

Review By Bob McQuiston, Cadence, November 2009

RECOMMENDED

New requiems are a rarity these days, but here's one completed in 2007 by Swiss-born Carl Rütti (b. 1949). For the most part a composer of religious music, he first studied at the Zürich Conservatory and then in Britain. Consequently you'll find elements of the English choral tradition here as well as central European influences.

The work is scored for soprano, baritone, double chorus, strings, harp and organ. At the request of the Bach Choir of London, who commissioned and perform the work on this recording, the orchestral forces are similar to those for the original 1887–88 version of the Fauré (1845–1924) Requiem. And like his French counterpart, Rütti uses them to great effect.

The composer tells us that to emphasize the fact we enter and leave this life weak and alone, he starts and ends with a cappella solos for the soprano. There's a disembodied quality about the first one that begins the opening "Introitus" which is quite haunting. The chorus and baritone soon join in, also a cappella, and the music becomes more melodic and dynamic. The overall effect is extremely moving and sets the tone for this highly individualized requiem.

A solo cello introduces the "Kyrie," or prayer for pity, that follows. The rest of the orchestra enters dramatically, playing a series of churning rhythmic motifs that are picked up by the chorus and soloists. Suddenly everything subsides as the music ends on a prayerfully peaceful note.

The "Offertorium" begins with a beautiful passage for soprano and chorus invoking deliverance for the souls of the faithful departed. Rütti chose not to include a "Dies Irae" in his requiem, but the central part of this section with the chorus crying "Deliver them from the jaws of the lion," to a roaring leonine organ and driving rhythmic orchestral accompaniment comes close to one.

The departed having been delivered from the beast, the baritone sings a cappella, "As Thou didst promise Abraham and his seed," to a modally tinged melody (MTM) that'll figure prominently later on. The ending of this section is thrilling, building to an earthshaking crescendo for full chorus and orchestra with arresting harp as well as organ effects. It then magically fades away with sparkles of violini sul ponticello.

In the "Sanctus – Benedictus" that's next, the vocalists ascend and descend what must be a stairway to paradise built by the organ and strings with rising-falling passages. There's a mystical quality about this section that some may find make it a distant cousin of "Neptune" from Gustav Holst's (1874–1934) *The Planets* (1916).

Scored for the two soloists, reduced strings and harp, there's a directness and simplicity about the "Agnus Dei," that make it one of the work's emotional highpoints. It effectively conveys the feeling of innocence and vulnerability associated with the lamb as a symbol of Christ.

Like Max Reger (1873–1916) and Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943) before him, the composer was inspired by his compatriot Arnold Böcklin's (1827–1901) painting *Isle of the Dead* when he wrote the next "Communio" section. Shimmering strings and a hushed chorus intoning the words "Let eternal light shine upon them," suggest the recently deceased's boat ride over a quiescent lake of tears to the land of eternal rest.

The final "In Paradisum" is a religious musical masterpiece! It begins unassumingly with strumming strings and the baritone singing, "Into paradise may the angels lead thee," set to the MTM idea mentioned above. Soon the chorus enters and the work builds to an ecstatic climax based on MTM, only to fade away in a diminuendo just for harp and strings.

The requiem concludes a cappella with a subdued chorus followed by the soloists singing "Lord, grant them eternal rest," again to MTM. Just as in the beginning, only the soprano is heard at the very end. Her voice floats heavenwards, asking God to give the departed eternal rest, and then disappears leaving the congregation in devout silence.

As you've probably already guessed from what you've read, there's a romantic undercurrent running through this work. Consequently any successful performance of it must preserve its religious formality but at the same time inject enough sentiment to make it emotionally meaningful. That's particularly true for the soloists, and soprano Olivia Robinson as well as baritone Edward Price do so to perfection.

The same can be said of conductor David Hill, who leads the Bach Choir of London along with the Southern Sinfonia in striking performances. As an added bonus, celebrated organist Jane Watts provides invaluable support on the magnificent Klais organ of St John's, Smith Square, London...The balance between the soloists, chorus, organ and orchestra is just right. Audiophiles will find some of Ms Watts' pedal points a good workout for their woofers.