


Recomposing Mozart: a Successful New *Requiem* Given in Zurich's Tonhalle

20/04/2019

 Switzerland **Beethoven, Mozart:** Soloists, Gemischter Chor Zürich, Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich / Joachim Krause (conductor). Tonhalle Maag, Zurich, 18.4.2019. (CCr)



Pierre-Henri Dutron © Jean-Baptiste Millot

Beethoven – *Christus am Ölberge*

Mozart – *Requiem* (setting by Pierre-Henri Dutron, 2016 – ‘Süssmayr Remade’)

Soloists:

Seraph/Soprano soloist – Amelia Scicolone

Mezzosoprano soloist – Roswitha Müller

Jesus/Tenor soloist – Emanuel Heitz

Peter/Bass soloist – José Coca Loza

Mozart's *Requiem* is a living piece of music about death. More than any other work that is classical and revered, it gets to be part of the canon while still evolving, never settling into the one authoritative version. It always begets yearning, the way any unfinished work does: What if Mozart had lived long enough to finish it? It tickles philosophical fancies: Isn't its unfinished status the very source of its power, its paradoxical permanence? It presents post-modern questions: Should we perform only what Mozart left, and leave the second half in fragments; or should we let Franz Xaver Süssmayr's flawed version stand, because it is the original completion and because it is familiar; or should we mix and match all the various amendments and addenda and cuts that have populated its performance history ever since post-WWII research has opened up Pandora's jukebox?

The (still quite young) French musician Pierre-Henri Dutron, apparently unintimidated by the inevitable reaction by literally everyone towards literally anyone who dares to go anywhere near this score with a pen in hand – ‘well, he's certainly no Mozart’ – completed, in 2016, not one but two new versions of the *Requiem*. The one given in this concert, ‘Süssmayr Remade’, doesn't so much excoriate Süssmayr's version as tinker with its instrumentation and style and the distribution of text across the voices,

in an effort to more closely match the arch of Mozart's development as a composer by the end of his life. In other words, it is a new third layer that respects both of the other layers. It treads lightly enough, but with a grand ambition to get closer to Mozart. The second alternative – 'Mozart Extended' – has not yet been published or recorded and forsakes Süssmayr's contributions completely. If Dutron was this successful with the more conservative approach, I anticipate his freer one greatly.

Joachim Krause, leading Zurich's Gemischter Chor (*Seen and Heard's* own John Rhodes is in their ranks) and conducting the Tonhalle Orchestra, was smart to bring it to Switzerland; Dutron's work is an intelligent effort and deserves to be played widely. Not because we need a new single authoritative version, but because this attempt, shoulder to shoulder with some others', honours the gravity of the original well, and that means it should be listened to. Have a look at Dutron's own description of his work, published in 2017 as an [introduction](#) to the score:

'I set myself a rule of constant vigilance, testing each avenue I explored with meticulous research. Yet to take rigour as my sole guide would have led me to avoid taking risks and obliged me to be overcautious. I must therefore acknowledge that the work I have done contains an irreducible element of arbitrariness, the mark of my singularity, with the aim of offering listeners the impression of a finished whole, a complete work in the double context of a Requiem of the late eighteenth century and a creation of the early twenty-first.'

After a desultory start, the Gemischter Chor sang brilliantly. Lush woodwinds opened the revised 'Introitus', and how welcome was it to be greeted by Mozart's strings of weightless anguish after listening to Beethoven's putzing about in the *Christus am Ölberge* oratorio, which preceded the *Requiem* (more on that later). After some too swift tempi in the 'Recordare' that prevented sweetness, after a 'Dies Irae' that was racing but without menace, after some mezzo forte soprano passages that lacked body, the choir hit their stride. The 'Voca me' of the 'Confutatis' had all the gently ripe ache that it should. The glory of the 'Sanctus' was allowed to breathe without evident force.

Generally, Dutron's compositional work sounded better when it referred backwards than forwards; little glimpses of Haydn were more sonorously welcome than anything that would twin Brucknerian bloat with Stamitz' musical mechanics. By the point in the work in which the music was least directly completed by Mozart, namely the final third, both the balance and wholeness of sound lifted an emotional aura above the individual passages. Very affecting, this is an immense success for a new work sutured straight into the familiarly old.

The Tonhalle Orchestra hit its stride in the *Requiem* too, which is to say that during their pre-intermission performance of Beethoven's sole oratorio, things were less than taut and often lacked an emotional thrust. Take the Seraph's aria 'Preist des Erlösers Güte' – 'praise the goodness of the redeemer', sung by a light-voiced, lovingly expressive Amelia Scicolone, whose gradual reveal of her coloratura abilities kept impressing. When the text is in your native language and sung for an audience of fellow native speakers (unlike the abstracter Latin of the *Requiem*, which is still quite heart-rendering when read in translation), what excuse do you have as an orchestra not to swing into a fully gallant, sanguine sound?

As Jesus, tenor Emanuel Heitz had the advantage of a well-trained, smaller-scale voice that was at times capable of a sober tone, plaintive or placative. His smaller-scale expressivity was another matter, and his singing sank into extended blandness. This was a major shame, since Beethoven used this earlier work of his to compete on the home turf of Haydn and gave Jesus all the bravura arias in doing so. In the smaller role of Peter, bass José Coca Loza sang with great resonance and full embrace of textual

pathos. The choir, too, was fulminant at the close, with a smoothly bombastic sound uniting orchestra and conductor around the closing chorus of angels.

If Beethoven later distanced himself from this work, it was likely due to his tremendous ambition for orchestral drama, which is already quite present in this piece. Not as pious or coherently narrated as Bach's passions – the libretto is amateurish – it was still a pleasure to hear these grand songs of love and reconciliation in advance of Easter, and in advance of the exciting new rendering of Mozart's *Requiem* by Dutron.

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