

Death's Lullaby: An Exploration of Fauré's *Requiem*



[La Madeleine in Paris, where Fauré's *Requiem* was premiered]

Introduction

Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem* in D Minor, Op.48 is a part of a ubiquitous sacred music tradition. Understanding the broader field of requiem Masses will help us understand how Fauré both follows and breaks tradition. The requiem Mass, a musical setting for the Catholic Mass of the Dead, has inspired many compositions by accomplished composers throughout classical music history, innovating the Mass over time. W.A. Mozart's *Requiem* was unfinished at the time of his death in 1791, and was finished by a student.¹ Johannes Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem* (1868) was regarded as his greatest choral work but was considered unusual for its use of the German language rather than the typical Latin as well as its use of passages from the Old

¹ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 564.

Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament, as opposed to Latin requiem liturgy.² Giuseppe Verdi's Requiem (1874) honored poet, playwright, and novelist Alessandro Manzoni.³ Like other Requiems, it has been adopted as a beloved concert piece. Notably it was performed at the Metropolitan Opera on September 11th, 2021 for the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001.⁴ The music has also been pervasive in popular culture. In the 1984 movie *Amadeus*, Mozart's Lacrimosa (a movement from his Requiem) is playing while the film depicts Mozart's funeral.⁵ The melody of the Dies Irae (Day of Judgment), a plainchant that is used in many requiem settings, has been quoted in many movies, from *Star Wars* to *The Lion King*.⁶ There is even a quiz on McSweeney's, a daily humor website: "What Your Favorite Requiem Mass Says About You".⁷



Gabriel Fauré's Requiem follows in the footsteps of these traditions in many ways, but his style as a composer, as well as the nature of his religious views, creates a requiem that

² Ibid, 734.

³Betsy Schwarm, *Britannica*, s.v. "Requiem: mass by Verdi", (2013).

⁴ "Verdi's Requiem: The Met Remembers 9/11", The Metropolitan Opera, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.metopera.org/season/2021-22-gala/verdis-requiem/>

⁵ Katy Judd, "10 Times Classical Music Starred in Movies," last modified March 25, 2020, <https://houstonsymphony.org/10-times-classical-music-starred-in-movies/>

⁶Brian LaGuardia, "Dies Irae in the Movies," April 5, 2013, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hL1m4hGBVY&t=108s>

⁷James Bennett II, "What Your Favorite Requiem Mass Says About You" *McSweeney's* (website), May 21, 2020, <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/what-your-favorite-requiem-mass-says-about-you>

achieves a gentler tone, musically and lyrically. Fauré (1845-1924) was a French composer who embodied “the qualities of the French tradition” through the “lyrical melodies”⁸ and qualities of “limpidity, sensitivity, [and] grace” inherent in his vocal, piano and chamber music.⁹ Though he is considered to be an “inobtrusive figure in modern music” by scholars such as Percy Young, his Requiem Mass is beloved.¹⁰

Requiem in D Minor, Op.48, written around 1888, has been described as more gentle and peaceful than a typical requiem. Fauré himself called it a "lullaby of death."¹¹ It is a setting of the Catholic Mass of the dead, so it is liturgical in nature. It is an abbreviated musical setting of the requiem with a duration of thirty-five minutes, compared to Mozart’s and Verdi’s settings, at sixty minutes and ninety minutes respectively. However, one of the more interesting aspects of this work is how he modifies the liturgical text. He omits the Dies Irae, the medieval and terrifying Day of Judgment, and adds In Paradisum, which is typically sung in the burial mass.¹² Scholars have noted that this work is likely connected to Fauré's personal beliefs and religious faith,¹³ and suggest that a choral conductor preparing to perform this piece should ask themselves “how those beliefs are manifest in his Requiem.”¹⁴ Some have argued that he was not devout, and that he was a skeptic and an agnostic.¹⁵ His lack of faith or belief in God makes his “conscious decision to eschew images of terror and judgment for sins” through the elimination of the Dies Irae coherent. Scholars have also debated whether he wrote this piece as a reaction to

⁸ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 752-753.

⁹ Percy M. Young, *The Choral Tradition*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981): 263.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Betsy Schwarm, Britannica, s.v. “Requiem in D Minor, Op. 48: musical composition by Fauré,” (2017).

¹²Percy M. Young, *The Choral Tradition*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981): 264.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Faux and David Rayl, “La Madeleine’s Requiem Faith in a Forgiving God,” *Choral Journal* 58, no.11 (2018): 22.

¹⁵Ibid.

the death of his parents, as an expressive form of processing his grief.¹⁶ His view of death “as a happy deliverance, an aspiration to happiness above rather than as a painful experience,”¹⁷ is interesting, and perhaps different from the mainstream view of death.¹⁷ Though scholars have discussed the meaning behind the altered liturgical texts, and have debated the connections of Fauré’s faith to his Requiem, there is little research about this work that specifically investigates how the music creates meaning. I will be exploring the beginning and ending movements of Fauré’s requiem (the Introit and In Paradisum) as examples of how the music illuminates the liturgy of the funeral mass, and his views on death.

Introit

The work begins with the Introit, “a piece of music sung or played at the beginning of a worship service” or liturgical celebration.¹⁸ The text is "Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis" (Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.) This section is in D minor, which reflects the somberness of the text. In Western music, minor keys are often associated with feelings of sadness and moodiness, which is appropriate for a requiem. It is a slow movement, and the orchestra plays chords accompanying the choir, descending in a chromatic fashion (chromatic refers to half step motion and the “frequent use of accidentals”) with each new phrase.¹⁹ This makes me think of the slow descent of the dead into the earth. The dynamics start very soft at a *pianissimo* on the phrase "Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine" (Grant them eternal rest, O Lord.) Then there is a crescendo and a dramatic swell in the orchestra and chorus on the phrase "et lux perpetua luceat eis" (and let perpetual life shine

¹⁶ Percy M. Young, *The Choral Tradition*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981): 263.

¹⁷Betsy Schwarm, Britannica, s.v. “Requiem in D Minor, Op. 48: musical composition by Fauré,” (2017).

¹⁸*Merriam Webster*, s.v. “Introit (*noun*),” accessed April 28, 2022.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/introit>

¹⁹*Merriam Webster*, s.v. “Chromatic (*adjective*),” accessed April 28, 2022.

upon them). This could be considered text-painting; as the perpetual light dawns and shines on the dead, the music grows. Subsequent repetitions of the phrase return to the softer dynamic of the opening, and there is a half cadence (“a musical cadence that ends on the dominant harmony,” or the V chord) at the end of the phrase, which occurs at 1:32.²⁰ This harmony sounds incomplete, indicating that there is more to come.

Score Example 1 is a musical score for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, and Organ. The vocal parts (Sopranos, Altos, Tenors, and Basses) sing the Latin phrase "Re - qui - em æ - ter - nam do - na e - is Do - mi - ne:" in a soft *pp* dynamic. The organ part provides accompaniment, starting with a *ff* dynamic and moving to *p*. The tempo is marked *Largo* with a quarter note equal to 40 beats. The score is written in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and common time.

Score Example 1

Score Example 2 is a musical score for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, and Organ. The vocal parts (S. A., T., and B.) sing the Latin phrase "et lux per - pe - tu - a lu - ce - at, lu - ce - at," with dynamics ranging from *cresc.* to *f*, *dim.*, and *p*. The organ part provides accompaniment, starting with a *ff* dynamic and moving to *p*. The score is written in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and common time.

Score Example 2

²⁰Merriam Webster, s.v. “Half cadence (noun),” accessed April 28, 2022.

In Paradisum

The work ends with In paradisum (into paradise), which is the movement that Fauré added that is not typically part of the requiem. Some have described this movement as “the moment when a soul floats to heaven.”²¹ There are a few reasons that this is an appropriate description. This movement comes after the plea for deliverance from everlasting death in Libera Me. Most requiem Masses end with the Libera Me, beginning with the text “Libera me, Domine, de morte æterna, in die illa tremenda. Quando cœli movendi sunt et terra. Dum veneris iudicare sæculum per ignem” (Deliver me, O Lord, from death eternal on that fearful day, When the heavens and the earth shall be moved, When thou shalt come to judge the world by fire), and ending with the text from the beginning: “Requiem æternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis” (Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine on them). The music in Libera Me is typically passionate and stormy, ending on a somber note as the dead are buried. That is usually the end of the story. Fauré decided instead to end the requiem by exploring what that eternal rest would be like in paradise. The lyrics of this movement are: “In Paradisum deducant Angeli in tuo adventu suscipiant te Martyres et perducant te in civitatem sanctam Jerusalem. Chorus Angelorum te suscipit et cum. Lazaro quondam paupere æternam habeas requiem” (May the angels receive them in Paradise, at thy coming may the martyrs receive thee and bring thee into the holy city Jerusalem. The chorus of angels receive thee, and with Lazarus, once a beggar, may thou have eternal rest). It is a slow movement in D major. The first movement was also in the key of D, but in minor, and subsequent movements have cycled through B minor, E-flat major, B-flat major, F major, and D minor, returning in the final movement to the key of D, but in major, which gives a sense of returning home (though in a

²¹“Q&A with Betsy Cook Weber: Fauré’s Requiem,” *Houston Symphony* online, April 19, 2016, <https://houstonsymphony.org/qa-betsy-cook-weber-faures-requiem/>

changed way), and a sense of finality. It is a movement that spotlights the sopranos (the other voices are silent), as their high register evokes the angels that are receiving the souls in heaven. The sopranos sing sustained notes in unison over a repeating arpeggiated sixteenth note accompaniment in the orchestra, which creates a floating effect.. The dynamic is at a *piano*, and the sopranos are singing with a pure and legato tone. Their voices sound particularly pure in this movement, as they are not using vibrato (they are singing with a straight tone), and they are singing in their higher register in unison. The melodies that the sopranos sing are arched; to me that represents the ascension into heaven and the descent into eternal rest.

Musical score for Sopranos, Altos, Tenors, Basses, and Organ. The Sopranos part is marked *p dolce* and features a melodic line with a slur over the notes "In pa - ra - di -". The Organ part provides a repeating arpeggiated accompaniment, also marked *p dolce*.

Score Example 3

100

Musical score for Soprano (S.) and Organ (Org.). The Soprano part is marked "5" and features a melodic line with a slur over the notes "sum de - du - cant an - ge -". The Organ part provides a repeating arpeggiated accompaniment.

Score Example 4

The full choir comes in and out as a chordal accompaniment, emphasizing important words and phrases, such as “Jerusalem”, “requiem”, and “may thou have eternal rest.” The chords follow

predictable patterns of Western harmonies, reinforcing stability and eternal rest. The dynamics stay at a *piano* for the majority of the movement. The loudest dynamic (*forte*) occurs on the word Jerusalem, the holy city and final resting place for the soul. Reserving the *forte* dynamic for this moment suggests a climax or peak in the music, and also emphasizes the text.

The image shows two musical excerpts. The left excerpt features three vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor) with the lyrics 'Je - ru - sa - lem, Je - ru - sa - lem, Je - ru - sa - lem'. Each staff has a 'cresc.' marking above it, indicating a gradual increase in volume. The right excerpt shows a four-part vocal setting (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) with lyrics 'S: - ru - sa - lem, — ALTO: Je - ru - ru - lem, Je - ru - sa - lem, — T. I.: Je - ru - sa - lem, — B.: Je - ru - sa - lem, —'. The Soprano part starts with a *f* dynamic, then moves to *p* and *ppp*. The other parts also have dynamic markings: *f* for Tenor and Bass, and *ppp* for Alto.

Score Example 5

In other movements, the audience heard heavy chromaticism, dissonant harmonies, thick textures in the choir, minor modes, and the alternation of *piano* and *forte* dynamics. These stormy and intense elements are not present in this movement; the music itself is at peace. The movement ends on a D major chord on the word “requiem,” and there is a fermata. The final chord can be held as long as desired, symbolizing eternal rest.

The image shows a musical score for the word 're qui - em.'. It includes four parts: Soprano (S. A.), Alto (T.), Bass (B.), and Organ (Org.). The vocal parts (S. A., T., B.) are marked with *ppp* dynamics and feature long, sustained notes with fermatas. The Organ part (Org.) has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and sustained chords in the left hand. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Score Example 6

Conclusion

Gabriel Fauré's Requiem in D Minor, Op.48 stands apart from other requiems for the innovations Fauré made to the liturgical text, and his views of death being “a happy deliverance,” which manifests itself in his music. The French composer Nadia Boulanger wrote of Fauré’s requiem, “His voice seems to interpose itself between heaven and men; usually peaceful, quiet and fervent, sometimes grave and sad, but never menacing or dramatic.”²² Rather than the fire and brimstone of typical requiems (fueled by the Dies Irae, or Day of Judgment) Fauré recognized that “grief can be assuaged by calm,” and crafted a requiem that prioritized quiet moments and text painting through slow tempos, soft dynamics, the alternation of major and minor modes, and lovely melodies.²³ The music of Gabriel Fauré’s *Requiem* intertwines the traditional requiem Mass with his religious and personal views, and his conception of the paradise that awaits in life after death.

²²Percy M. Young, *The Choral Tradition*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981): 263.

²³Ibid.

Bibliography

- Bennett II, James. "What Your Favorite Requiem Mass Says About You." McSweeney's website. May 21, 2020, <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/what-your-favorite-requiem-mass-says-about-you>
- Burkholder, J. Peter, Grout, Donald J. and Palisca, Claude V. *A History of Western Music*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.
- Faux, Jeffrey and Rayl, David. "La Madeleine's Requiem Faith in a Forgiving God." *Choral Journal* 58, 11. 2018.
- Judd, Katy. "10 Times Classical Music Starred in Movies." last modified March 25, 2020. <https://houstonsymphony.org/10-times-classical-music-starred-in-movies/>
- LaGuardia, Brian. "Dies Irae in the Movies," April 5, 2013. Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hL1m4hGBVY&t=108s>
- "Q&A with Betsy Cook Weber: Fauré's Requiem." *Houston Symphony* online. April 19, 2016. <https://houstonsymphony.org/qa-betsy-cook-weber-faures-requiem/>
- Schwarm, Betsy. *Britannica*, s.v. "Requiem in D Minor, Op. 48: musical composition by Fauré." 2017.
- Schwarm, Betsy. *Britannica*, s.v. "Requiem: mass by Verdi", 2013.
- "Verdi's Requiem: The Met Remembers 9/11." The Metropolitan Opera. accessed March 10, 2022. <https://www.metopera.org/season/2021-22-gala/verdis-requiem/>
- Young, Percy M. *The Choral Tradition*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981.