Mozart Requiem

February 21 – 24, 2013

Koerner Hall

PROGRAMME NOTES

As a boy and young man in Salzburg, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was surrounded by musicians composing and performing music for the Catholic church. The Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg had authority over both state and church. The Prince-Archbishop employed some 100 musicians to provide daily music in the cathedral, at court, and for other ceremonial and social occasions. There was a continual demand for new, locally composed church music. Mozart was among the contributors, writing fifteen complete mass settings, four litanies and two vespers, as well as numerous smaller pieces, before leaving Salzburg at age 25. Among the short works is the *Sancta Maria, mater Dei*, composed in September, 1777. It was written shortly before Mozart left for an extended stay in Mannheim. He travelled with his mother, and it was his first extended separation from his father. It has been suggested that the *Sancta Maria* was a sort of votive offering on the young Mozart’s part. It is not in typical Salzburg style, but is a more “modern,” lyrical setting, perhaps in anticipation of his upcoming travels to the innovative court at Mannheim.

After leaving the Archbishop’s employ in 1781, Mozart wrote very little sacred music. We find two remarkable works, however, from his last year of life, ten years after arriving in Vienna: the exquisitely simple *Ave verum corpus*, and the enigmatic and powerful Requiem in D Minor. We mused on which path to follow in tracing the young traveller who penned the *Sancta Maria* to the master who wrote these two late works, and decided to explore the music that Mozart himself explored during this period, specifically that of the Bach family.

Mozart encountered music by various Bachs during his childhood travels, and was obviously pleased to meet it again in Vienna, thanks largely to the passionate interest of Baron Gottfried van Swieten, who had served as Austrian envoy in Berlin. Van Swieten held weekly gatherings at his home in Vienna during the 1780s, to which he invited musicians to perform the works of the Lutheran Bachs, as well as the oratorios of Handel. Mozart was a regular guest at these assemblies. He wrote to his father in April, 1782: “I go to the house of Baron van Swieten every Sunday at twelve o’clock, and nothing is played there but Handel and Bach. I am making a collection of Bach’s fugues, those of Sebastian as well as Emanuel and Friedemann.” A week later he wrote: “When Constanze heard the fugues, she totally fell in love with them. Now she will not listen to anything but fugues …”. Thomas Attwood, a student of Mozart during the mid-1780s, recounted that Mozart always kept a copy of J.S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* open on his pianoforte. Further evidence of Mozart’s interest are arrangements of several of the fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* for strings, three of which we are performing this week. Probably originally intended for string quartet, one manuscript includes a note in Mozart’s hand indicating that...
multiple strings are to play each part, and that double bass is to join the cellos, probably for inclusion on a public orchestral concert — and hence a logical model for our performances.

The three fugues frame motets by Johann Christoph and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. We know with certainty that Mozart knew, studied and admired the works of Emanuel, but it is mere conjecture that he might have heard the choral works of Johann Christoph. A first cousin of Johann Sebastian’s father, Johann Christoph is little known today, but was greatly admired by both Sebastian and Emanuel: the former described him as a “profound composer,” and the latter as a “great and expressive composer.” Sebastian assembled the Altbachisches Archiv, a collection of works by his ancestors, and passed the archive on to Emanuel. Among the works of Johann Christoph chosen by Sebastian for the collection are two hauntingly beautiful arias, written to be sung at funerals. The deceptive simplicity of “Mit Weinen hebt sich’s an” (“It begins with weeping”) belies a metrical complexity of which only those reading the music are aware. The listener is aware only of a lilt, or the rocking of a lullaby, possibly unaware that the lilt never fully settles. The aria is perhaps a lullaby for the soul of the departed, and a curiously soothing setting of an anonymous text on the ages of man that offers little comfort.

The motet by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach is a setting of one of Leipzig poet Christian Fürchtegott Gellert’s Geistliche Oden und Lieder, published in 1758. Gellert’s publication was followed a few months later by a publication of settings of the same texts to melodies with simple accompaniments, by Emanuel Bach, a sort of hymnal for home devotion. As Bach explained in his preface, “I have been very much moved by the excellence of the noble and instructive thoughts these lyrics contain and felt compelled to set all of them to music. It is well known that didactic odes cannot be set to music as easily as lyrical poems. However, if didactic odes are as beautifully written as those of Mr. Gellert, one feels compelled to make all efforts to embellish their purpose so that their use will become more widely spread. My special aim was to make these odes more attainable and enjoyable for music lovers.” Bach revisited a few of these some years later, arranging them as four-part motets with continuo, including Der Kampf der Tugend (The Struggle of Virtue).

During the decade in Vienna in which Mozart would have enjoyed the study of works of the Bachs, he penned but one sacred work: the wonderful, but incomplete Mass in C Minor. Interestingly, when the nineteenth-century director of the Mozartverein, Alois Schmitt, tackled the completion of the Mass, he considered Mozart’s study of the works of Handel and the Bachs—including both the choral works and the fugues—essential to understanding the work. The same has been said of his final work, the Requiem.

As to his one other Viennese sacred work, the directness and simplicity of Mozart’s setting of Ave verum corpus owes more to the Enlightenment than to baroque counterpoint. The motet was a gift for Anton Stoll, organist and choirmaster of the parish church in Baden, the spa near Vienna. Mozart’s wife Constanze was in ill health and pregnant for the sixth time when she went to Baden in early June, 1791 to take the waters. Mozart visited her a few weeks later and penned the Ave verum corpus. Stoll was an admirer and friend, performing Mozart’s church music with his choir, and keeping a watchful eye on Constanze on her frequent visits. It is thought to have been performed by Stoll at the Baden church on the Feast of Corpus Christi on June 23.

On December 14, 1793, Count Franz Walsegg-Stuppach, an Austrian aristocrat and musical dilettante, directed the performance of a Requiem Mass in memory of his wife at the Cisterian monastery of Neukloster in the Wiener Neustadt. On the score, written in his own hand, was written “composed by Count Walsegg,” but it was in fact the work of Mozart and his pupil Franz Xaver Süssmayr. Walsegg
apparently was in the habit of commissioning composers to write music for him, which he would then recopy and call his own. In this case, Mozart did not know the identity of his employer: Walsegg sent an agent to offer the commission anonymously. From this unusual event has arisen a multitude of tales about Mozart's perception of the affair, and the identity of the mysterious stranger as an emissary from another world, bidding Mozart to compose his own Requiem. Mozart’s work on the Requiem was interrupted by work on his last two operas, La Clemenza di Tito and Die Zauberflöte. He returned to the Requiem, but it was unfinished when he died: the vocal parts and the figured bass were complete as far as the end of the Hostias, except for the Lacrimosa. Only the first movement was fully orchestrated, other movements having nothing but sketches of orchestra parts. Mozart's wife Constanze was determined to have the score completed — she needed the rather handsome commission fee — and asked various people to undertake the task. Süßmayr agreed to complete the work and delivered it to Walsegg.

Mozart was seriously ill during much of the time he was composing the Requiem, and apocryphal stories aside, it is hard to imagine that he did not start to associate it with his own death. On December 4, 1791, three singers from the theatre visited him and sang through the completed movements of the Requiem, with Mozart himself singing the alto line. He is said to have wept when they reached the unfinished “Lacrimosa.” That night his illness took a turn for the worse, and Mozart died just before one o’clock the following morning.

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*For our performances we have chosen to use an edition by the musicologist H.C. Robbins Landon which incorporates passages by Mozart's pupils Franz Jakob Freystädter and Joseph Eybler as well as the Süßmayr portions.*