

Carl Rützi's Requiem

by Robert Reilly - November 30, 2009

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With his new Requiem, Swiss composer Carl Rützi has made a major contribution to the repertory. Naxos has issued a stunning recording of it with the Bach Choir, the Southern Sinfonia, soprano Olivia Robinson, and baritone Edward Price, under conductor David Hill ([Naxos 8.572317](http://Naxos.com)).

I first interviewed Rützi for *crisis Magazine* in May 1999, at the time of the release of his beautiful *Missa Angelorum* on ASV records. He was kind enough to answer some questions and respond to my impressions of his new masterpiece.

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Robert R. Reilly: You were asked by the Bach Choir to compose a Requiem for the same forces as those used by Gabriel Fauré in his Requiem. Also the liner notes to the CD claim your music is "French." Did you have any models, French or otherwise, in mind when you began work?

Carl Rützi: No, I didn't have any models of other composers in mind, but I used works of mine I had written about death before (*Pavane for violin and organ*, etc.).

RR: What about the moving *Stabat Mater* you wrote some years ago? Did it have any influence here? You prominently used a solo cello in that work, as well.

CR: When I wrote my Requiem, I didn't especially think of my *Stabat Mater*, but you are right: The similarity between the two works is quite obvious (the theme of death, double choir, seven movements, solo cello). Whereas the *Stabat Mater* was written for a specific person (a mother who lost her 18-year-old son), the Requiem implies all the losses I have experienced in my life. The cello is a significant voice throughout all my works: I have used it *in extremis* in *Songs of Love* (introducing the words "*Fortis ut mors*"); in the *Stabat Mater*, because the deceased son was a cellist; in *Verena die Quelle*, of which the song of the engaged was the model for the Requiem's *Agnus Dei* (soprano/cello - tenor/violin).

RR: You said to me in our interview about the *Missa Angelorum* ten years ago that "liturgical music... has to be very exciting and very rhythmical." Does this apply to a Requiem?

CR: What I then meant about liturgical music is that, for me, church music shouldn't be just official and formal but rather full of life – "full of life" not only meaning exciting and rhythmical, but also intensive and touching. This certainly applies to a Requiem, even more so than to a normal church service.

RR: This work seems to emphasize the devastating human distress at death, rather than any impending threat of divine retribution that death may bring. You focus on dealing with this deep disquiet and the effort to resolve it, to the extent it *can* be resolved. Is this a fair statement?

CR: Yes, indeed.

RR: But why did you choose not to set what may be the most famous part of the Requiem, the Dies Irae?

CR: A punishing God does not correspond with my Christian faith. I wouldn't be able to set it to music. For good luck, the Bach Choir didn't ask for a Dies Irae.

RR: Do you consider this work specifically Catholic?

CR: Yes and no: Yes, because the text is in Latin, based on the Roman Catholic liturgy. No, as we shall all face the same God after death – Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc.

RR: Well, that no doubt will be a big surprise for some – that their God is our God. Have you had any reactions from non-Christians to this work?

CR: Not so far. The CD is very recent. I will let you know.

RR: Except for the vocal solos, which are striking in their simplicity and beauty, there always seems to be more than one thing going on. The choral music expresses one thing, while the orchestra another. The double choir may be doing two different things from the soloists, and then the orchestra becomes a fourth person in the proceedings. This makes things very rich expressively.

CR: The choreographic options of the double choir can enrich the emotional impact on the audience in a live performance.

RR: I meant more specifically that having all these musical actors in motion allows you to evoke the conflicted feelings that death can provoke – helplessness, rage, abandonment, desperate yearning for assurance of the beyond, but also faith and final peace – making their coming together all the more moving as a resolution. Might these considerations have determined how you utilized these forces in the Requiem, or did this all somehow naturally flow from the constraints under which you had to operate from the commission (i.e., replicating the forces used in the Fauré Requiem)? If you don't mind my saying, you coaxed a greater variety of expression out of the same orchestration than did Fauré.

CR: The beginning and the end are a cappella, and a cappella sung on a high standard is the most human and most intimate musical expression for me. In the Kyrie, in the Offertorium, and in parts of the In Paradisum the orchestra goes naturally with the dramatic development of the singers. In the Sanctus and in the Communio, the orchestra has its own function: Sanctus describing the ladder between heaven and earth (Jacob's dream), and Communio symbolizing the archaic river of death. At the beginning of In Paradisum, the orchestra illustrates the slow pace in the procession when the coffin is carried from the church to the grave. In Agnus Dei, the chamber group of single instruments intensifies the intimate atmosphere of this movement.

RR: The work seems to be very tight thematically, which, despite the wide range of expression you achieve, keeps the Requiem unified and the experience through which the listener goes continually coherent. One is never musically (or otherwise) lost.

CR: This was very much my intention.

You begin with an almost angelic line for the soprano a cappella. The radiant voice of Olivia Robinson and the church acoustic, which the recording so perfectly captures, make this seem to be coming from heaven. The first impression is one of deep consolation and hope in the new Jerusalem.

CR: And of deep grief! You are right: The recording does indeed capture the impression of a live performance in a cathedral.

RR: Even as the baritone and then the soprano woefully intone the fate of "*omnis caro* (all flesh)," their lament is cushioned by the underlying reassurance of the consolatory choral music. The real anguish seems to begin in the Kyrie, first with the simple but eloquent lament in the solo cello line, then the uprush of orchestral agitation, followed by the stabbing staccato string chords that then serve as an ostinato under the erupting choral cries of the Kyrie. This is very powerful dramatically, enhanced by the conflicting rhythms, and never less than thoroughly musical in its means. I have never heard a Kyrie quite like this and think it is an original inspiration. From where did the inspiration for this stunning movement come?

CR: From the words "Lord have pity on us" (*Kyrie eleison*), who have lost a beloved person and who will have to die one day, too. This fact is so existential that praying turns into screaming.

RR: And can screaming be prayer?

CR: Yes, of course: a prayer said in a desperate situation can grow into a scream as it does in the Kyrie after each verse.

RR: It is also the one place in this work where I am reminded of the uninhibited impulsiveness of black spirituals that you drew upon to a greater degree, it seems to me, in your *Missa Angelorum*. Do you agree?

CR: Sure, you are quite right.

RR: The Kyrie seems to take the dramatic place of the absent *Dies Irae*, even more so than the *Offertorium*. In the *Offertorium*, the "*liber animas*" vocal line for the soprano is gentle but almost eerie, and a reminder of the stabbing ostinato from the Kyrie appears under the "*peonis inferni* (pains of Hell)" and "*profundo lacu* (bottomless pit)." Harmonic restlessness expresses what seems to be as yet an uncertain hope.

In the beautiful *Sanctus*, the harmonic restlessness is resolved in the gently swelling choral line, and then in the strings as they take us upward in a swirling motion. The movement builds in excitement in anticipation of His coming. The peace is at first still, and then active.

The lovely *Agnus Dei*, with only the two soloists and reduced orchestral forces, seems the most private utterance of the whole work. In parts of the *Requiem*, it is all of creation that participates; here it is a single person, reflecting and praying. Did you use reduced forces to achieve this sense of intimacy?

CR: "Agnus Dei" means "the Lamb of God," which is sacrificed for us, and the lamb is one most innocent animals. The Agnus Dei of my Requiem is dedicated to two dear friends, both soloists of Cambridge Voices who sang most of the solos of my works in the 1990s (*Songs of Love, Verena die Quelle, Veni Creator, Alma Redemptoris Mater*, etc.) and who died in 2005-2006 – much too early.

RR: In the Communio, the swirling strings again lift us upward into a peaceful realm. The restatement of "*Requiem aeternam*" is now almost blissful. Hope is rewarded. In Paradisum, after the soloists sing the text over the strumming strings, there develops a wild, exultant dance at the mention of "Jerusalem" and during the repeat of "*in paradisum*," of the kind that implies that all of creation is carried away within it. I think you capture in this wild dance the hope that there is something like this awaiting us on the other side. Tears continue, but they are now tears of joy.

CR: I can't possibly think of more appropriate words to describe this movement.

RR: Then the strings and harp gently unwind before the chorus members, *a cappella*, haltingly repeat the opening Requiem line, while the soloists soar above them singing of Jerusalem, until the chorus finally expires, diminuendo, in the bass – as a kind of reminder that we are still in the presence of death. Then comes the final prayer from the soaring solo soprano that, "with Lazarus, once poor, may thou have eternal rest." One ends in a state of exhaustion, but also of restoration – drained but not empty.

Another Swiss composer, Frank Martin, wrote a very successful Requiem. Madame Martin wrote to me that, at its premiere, "Several people of all kinds came to him with tears in their eyes, saying, "Thank you, Mr. Martin. You took away from us all fear of death." Martin himself said to his daughter after the performance that "I have achieved my purpose. Now I may die."

I do not mean to be at all morose in quoting this, but am impelled by the extraordinary nature of what you have achieved to ask you about the reactions you have had to this work and, also, if you have confronted anything in its composition that has affected you as deeply. It is hard for me to think that you have not, because of the depth of what your Requiem expresses.

CR: After the last note there was, at both premieres (in Winchester and Douai Abbey), an impressively long silence before the audience started clapping, which ended up with a standing ovation. I've been told that this is a rare event for a premiere in the UK.

RR: Would you care to say something about what you personally underwent in writing it? Your Missa Angelorum is a great celebration of life. In the Requiem, it seems to me that faith is all the stronger for having survived that greatest, most malicious assault against it – the grave.

CR: Whenever I write music, I have to be completely involved and have to draw feelings from all my personal experiences. Writing about death was a very special challenge – the Bach Choir hardly dared to ask me for a Requiem – which affected me for more than a year: All my thoughts turned around this issue for quite a while. All the personal memories of my life are woven into this music. Thinking of Mozart and his commissioner for a Requiem, and myself being nearly 60 years old, I had sometimes kind of a queasy feeling. I am grateful how well it turned out.

RR: Congratulations. It is a masterpiece.

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