

Requiem (KV626) by W. A. Mozart (1756-91) Robert Levin Completion

When Mozart died in the early morning hours of December 5, 1791, he left his final masterpiece, the *Requiem*, unfinished. Less than three months later, a completed score of the *Requiem* was delivered to its anonymous commissioner. How was the *Requiem* completed and how would Mozart have completed it had he lived? These mysteries have tantalized musicians for over two centuries.

Mozart received the commission to compose the *Requiem* from a mysterious 'Gray Messenger' in the summer of 1791. The Messenger paid half the commission in advance, but insisted on guarding his patron's anonymity. Already committed to compose an opera for the Bohemian Court, Mozart left for Prague and didn't begin work on the *Requiem* until his return in September. Before long he became convinced that the Messenger had come to warn him of his own mortality and that he was indeed composing the work for his own death. Concerned with this morbid fascination, his wife Constanze hid the score and forbade him to work on the *Requiem* for several weeks. But, shortly after resuming work in mid-November, Mozart became ill and took to his bed. He gathered a choir of friends around his bedside the afternoon of December 4th to sing the movements he had completed. He died less than twelve hours later.

In dire need of money to support herself and her two young sons, Constanze asked several noted composers to complete the *Requiem* so that she could collect the balance of the commission. Feeling unequal to the task, they declined. Mozart's students Freystädler and Eybler filled in some of the orchestration, but it fell to Franz Xaver Süssmayr to actually complete the score. Busy composing an opera of his own, Süssmayr rushed to meet the February deadline imposed by the mysterious Messenger. Able to imitate Mozart's handwriting, Süssmayr forged Mozart's signature on the title page and gave no indication that he had composed any part of the finished score.

Not content with collecting the commission, Constanze had two copies of the *Requiem* made for her own use. One she sold to King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia. The other she later sold to publishers Breitkopf & Härtel of Leipzig in 1799. Learning of the pending publication, the anonymous patron finally revealed himself. Franz Count von Walsegg confessed that he had commissioned the work in honor of his late wife Anna, and had passed it off as his own composition at her memorial service. No longer able to claim authorship of the *Requiem*, he at least wanted a refund of his investment. He eventually compromised by accepting several pieces of music in compensation.

Those conversations with the publisher sparked a great controversy surrounding the *Requiem*. Süssmayr, who had kept his silence for eight years, wrote the publishers stating that the *Sanctus*, *Benedictus*, and *Agnus Dei* were entirely his own composition. Abbé Maximilian Stadler, one of Mozart's close associates, carefully marked Count Walsegg's score to indicate which handwriting was Mozart's and which was Süssmayr's. Still, Breitkopf & Härtel published the first edition attributing the entire work to Mozart. Some considered the work not worthy of Mozart, noting many errors in voice leading and also recognizing melodic material borrowed from Handel and Bach. Controversy as to the merits of the *Requiem* raged within the musical community for decades. In 1826, 23 years after Süssmayr's death, André of Offenbach finally published an edition giving Süssmayr credit for his completion.

Half a century later, Johannes Brahms published a new edition of the *Requiem* in which he

declined to fix any of Süssmayr's errors. History, it seemed, had decided to accept the version delivered to Count Walsegg as definitive. Then, in 1960, musicologist Wolfgang Plath discovered previously unknown sketches for the *Requiem* in a collection of Mozart manuscripts at the Berlin Staatsbibliothek. These were clearly among the "scraps of paper" given Süssmayr by Constanze, which he had disregarded in his haste to meet the February deadline. The most important sketch indicated that Mozart intended the *Lacrimosa* to end in a fugue on the text "Amen."

This was the final clue Harvard musicologist Robert Levin needed to create his own solution to the mystery of Mozart's unfinished *Requiem*. A noted Mozart scholar, Levin had completed many Mozart fragments and specialized in historically informed performances of Mozart piano works. A lifetime of study allowed him to "get into Mozart's mind." He recognized in Mozart's original score a structure, first suggested by fellow musicologist Christoph Wolff, of five major sections, each ending in a fugue. By completing the "Amen" fugue found in the Berlin sketch and revising Süssmayr's amateurish "Hosanna" fugue, Levin restored Mozart's original structure. Recognizing recurrences of Mozart's original *Requiem* theme hidden in the movements attributed entirely to Süssmayr, Levin deduced that Süssmayr either had sketches, now lost, or oral instructions from Mozart guiding their composition. By retaining what he recognized as Mozart's themes while revising Süssmayr's compositional errors, Levin created a new and compelling completion of the *Requiem*.

The mystery of Mozart's *Requiem* can never truly be laid to rest. With this inspired and historically accurate completion, Dr. Levin has offered one possible solution to the puzzle posed by Mozart over two centuries ago.

Notes by - *Yvonne Grover*