with quasi-tonal, rather than serial, composition. The first of these instrumental sections, the "Prelude," begins in a meter of $\frac{5}{16}$ (five sixteenth notes per measure)

that is not atypical of Stravinsky's past work, but is atypical of "traditional" church settings. As Stravinsky himself was not a Roman Catholic, scholars have attributed his contribution to Roman Catholic music to a love of ritual (Perry 237), which, regardless of the extent to which Stravinsky believes in the religious power of ritual, remains to him a human action originally performed with the intention of triggering some event or change. This focus on human action and individualism rather than on group prayer and the collective is present, albeit indirectly, in the instrumental Prelude as well as the other instrumental movements. These voiceless movements resemble a silent funeral procession in the Prelude, a solemn church service proceedings in the Interlude, and an unsympathetic signal of the end of the funeral in the Postlude. The strings-only Prelude begins with a staccato beating, followed by a violin solo whose dissonant line cuts through the rest of the ensemble. Like the Mozart requiem, the violin melody resembles a wailing or crying, but both the violin and the accompanying strings drop out suddenly in m. 7, cutting the line short. Dramatically, they start up again in m. 8 with a sharp *mezzo forte* attack, but this time with the addition of a second violin soloist. The entrance in m. 6 introduces the third voice, a viola, and a break in m. 34 and the subsequent attack in m. 35 introduces a fourth voice, a cello doubled with bass. As the number of voices grows, so too does the number of mourners for the deceased. The Prelude, unlike other movement of the *Requiem Canticles* (except perhaps the opening of the Interlude), is rather tonal, assisted by the repeated beating of the accompanying strings that form a foundation upon which the soloists play. The quasi-tonal mourning must be interpreted in context of the funeral service depicted in the instrumental movements. Here, Stravinsky mourns and honors a single deceased, evidenced by the dedication at the top of the score, which reads, "To the memory of Helen Buchanan Seeger" (Stravinsky). The collective dead has no place in the work; in traditional requiems, prayers for them are seen

primarily in the usual musical phrase "*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine*," (with the line's English translation containing a plural "them"), a phrase Stravinsky omits from the first vocal movement following the Prelude. By coupling the omission with the funeral imagery, Stravinsky effectively shifts the focus of the ritual away from the collective and towards the individual.

Immediately following the Prelude is the first vocal movement "Exaudi," which continues the focus on individualism with a reluctance to rely on the intangible actions of God. The tense tone of the Prelude is left behind in favor of a slow harp and woodwind passage, which nearly encompasses the entire range of the eleven possible pitch classes, hitting ten of the eleven. Stravinsky's serialism is loose, rather than strict, as all eleven would have been played if it were the latter: "[The] effect is neither serial nor atonal (and this goes for much of the rest of the score)" (White 14). The Exaudi omits the vast majority of the "Requiem Aeternam" usually seen in Requiem Mass settings, leaving only one sung line, "*Exaudi orationem me am, ad te omnis caro veniet*."[3] The specificity of Stravinsky's choice of the one remaining line lies in the text itself. The omission of the "requiem aeternam" text is an omission of prayer to God – no peace and no rest. The Exaudi is a request for God to hear the speaker's prayer, shifting the focus away from the deceased and towards the man not praying for him/her in the omission of "requiem aeternam." This second-person perspective that addresses God becomes the starting point of the vocal sections of the piece, cementing a focus on the individual that will run throughout the rest of the work. Stravinsky's individualism directly contrasts the selfness nature of Mozart's music, which features the choir praying for others and accepting God's will no matter the outcome. Where Mozart's Exaudi is comprised of a *forte* fugue accompanied by a triumphant fanfare-like figure in the bassoon and strings (m. 26-29), Stravinsky's piece is slow, marked *piano,* with a sparse accompaniment consisting primarily of harp and woodwinds (m. 59-65), yet is grounded

with an A♯ in the bass that acts as the central note of the piece (m. 76-80), giving it a "sense of weightedess and focus" (Straus 196). Where Mozart's choir is jubilant at the thought of praying for God to hear their prayer to the dead, Stravinsky's choir is reluctant, clinging onto something more tangible, a single note that grounds the movement in humanity and ritual, not divinity.

The individualistic second person perspective of the vocal lines continues in the sixth movement of the *Requiem Canticles,* "Rex Tremendae," which opens with the choir directly addressing God in a plea for salvation with a completely new twelve-tone series (Payne 10): "*Rex tremendae majestatis, qui salvandos salvas gratis, salva me fons pietatis*."[4] Here, God is described not only as a source of love and forgiveness, but also as divine being of awful majesty capable of great and terrible feats, among them, the power to save or to damn. Here, the second of the two meanings of death comes into play. Up to this point, the prayers by the choir to God pleaded for salvation from earthly death, or peace to those who have died on earth, but now the focus in Stravinsky's work shifts to the Final Judgment. The choir enters one voice at a time, creating a four note progression that initially sounds tonal but gives way to dissonant serial hexachords, generating a "sense that the chorus is beating around the bush in its supplication" (Perry 241). Even under the threat of eternal death, the choir is reluctant to appeal to God, but Stravinsky overturns this reluctance in a dramatic and ritualistic style with m. 216. Stravinsky inserts inverted intervals in the *forte* exclamations by the sopranos and altos' "*salve me*" that evoke a sense of desperate prayer, before resolving to sweet supplication with the unison of the two parts as they sing "*fons pietatis*," noting that God is indeed a source of clemency and forgiveness. The "Rex Tremendae" movement, featuring both a choir and their prayer to God, appears to subvert the image of individualistic ritual, but essentially functions to balance the individualism with a return to prayer and religion. The *Requiem Canticles* is not an atheistic

work, but a ritualistic one, and although the action of the ritual is human, it could not exist without the presence and power of God.

Stravinsky continues to leave room for God and to acknowledge His presence in the final two vocal movements of the piece, "Lacrimosa" and "Libera Me." For the first time, a prayer for rest and peace is offered; measure 255 features a contralto soloist who sings, "*Pie Jesu Domine, dona eis requiem. Amen.*"[5] By allocating the prayer to a soloist, Stravinsky effectively combines the individualism of the Prelude and Exaudi with the supplication and prayer of the Rex Tremendae. The image of crying and wailing depicted with large interval jumps in the solo line and the repetitive G♯- F♯ sixteenth note rhythm in m. 230 fit the sung text "*Lacrimosa dies illa,*"[6] but also call to mind the same image of crying in the Prelude, further bridging the gap between individualism and supplication. Stravinsky strengthens this link in the final vocal movement of the *Canticles,* the "Libera Me." The chant-like line sung by the soprano, alto, tenor and bass soloists is, like the crying from the Lacrimosa, reminiscent of the similar beating rhythm in the strings in the Prelude. A second vocal layer sits on top of the soloists which feature the remainder of the choir speaking, not singing, the text of the Libera Me. Among the spoken text is the "*requiem aeternam, dona eis Domine*" prayer for peace in measure 276, but is easily missed unless the listener is carefully and attentively seeking it. Peace has been quite literally relegated to the background in favor of a personal plea for salvation. The focus is on individualism, yet the selfless prayer for rest is present all the same.

While Mozart's music makes use of Classical musical form to illustrate selfless prayer to God for peace for the dead in a quasi-Romantic requiem, Stravinsky's post-tonal *Canticles* paints an entirely different picture, one of an individual relationship with God where human action precludes, but does not outright exclude, divine power. However, an analysis of the pieces as

case studies of their time would be pointless and useless without considering their value to the societies in which they originated; had the general public not connected to the works in some way, they would not have survived the "test of time," as it were. Time is a crucial factor. Placing Mozart's Requiem and Stravinsky's *Canticles* into their respective time periods allows a shift in public ideology to be revealed; where the 18th C valued the group over the individual, the 20th C valued the latter over the former. The calm, religious acceptance of death gives way to its ritualization. Death, formerly an introspective religious event through which people bonded with God, becomes a phenomenon that must be overcome alone, but God is present to ease the journey regardless of how alone we feel.

Notes

1. "Eternal rest grant them, O Lord" (Robertson 12).
2. "And let perpetual light shine upon them" (Robertson 12).
3. "Heed my prayer! All flesh must come before thy Judgment seat" (Robertson 12).
4. "Dread King, to thee thyself run I, who savest the saved, without a why, And so mayst me, thou source of clemency" (Robertson 18).
5. "Gentle Lord Jesus, give rest to them. Amen" (Robertson 19).
6. "That day fulfilled of tears" (Robertson 19).

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