

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Mozart's Requiem

WITH THE MASTER CHORALE OF TAMPA BAY

May 13 - 15, 2022

Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179)***O virtus sapientiae***

Duration: ca. 2 minutes

To say she was a woman ahead of her time is an understatement. Born nine centuries ago, Hildegard von Bingen has been called a medieval light, a feather on the breath of God, a musical poet whose song echoes for the ages.

She is the first and oldest of all composers who are still performed today, a German nun whose music, poetry, scientific musings and mysticism shaped ideas in a world dominated by male thought and action. She won celebrity for her creative vision and defiance of religious doctrine – she wrote for women's voices at a time it was forbidden – and both Pope Eugenius III and Emperor Frederick Barbarossa sought her advice and embraced her writings.

In 1998 – the 900th anniversary of her birth – performers and record companies celebrated her Benedictine hymns, sequences and allegories with an almost pop sensibility, some backing her monophonic plainchant with rhythm tracks and other highly stylized colorings.

But at their core, her music and poetry possess a liquid freedom full of expressive touches that she said came from a divine source. Her visions of luminous objects in the sky, scholars believe, may have been hallucinations caused by migraines or even epilepsy.

Lasting just two minutes, *O virtus sapientiae* (*O Strength of Wisdom*) is one of three works on this program to be performed a cappella by The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay. An antiphon – music using alternating choirs – the piece is part of *Lux Lucis*, a collection of three motets that refer to light, radiance and hope. The sound resembles Medieval plainchant but with a more sensual flow, the singers embellishing on the written notes.

“This work is an extension of our *Serenity* concert from last season,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “I felt then that people were listening deeper, so I wanted to continue that this season. And this piece, along with the rest of the music on this program, sets us up to hear the Mozart *Requiem* at the end.”

Mindaugas Urbaitis (1952-)***Lacrimosa***

Duration: ca. 5 minutes

When the Nazi forward guard entered the Lithuanian cities of Vilnius and Kaunas in the early 1940s, they rounded up thousands of Jewish men, women and children and forced them into the surrounding woods, where they disappeared forever. The scope of the carnage of these pogroms was not well known until after the war, and the Lithuanian composer Mindaugas Urbaitis believes that through artistic testimony they will never be forgotten.

In 1994, he wrote his brief *Lacrimosa* (Latin for “weeping”) in memory of those who died helpless or in defense of their homeland – where he was born seven years after the end of the war. Urbaitis borrows from the eponymous section in Mozart’s *Requiem*, using small motifs and scale patterns that repeat themselves until they come to an abrupt amen – suggesting the place in the score where Mozart laid down his pen and died.

“It’s a deconstruction of the *Lacrimosa* from Mozart’s *Requiem*,” says Brett Karlin, artistic director of The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay, which performed the work in April. “He uses little elements from it, then a full quote. It’s all a cappella and I think it will be a very intimate and mysterious experience for the audience.”

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Sinfonia da Requiem, Op. 20

Duration: ca. 20 minutes

Britten wrote his *Sinfonia da Requiem* in 1940 as a commission by the Japanese government to mark the 2,600th anniversary of the Mikado dynasty, but the score was rejected, and the composer instead dedicated it to the memory of his parents. Oddly, the original manuscript disappeared and was presumed lost until the Imperial authorities – who had secretly kept the score – “rediscovered” it in 1987.

Here is a *Requiem* unlike most, because there is no chorus or religious theme. There is, however, an undeniable sense of loss, grief and renewal, and it remains one of the composer’s most potent creations. A lifelong pacifist, Britten was profoundly affected by the Second World War, and while the music offers no direct association with the conflict, its inherent tensions and fierce mood seem inseparable from the environment of the time.

Not to be confused with Britten’s large-scale choral *War Requiem* of 1962, this 20-minute piece is for orchestra in three movements – *Lacrymosa*, *Dies irae*, *Requiem aeternam* – and is intensely compact in its development. It opens with an arresting series of timpani strokes against the growl of cellos, evolving into an anguished lament that ascends and descends and leaves the listener feeling as if pulled apart.

Without pause comes the *Day of Wrath*, a writhing dance of death spiked by a sinister saxophone and the entire orchestra in a state of controlled chaos. The finale begins by quoting themes heard earlier, but the intensity has given in to a tranquil mist in D major, the harmonies reminiscent of Mahler.

“It’s full of passion,” says TFO Music Director Michael Francis, “and there’s an incredible sense of fear in this piece.”

Gregorio Allegri (1582-1652)

Miserere Mei, Deus

Duration: ca. 12 minutes

The Roman Catholic priest and composer Gregorio Allegri is known today for a single piece of music, one that caused quite a stir in its day and caught the ear of no less a genius than Mozart.

Miserere Mei, Deus (*Have Mercy on Me, O God*) is among the most-performed works of the Renaissance, and rightly so. A setting of Psalm 51, the music unfolds in two alternating choirs against a bridge of plainchant, with the singers uniting at the end. But what makes the piece so striking is the haunting solo voice that ascends above the chorus in a sustained high C. The effect has thrilled listeners for centuries.

Pope Urban VIII adored Allegri's composition so much that he claimed rights to it exclusively for the church, and anyone performing it outside the Sistine Chapel would be threatened with excommunication. The 14-year-old Mozart apparently didn't get the memo. He heard the piece while visiting Rome with his father in 1770, and later in the day transcribed it from memory.

Since the papal ban was lifted in 1870, the *Miserere* has become a staple of choirs around the world, although performances today replace the original boy soprano with a solo female voice.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Requiem in D Minor, K. 626

Duration: ca. 46 minutes

When Mozart died at age 35, he was at the top of his game, primed to enter the 19th century and rival Beethoven in the emerging Romantic-era arena. His creative momentum cut short, future miracles would never appear beyond his highly personal, and tragically incomplete, *Requiem*.

This magnificent work is, by definition, a torso, a Venus di Milo in music. Its backstory and history of performances are as much a part of Mozart's mystique as they are controversial. Why? Because we don't precisely know how much of the *Requiem* is genuine Mozart.

On his death bed in December 1791, he completed less than half of his funeral music: the opening *Introit*, the essential music for the *Kyrie* – a prayer of divine mercy – and six sections of the *Sequence*. Too weak to continue working, he fell silent eight bars into the tearful *Lacrimosa*. From there, the score contains puzzling lapses in consistency and quality, according to scholars.

Many believe Mozart wrote little if any of the *Sanctus*, *Benedictus* or *Agnus Dei*, even though he may have left notes concerning the work's remaining five sections. These were fleshed out, allegedly, by his 25-year-old student, Franz Sussmayr, who infamously forged Mozart's signature on the score to help Mozart's wife, Constanze, receive the money from its commission.

But not everyone thinks Sussmayr was skillful enough to finish such an extraordinary work, with or without his master's guidance. Robert Summer, founder of The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay and author of *Choral Masterworks from Bach to Britten: Reflections of a Conductor*, raises this point. How can the *Agnus Dei*, if not penned by the composer, be one of the most emotionally expressive moments in the entire work?

"The questions that remain concern the abilities of Sussmayr to complete the work in such a masterful way," Summer notes.

Musicologists have wrestled with the vexing provenance of the *Requiem* by attempting to alter sections or "complete" it themselves – with varying degrees of success. This TFO/Master Chorale program will use a 1993 reconstruction by Robert Levin, a Harvard musicologist and pianist, who tweaked certain points of harmony and introduces an *Amen* fugue at the end of the *Lacrimosa*.

Regardless of all the fuss, most people enjoy the work for its sublime beauty and expressiveness. Unlike so many of Mozart's 626 published compositions, here he makes no attempt to separate personal experience from his art. This is a realization of death – a highly charged emotional statement of a man looking into the abyss.

Torso or not, it contains some of the most profound utterances by any composer, and its romantic view of life's end urged Beethoven to say, "If Mozart did not write the music, then the man who wrote it was a Mozart."

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based writer, member of the Music Critics Association of North America, and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.