

A background to Mozart's Requiem

How much do you have to know about the Mozart Requiem to sing it well? The answer may be "Not that much." An understanding of the libretto and the key words in the score, a knowledge of the musical notes and of the expression markings may be all that is needed to enable choristers to sing confidently and to respond to the conductor's direction, giving a fulfilling occasion for performers and audience alike.

For many pieces of music, this may well be true. But Mozart's Requiem is rather special. There is a myriad of uncertainties and mythologies surrounding its composition and early life. It might have been left untouched after Mozart's death, uncompleted and unperformed. It could well have been performed just once, put on one side and then lost to future generations. And if its original sponsor had had his way, we might now be singing Wallsegg's Requiem, not Mozart's.

How did all this come about, and is it relevant to modern performances? In spending fifteen weeks rehearsing primarily this one work, we have an opportunity to immerse ourselves in its origins, deepening our understanding of its meaning to the composer and those around him. In doing so, we need to take off the lens of modernity through which we usually view historic events and to see them in their true context.

Mozart was in one sense a jobbing musician. He made his livelihood, somewhat precariously, by writing and performing music. He depended on commissions and performance fees for income to pay the rent and feed his family. There were other composers and performers who were effectively competitors, also seeking to secure commissions and to have their works performed in public and before men of influence. The book and subsequent film *Amadeus*, for example, imagines the competitiveness between Mozart and his contemporary Salieri. They are perhaps overly dramatic, but there is at least a grain of truth in the story, and show one aspect of a composer's life in the late seventeenth century.

In another sense, Mozart was a great artist, anxious to compose what he felt was deep down inside him, irrespective of how popular the music might be with the public and potential patrons. He studied works by the great composers such as JS Bach, wishing to continue and develop their traditions. And of course his own works became the object of study by later composers such as Beethoven.

These two forces propelled Mozart's career. They caused major problems from time to time. For example, Mozart had a very secure position under the Archbishop of Salzburg for many years. But Mozart felt that the Archbishop controlled his work too closely: he wanted to branch out from sacred music to opera and orchestral works. There was a major row in which Mozart lost his comfortable, well-paid position and also the support of his father; from that point he and his wife Constanza led a hand-to-mouth existence for many years.

Mozart was a great musician but also a human being. He had been a child prodigy, and certain traits followed him into adulthood. It is strange to think that such a consummate artist would have a love of what we today call "toilet humour", but not surprising that he fell in and fell out with friends and colleagues, even the closest such as Joseph Sussmayr, more frequently than most.

1791 was a most productive year for Mozart, so much so that his finances came back into balance and he was able to start repaying loans taken out over the lean years. He completed two operas, *The Magic Flute* and *La Clemenza di Tito*, to great acclaim. The *Clarinet Concerto* was extremely well received, as were a number of minor works which were published and widely performed. Amongst the minor works were some small scale sacred works, early moves by Mozart to bring himself to the notice of the Archbishop of Vienna, who was starting the process of appointing a new *Kapellmeister* at the Cathedral. Despite the argument with the Archbishop of Salzburg many years earlier, Mozart remained a committed Roman Catholic all his life. An appointment such as *Kapellmeister* would have been secure and, in the more enlightened times which now prevailed, would have allowed him more scope than his position at Salzburg.

Early in 1791, the young Count of Wallsegg, a local nobleman, lost his beloved even younger bride of only four years, to the fever. He was distraught. To assuage his grief he had her buried in a beautiful mausoleum on his estate and planned to hold a choral *Requiem Mass* on the first anniversary of her death. He was an amateur musician and occasional composer. However, he must have realised that composing a *Requiem Mass* was beyond his limited skills, so he commissioned Mozart to write it on his behalf.

The *Requiem* is a rite of the Roman Catholic Church which prays for the repose of departed souls. It is interesting to note that, although earlier composers had written *Masses* in profusion, no major composer had previously written a *Requiem Mass* which passed the test of time. This was new territory, an opportunity to do something different which would no doubt appeal to Mozart. And it started a trend: many composers from Brahms and Bruckner to Rutter and Jenkins have followed Mozart's example.

This is where the mystery starts. It was common in those days for wealthy patrons to commission works from composers, paying over the odds for the privilege of having the rights to them and even passing them off as their own composition. This is the deal to which Mozart seems to have agreed. It was an opportunity to write a full scale sacred work. This would further his reputation as a sacred composer and possibly smooth the path to the appointment as *Kapellmeister* in Vienna, always providing the proprietorial issues could be resolved.

However, all the other commissions had tight deadlines and kept Mozart busy. He was only able to start work on the *Requiem* in September, and then could work on it only intermittently. By the middle of November, only the first two movements were complete. Other movements existed in sketches of melodies and chordal structures. Some were not even started. Mozart worked as much as he could, but he was very ill. One story has it that on December 4th, he was determined to run through the music with a group of friends, but he became so weak that they had to stop whilst singing the *Lachrymosa*. He died a few hours later, early on the morning of December 5th.

Mozart was buried the following day, not in a pauper's grave but in an unmarked grave, as was the norm for the non-noble classes, which would be reused ten years later. At a commemoration for Mozart later in December the *Introit* and *Kyrie* of the *Requiem* were sung, possibly with a simple organ accompaniment.

This is one point at which this wonderful music might have been lost for ever.

Constanze could have put the music to one side and foregone any further payment from Wallsegg. For whatever reason – the potential income, recognition of the greatness of the work, pressure from Wallsegg himself, pressure from friends and colleagues – she initially asked Mozart's student Joseph Eybler to take over the score. He did not do much work on it before returning it to Constanze, who then asked Franz Sussmayr, who had been out of favour with Mozart for a while before his death, to complete the task, which he did sometime in 1792, but nobody knows precisely when. Furthermore, nobody knows how Constanze presented the work to Wallsegg. Some say that she averred it was all the work of Mozart himself, although it is not clear how she can have accounted for the delay in delivery. Others suggest that the Count knew full well what he was receiving and paying for.

Parts of the Requiem were performed, as was normal practice at the time, throughout 1792. The first event we would recognise as a full performance was at a benefit concert on 2nd January 1793. It took some time for Wallsegg to arrange his own performance, so who was purported to be the composer at this stage is unclear. He conducted it twice in early 1794, the second performance being on the third anniversary of his beloved wife's premature death. He then put the work away and appeared to forget about it.

At this point, Wallsegg owned the rights to the Requiem. He had commissioned it from Mozart to pass off as his own. So we would be singing Wallsegg's Requiem today if subsequent events had not changed its attribution.

It is unclear how the change came about, but it may have been as follows. In 1799, possibly hoping for the royalty income, Constanze arranged for the work to be published under Mozart's name. Wallsegg instructed his lawyer to protect his rights to the work. Eventually, with the work having less significance for him as the years since his wife's death passed, he lost interest and allowed Constanze to buy the rights back, thus enabling its publication.

So now we have Mozart's Requiem in the form and attribution we know it today. But the mystery does not end here. On Wallsegg's death in 1827, the controversy over how much Mozart had written and who completed which sections was still raging. And scholars from around the world continue to pore over the score, searching for further clues which might help to unravel the remaining uncertainties.

One reading of the story above is that Mozart's Requiem turns out to have been a commercial arrangement between a composer and someone who wanted his own Requiem. Does that compromise its artistic integrity? How much of Mozart's soul is bound up in its music, alternately thundering and delicate?

Another reading suggests that, although the initial commission might have been purely commercial, Mozart was incapable of writing second-rate music, always pouring his heart and soul into making something of great beauty and significance. That would incidentally be a prerequisite for the work to impress the Archbishop of Vienna. What is more, from September 1791, he may have realised that he was seriously, perhaps terminally, ill. We have to remember that there were no antibiotics in those days and even at 35 the chances of recovery from a serious fever were small. So maybe at that stage his musical senses were heightened even further than normal. He is thought to have said "It feels as though I am writing my own Requiem." Some have interpreted this as his not knowing that the work had been commissioned on a commercial basis by Wallsegg. Others believe that he

knew full well the circumstances of the commission, but that as his health deteriorated he began to feel that this might be his final composition.

A further conjecture is that a man of Mozart's musical stature would heavily influence his contemporaries, and that the work done to complete the Requiem, although actually not Mozart's own, was at the very least highly influenced and inspired by him.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Mozart's Requiem has stood the test of time to become one of the staples of the choral repertoire. Its music continues to stir the soul of choirs and audiences around the world. It has the capacity to move believers and unbelievers, old and young, rich and poor. However it came to be written, however Mozart's ideas came to be a part of it, becomes irrelevant as we benefit from the uplifting experience of being immersed in it for a short time.