

Dead man talking

by M.L. Rantala

It's well known today that Mozart's Requiem was unfinished at the time of the composer's death in December of 1791. Yet a few months later, a completed mass for the dead, bearing Mozart's forged signature, was delivered to the man who commissioned it.

Urged on by Mozart's widow Constanze, who needed the other half of the commission to support her two sons, Mozart's assistant Franz Xaver Süssmeyer became the first to tinker with Mozart's Requiem. He was by no means the last.

H.C. Robbins Landon used surviving sources (from Eybler and Freystädtler, Mozart's students at the time of his death) but shunned any attempt at significant recomposition, while Duncan Druce composed large sections himself. Richard Maunder's version is famous because it attempts to cut out everything that is Süssmeyer, leaving only pristine Mozart. Peter Lichtenthal (a 19th century Croatian doctor) even arranged the Requiem in mute form as a string quartet. Composers themselves have looked at the Requiem in different ways. Brahms published an edition without changing anything in Süssmeyer, while Benjamin Britten made his own, albeit small, changes before recording it.

Composing while decomposing—only Mozart could do it.

One attempt to "complete" the Requiem has been offered by Harvard musicologist and keyboardist Robert Levin. He agreed

with musicologist Christoph Wolff that Mozart's original score suggested a structure of five major sections, each ending in a fugue. Levin took his hands to the score, keeping as much of Süssmeyer as possible, intervening only when that man's score is awkward, unidiomatic, or fails to take account of Mozart's own intentions, as recorded on "scraps of paper," as Constanze called them.

The most famous of these were discovered in 1960 by musicologist Wolfgang Plath, with one that clearly showed Mozart intended for the Lacrimosa to end with a fugue sung to "Amen", including a few measures written out by Mozart. So Levin completed the "Amen" fugue and revised Süssmeyer's "Hosanna" fugue (including modulation back to the original key of D major for the reprise), and made other changes to create the structure he believes Mozart intended. Other changes include correcting Süssmeyer's solecisms in part-writing and lightening up the orchestra.

It takes a bold man to offer some of his own work as Mozart's, but Levin has for many years performed Mozart works at the keyboard and is known for his extemporaneous cadenzas in a clear Mozart dialect. While he might be accused of trying to channel Mozart, the real issue is whether he's done it better than Süssmeyer and with more care and attention to detail.

Many believe he's succeeded, and his concern with historical detail has won Levin some fans, including Hyde Park conductor Bruce Tammen. When his Chicago Chorale

music review



The Chicago Chorale and Bruce Tammen (lower right) in Rockefeller Chapel. Nick Grazer

performed the Requiem the night before Palm Sunday, it was the Levin edition that sounded through a full house at Rockefeller Chapel.

This was a very pleasing reading of Levin's completion and the Chicago Chorale sang with bright, clear voices and immaculate phrasing. Where others have offered terror to mortal man, Tammen was satisfied with simple bold strokes. The end of the "Introitus" was delicate and other-worldly and the "Agnus Dei" had a perfect gentleness. Tammen paid particular attention to those places where Levin differs from the ubiquitously performed Süssmeyer. The complex "Amen" fugue was transparent and enchanting. Tammen clearly brought out where the orchestra swings from B-flat major back to D major for the "Hosanna"

and if Levin seems a wee bit awkward here one is still grateful for his effort.

Soprano Tandra Black stood out among the soloists, with a creamy sound and natural grace. The other soloists, alto Kristina Alveteg, tenor Mark Eldred and bass Jay McDivitt were at their best in the ensembles. Concertmaster Jeri-Lou Zike led an orchestra assembled specially for the occasion, and they acquitted themselves well.

The concert started with half-a-dozen motets. Interestingly, Tammen had the chorale sing from the balcony at the back of the chapel. The sound that gently floated down was absolutely wonderful. I would have loved to hear the Mozart performed from "on high" and perhaps that's something we can look forward to in the future.