

Musical Musings – November

The start of November is traditionally associated with the period of Remembrance, and this year it has been even more poignant with the marking of a century since the end of the Great War. Music can evoke so many memories as well as healing and being of great comfort. The Requiem Mass has been a most effective way of offering prayers to God for the repose of souls who have passed on. And how inspired have composers been in their approach to this particular musical form!

The Requiem Mass comes in all shapes and sizes. In essence, the text is a mixture of the Ordinary of the Mass combined with the texts of Introit, Gradual, Pie Jesu, Libera Me and In Paradisum. But composers have experimented with all sorts of different texts that have proved to be very effective. As I say, Requiem settings come in all shapes and sizes. You can't really compare Verdi's massive setting with the intimacy of Gabriel Faure – yet both have their place. Some are great concert pieces; others work very well as liturgical offerings.

I have many favourite settings myself. I grew up singing Faure as a chorister and I love the way it works so well liturgically. I grew to love Mozart's wonderful Requiem and then was introduced to Brahms' masterpiece. Berlioz, Bruckner and Verdi followed for me and I have really enjoyed the more contemporary settings of Karl Jenkins, John Rutter and Andrew Lloyd-Webber.

But do I have a real favourite? The answer is yes. I love the very intimate unaccompanied Requiem Mass by Herbert Howells, written in response to the death of his only son, Michael. It is very intense and sublimely beautiful. However, that is my number two, as without doubt, for me the most sublime setting is by Maurice Durufle. Based on Gregorian chant and set for organ and choir with soloists, but later orchestrated, it is simply peerless in its beauty and power. Durufle spent years refining and tweaking it and it remains one of the great liturgical works of the twentieth century. If you are not familiar with it, I do wholeheartedly recommend it to you!

Simon Lole