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French requiems get deep Seraphic Fire treatment

November 20, 2016 By Greg Stepanich — 0 Comments

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The idea of putting two requiems back to back on one program might seem to promise an overdose of despair, but when the two funeral pieces in question are among the two best-known such works by French composers, it's a notion that makes more sense.

For the second concert of its season, the Miami chamber choir Seraphic Fire offered the requiems of Gabriel Fauré and Maurice Duruflé, along with a newly commissioned work by American composer Douglas Cuomo. In its performance at All Saints Episcopal in Fort Lauderdale on Nov. 12, the day after Veterans Day, the choir gave richly rewarding readings of the two French works for a satisfying evening of this highly personal repertoire.

Seraphic Fire has commissioned a number of new works for world premieres this season, and on this program it was Cuomo's *The Fate of His Ashes: A Requiem for Victims of Power*, which is based on a text by the 17th-century English writer and physician Thomas Browne. Cuomo has carved chunks out of the text to make a John Cage-style list of almost random sentences, though in the aggregate they make a kind of recondite poetry in which you could find a meditation on the work's subtitle.

Cuomo, who is best-known for his theme music for *Sex and the City*, has written rather austere music to go with Browne's text. Much of it is constructed in bits and pieces; for example, the words "Human daily fragments" are set to tiny two-note motifs separated by silence. And most of the rest of the work sounds stuck, not really moving anywhere as it makes its way aridly through the words. As a text-driven examination of people wiped out by politics and existing only in bursts of humanity cruelly cut off, it works rather well and is cannily crafted. But it's not very interesting as music.

The first of the requiems, both of which were accompanied by organist Nathan Laube, was Fauré's, which has been done countless times by every church choir in the Americas for decades; it's relatively short, very clear and direct, and ravishingly beautiful. Conductor Patrick Dupré Quigley led a sober, deeply felt version of the piece, with tempos on the slow side that tended to make the music sound more earthbound than it might.

But the choir sang beautifully, with full, rounded tone and excellent blending. Soprano Brenna Wells was the fine soloist in the "Pie Jesu," in which her work in early music gave this familiar piece the kind of purity you hear when a boy treble is the soloist. Organist Laube did a nice job of working with what sounded like a recalcitrant instrument, though sometimes the absence of Fauré's dark, emotive strings was keenly felt.

The second half was devoted to Duruflé's Requiem, which uses the Fauré as a model. Its inspiration from Gregorian chant is also clearly evident, and that adds a feeling of timelessness to the music. As in the Fauré, Quigley was a little over-reverent, so that a passage like *Sed signifier sanctus Michael*, with its

sopranos quietly sneaking in, lacked some of the otherworldly mystery that makes it so effective.

But that, too, may have been a function of having only an organ to accompany the music, and here Laube had a much more difficult task than in the Fauré, which he accomplished expertly. One particularly good thing about this performance was the way the singers handled the huge outbursts in the “Kyrie” and “Domine Jesu Christe”: there was no oversinging or yelling, just sheer controlled power, and it was most impressive.

James Bass was a strong soloist in the “Hostias,” and mezzo Margaret Lias sang the “Pie Jesu” with an endearing tone quality that lifted the music out of its somewhat lugubrious coloring. Overall, tempos were pokey, which gave the music a sort of hothouse, thick quality, but the singing was beautiful throughout, and the Duruflé revealed itself to be the minor masterpiece it is.

The concert opened with Duruflé’s best-known piece, the motet Ubi Caritas. Seraphic Fire sang this radiantly, with brightness and warmth, unlike the prayerful approach that sometimes is brought to this brief work. These were voices of outreach, and while too much may have been made of the ugliness of the recent presidential election, I at least heard plenty of conviction behind the line Et ex corde diligamus nos sincero: And may we love each other with a sincere heart.

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