

PROGRAM

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

1756 – 1791

REQUIEM, K. 626

I. Introitus

Requiem aeternam (Soprano and Chorus)

Kyrie (Chorus)

II. Sequentia

Dies irae (Chorus)

Tuba mirum (Solo Quartet)

Rex tremendae (Chorus)

Recordare (Solo Quartet)

Confutatis (Chorus)

Lacrimosa (Chorus)

Amen (Chorus)

III. Offertorium

Domine Jesu (Solo Quartet and Chorus)

Hostias (Chorus)

IV. Sanctus

Sanctus (Chorus)

Benedictus (Solo Quartet and Chorus)

V. Agnus Dei

Agnus Dei (Chorus)

VI. Communio

Lux aeterna (Soprano and Chorus)

Cum sanctis tuis (Chorus)

Mozart's Requiem: It's about life, not death

Mozart knew what it was to experience life interrupted. He was the youngest of seven children, five of whom died in infancy. Of his own six children, only two survived. Death wasn't an abstract idea but pursued him from birth until his death in 1791 – the most productive and successful year of his life. The Requiem in D minor was his final work; he himself died before completing it. He was only 35.

As a Catholic, Mozart would have attended many requiems – church services for the peaceful repose of the dead. This Christian funeral rite asks an all-powerful God to accept a human soul into heaven.

Mozart set this liturgical text to music for a patron who had lost his young wife to illness earlier that year. But after his death, his widow, Constanze claimed that throughout Mozart's last painful days he believed he was writing the Requiem for his own funeral. And he was. Even though it had to be completed by his contemporaries, the circumstances of the composition, combined with Mozart's genius, make it no ordinary piece of music. It has the drama and humanity of his stage masterpieces. His operas wrestle with the beauty and complexity of being alive in the same way his Requiem

grapples with the mystery of death. Composed by a man on the edge of consciousness, Mozart willed his last creation into life with his final breaths.

The first performance was given by the artistic forces of the Viennese theatre that had premiered Mozart's instant hit *The Magic Flute* only two months previously. Generations of artists have been inspired by the Requiem ever since. Perhaps most notably, Peter Shaffer, in his 1984 play *Amadeus*, revived a fictional version of Mozart's cause of death: an envy-induced poisoning by his fellow composer Antonio Salieri. One cannot help thinking that as a man of the theatre and someone who loved a good joke, Mozart would have been amused to find himself at the center of an operatic murder mystery, and delighted that he had pre-emptively provided the soundtrack for the hugely successful film version.

Mozart's attention to text is what makes his operas so glorious. The Requiem loses none of this magic touch. He takes text made over-familiar to Catholic believers and infuses it with emotion and his own point of view. The first bars of the opening section, the Introit, are stately, serious and severe. Starting with the basses – who couldn't sound more melancholy and despondent – the choir sings *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine* – Grant them eternal rest, O God. The dark minor key indicates that this may not be an easy ask, but then a fleeting moment of musical hope arrives. In a beautiful setting of the phrase *et lux perpetua luceat eis* (and may perpetual light shine upon them), Mozart reveals the crux of the piece – a journey from uncertainty into hope. I love that he is too compassionate and impatient to withhold musical redemption for any unworthy sinner.

Mozart the showman couldn't help letting everything rip on the *Dies Irae* – Day of Wrath. He imagines a very dramatic end of the world and Last Judgment that has enough theatrical fire to function as a huge finale in one of his operas. And in the plaintive *Lachrymosa* we have perhaps the most beautiful and saddest moment in the whole work. Mozart only wrote the first eight bars before he died; it was completed with Constanze's approval by one of his students. Herein lies the truth at the heart of the piece – however special a life is, when it ends, everything and everyone else must continue, by imperfectly piecing together what is left.

Operatic music has an enormous capacity for embracing emotions when words – however powerful - cannot express the challenges of being alive.

We as a society have had to face a unique interruption to our lives during the coronavirus pandemic. Some have experienced the lockdowns as an interval, not an ending. For others, the interruption has been devastating, with the loss of security, health, or loved ones. Operatic music has an enormous capacity for embracing emotions when words – however powerful - cannot express the challenges of being alive.

But one of the things I have always loved about opera is that it understands how helpless we are all in the hands of fate; we have less control over our destinies than our culture of self-help, self-actualization and positivity likes to admit. Sometimes events overtake us and all we can do is to choose how to react to our new reality, as many generations before us have had to confront their own huge challenges, whether pandemics, war, disasters or the quieter human tragedies that many must bear.

In the words of Thornton Wilder: "There is a land of the living and a land of the dead, and the bridge is love." From the long-distant past Mozart builds a musical bridge, inspired by love. He reminds us we are not alone and wills us to anticipate joy, even in hard times. His most religious work is actually his most human. His Requiem reminds us, as great art can, that both before and after death, we forever belong to each other.

Article written by Annilese Miskimmon
Artistic Director, English National Opera