Singing of Loss, Saving through Memory:

THE HEALING POWER OF SECULAR REQUIEMS

Music's prominence in the sacred sphere has shaped some of the most enduring genres of choral music in Western culture, such as the requiem mass. For more than a century, composers have found resonance in the requiem outside its traditional religious framework—a resonance that has acquired new intensity in recent years. Here is a look at four American composers of today who have adapted the idea of the sacred requiem to secular expressions that commemorate loss and encourage healing. Their music responds to a wide spectrum of inspirations—and perhaps has even more relevance in a world coping with suffering and loss in a new way.

BY THOMAS MAY

Eternal rest—*requiem aeternam*—is the prayed-for destination from which the genre takes its name. The peace of eternity, an unending flatline. The requiem's scenario conjures above-the-battle acceptance and aims for a serenity that passes all understanding.

But even as it gazes into the beyond, the requiem remains earthbound, a vehicle for the grief and fear of abandonment felt by the living left behind. Composers today are turning increasingly to this time-honored format to address not only the pain and anxiety of this world, but the systemic injustices that also cause suffering and loss. Even without relying on the faith-based certainties of old, secular requiems—which can point to such eminent predecessors as Brahms's *German Requiem*—emanate the same passion and desire to move listeners as the sacred works of the standard repertoire.

The endless varieties of musical expression inspired by the requiem reflect varying positions between two poles: consolation versus rage against the dying of the light. Think of the best-known treatments from the core classical repertoire. Mozart's *Requiem* embodies these contrasts within the same work. The settings by Verdi and Fauré stand at either extreme, conveying, respectively, the sound and fury of ultimate loss and the sense of "a happy deliverance," as the Frenchman described his "lullaby of death."

Why Write a Requiem Today?

If we move outside the sacred sphere from which the requiem first emerged—going back to the early days of Christianity and developed musically through medieval Gregorian chant—what do composers facing today's challenges find so appealing about the genre—particularly in a secular context? Some secular requiems, such as Morten Lauridsen's *Lux aeterna*, have had enormous success (and influence) by evoking the aura of their predecessors in the sacred music world to offer consolation for personal loss.

Conductor and scholar Katherine FitzGibbon, artistic director of Resonance Ensemble in Portland, Oregon, wrote her dissertation on the requiem genre. She observes: "When you try to grapple with some of the hard truths in our world, if you are a choral musician, I think you naturally gravitate toward the requiem." The format of the requiem, "with its text wishing eternal rest for all the lives lost," serves not only as a powerful musical commemoration but is a vehicle on a grand scale for performers and audiences to join together in solidarity. For Resonance Ensemble, FitzGibbon commissioned Portland-based composer Damien Geter to write *An African American Requiem* (originally scheduled to premiere in May as the climax of Resonance's 2019–20 season).

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Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Resonance Ensemble (top) has had to postpone the premiere of An African American Requiem *by ensemble member Damien Geter (pictured immediately above with Resonance artistic director Katherine FitzGibbon).*

Gabriela Lena Frank, the child of a Peruvian mother of Chinese descent and a father with a Lithuanian-Jewish background, explores one of the defining moments of the modern world in *Conquest Requiem*: the initial confrontation between the Spanish colonialists and Aztec civilization five centuries ago. This confrontation also led to ecological disaster through the depletion of resources.

Michael Conley is another composer who uses the requiem genre to address the environmental angle and the associated destruction of a way of life. He recalls being shattered when, in 2009, he stumbled on an article about mountaintop removal mining in the region near where he grew up in Virginia, on the edge of Appalachia: "It hit me like a lightning bolt to read about the devastation caused by these corporate mining practices."

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Verdi's *Requiem* is a canonical setting that both Geter and Frank single out as a key musical inspiration and even model for their works. Its music so impressed Dale Trumbore when she sang it in college that she determined to write a requiem of her own—not as a religious work, putting the Latin texts to music, but as a vehicle for music's "potential to meet someone where they are when they are coping with loss." The result is *How to Go On*, the largest work to date of this remarkable Los Angeles-based composer, who is frequently drawn to working with words.

The Requiem as Social Justice

"What makes a requiem a requiem, for me, is that remembrance and honoring are the key," says Damien Geter. "Whether it's personal or an historical event, you are writing in memory of someone or something." Also in demand as an actor and bass-baritone (he made his Metropolitan Opera debut last fall in the new production of *Porgy and Bess*), Geter is committed to "responding to the tumult of the world." His work realizes the mission that Resonance Ensemble set for itself in the aftermath of ▶

Michael Conley conducts the 2017 premiere of his Appalachian Requiem *at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco.*

The Healing Power of Secular Requiems

a particularly disturbing series of racist incidents in Portland and across the U.S. in 2017. "We decided that we wanted to dedicate ourselves fully to being actively anti-racist in our approach and to help make our community a better place for everyone with music," FitzGibbon explains. "Our board and audiences have been very receptive to this and hungry for this kind of concert experience that is immersive and tells stories."

Referring to Geter (who also sings with Resonance) as a "musical soul-mate," FitzGibbon became aware of his gifts as a composer through an a cappella arrangement he made for the ensemble of the spiritual "There's a Man Goin' Round." Geter determined to take on "the responsibility of being an artist by composing something on a bigger scale that was political—something that made a statement, that spoke for those who didn't have a voice anymore."

Initially, he thought opera would offer the most suitable platform but then decided to use the format of the requiem to give witness to and commemorate African American victims of racial violence throughout the history of the United States—including not only the historical legacy of slavery and lynching but also contemporary police violence. Although the text is religious," Geter says "I don't look at it from a God perspective. The spirituals I use in the piece also have this double meaning and aren't only about religion."

Geter initially thought of a work of relatively modest, chamber dimensions, but with the encouragement of FitzGibbon, the scope of the project expanded dramatically. Geter was given a far larger apparatus to work with when FitzGibbon managed to enlist an amalgam of community organizations reflecting the city's diversity in a special partnership, along with the Oregon Symphony. With these expanded resources, Geter wrote a 20-movement work whose libretto also includes pieces from civil rights activist Jamilia Land and Ida B. Wells, a founder of the NAACP. In the *Libera Me*, for example, we also hear excerpts from Wells's speech of 1909, "Lynching Is Color-Line Murder." African American writer S. Renee Mitchell, poet-in-residence with Resonance, was commissioned to write a final narration to be spoken over the music of *In Paradisum*.

"We wanted to create contemporary poetic reflections as well as musical ones," says FitzGibbon. Geter recalls being surprised to discover "how pertinent the Latin texts can be today, though not necessarily from a religious standpoint." This timeliness is enhanced by the juxtaposition of new texts and poems. His setting of the last words of Eric Garner, an African American who died from suffocation when New York City police put him in a chokehold during a 2014 arrest, is the most harrowing part of the work. The solo tenor sings "I can't breathe" during a movement within the expansive *Dies irae* sequence but is gradually drowned out by the percussion section. It's an unforgettable merging of contemporary events with the traditional requiem framework. *[Editor's note: As this issue of the* Voice *went to press, protests and demonstrations for racial justice took place across the U.S. and the world following the death of George Floyd, an African American man who was killed by Minneapolis police while being arrested. Among Floyd's last words were "I can't breathe."]*

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–Gabriela Lena Frank

The Cataclysm of Colonial Conquest

Berkeley-based composer Gabriela Lena Frank completed the *Conquest Requiem* in 2017, when it was given its world premiere by Andrés Orozco-Estrada and the Houston Symphony and Chorus. Giancarlo Guerrero was scheduled to lead the Nashville Symphony and Chorus in its second round of performances in March, which were also to be the source for the first live recording. Frank's approach interweaves prayers from the traditional Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead with a new text—the work of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and poet Nilo Cruz.

Cruz's libretto tells the story of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire during the early 16th century from the perspective of the conquered, focusing on the figures of Malinche (a soprano role) and Martín (baritone), Malinche's mestizo son by the conquistador Hernán Cortés. A young Nahua woman who was enslaved by the invading Spaniards and taken by Cortés to be his mistress, Malinche has a complex, ambiguous reputation. Frank explains: "She has been variously viewed as a feminist hero who saved countless lives, a treacherous villain who facilitated genocide, a conflicted victim of forces beyond her control, or as symbolic mother of the new mestizo people."

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"As a whole, [*How to Go On*] grapples with the prospect of confronting our own mortality in the face of our grief over a loved one's death, the weight of all that." *–Dale Trumbore*

Frank uses three languages to narrate "the cataclysm that was the Conquest": Latin, Spanish, and the Nahua of the Aztec world. The Latin requiem's outlines are clear but foreshortened, leaving more space for Malinche's narrative to be overlaid, while the omnipresent chorus comments in the manner of Greek tragedy. The violent, blood-stained consequences of the Conquest remain as unresolved as the racial violence that has accompanied the history Geter commemorates in *An African American Requiem*.

Her score calls for many unusual colors, blends, and gestures, often aiming to generate a sense of wonder, and gives the orchestra a prominence equal to that of the voices, which are often treated in operatic style.

Grieving Loss in Appalachia

Even though he had become "a Southern expatriate [then] living in New York City," Michael Conley channeled his reactions to the disastrous consequences of mountaintop removal mining in Appalachia into a requiem—"not a requiem in the traditional sense, with the intent of consoling the living on the death of a fellow human being, but with the idea in mind of lamenting the loss of an old and enduring culture, and an environmental heritage that continues to be under assault." He prepared his own libretto for *Appalachian Requiem* by turning to a poetic anthology of women writers from Appalachia spanning from the ▶

19th century to the present. "Most of them ended up being contemporary poems and environmentally focused," says Conley.

With its intermingling of the ancient Latin texts and modern verse, Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* is a frequent model for secular requiems. Conley, however, takes the idea even further by omitting the Latin prayers entirely from the sung text. Conley uses the familiar names (*Dies Irae*, *Sanctus*, etc.) only to provide "a frame of reference for how this work is intended to mirror the traditional outline of a requiem mass." Other texts include a poem by Wendell Berry and hymns from such sources as *The Sacred Harp* and *Southern Harmony*. He organized these texts in a way that progresses, like the traditional requiem, "from grief and tragedy to consolation and hope."

Also a choral conductor and organist, Conley has focused his composition mostly on choral music, songs, and vocal chamber music and plans to undertake his first opera. For *Appalachian Requiem*, he wanted to write a piece drawing on the style of shape note hymns as a unifying device. The chant and poetry of Cherokee Indians are another impetus and bring the "original people from this land" into the requiem in the section corresponding to the *Sanctus*—"the turning point in the piece." Conley began with chamber versions but was able to realize his initial, fuller vision for chorus and orchestra in the version he introduced in 2017 at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, where he now serves as music director.

***Appalachian Requiem* is "not a requiem in the traditional sense, with the intent of consoling the living on the death of a fellow human being, but with the idea in mind of lamenting the loss of an old and enduring culture, and an environmental heritage that continues to be under assault."** *–Michael Conley*

Conley doesn't think of his *Appalachian Requiem* as an entirely secular piece, since sacred texts are embedded in it. He considers it "a different lens for looking at what 'sacred and secular' means. It's all about context. The blurring of that line to me is very interesting." He chose the requiem form because it has privileged status in the canon: "So it makes sense that this is what you go to when wanting to make a statement."

Asking Questions

For *How to Go On*, Los Angeles-based composer Dale Trumbore drew on what she sees as the themes treated by the traditional requiem: "concern with what happens after we die and what we cannot know. As a whole, it grapples with the prospect of confronting our own mortality in the face of our grief over a loved one's death, the weight of all that." Put another way: *How to Go On* is "more about asking questions than being able to know any definite answers. When we lose someone, the question we ask is: 'How can we go on?'"

The title itself ambiguously suggests both question and answer. Indeterminacy is built into the structure of this eight-part a cappella work from 2016, which has been widely performed around the U.S. since it was commissioned by the Southern California-based Choral Arts Initiative and its artistic director Brandon Elliott (who have also recorded it for the anthology *How to Go On: The Choral Works of Dale Trumbore*). The composer allows performers to alter the order in which the movements are presented, with the exception that the work must end with her setting of a poem by Amy Fleury ("When at last I join the democracy of dirt"). This flexibility, Trumbore believes, reflects the psychology of coping with loss: "When we move through grief, we don't have control. It can be beautiful to lose that control."

An acknowledged agnostic, Trumbore—who studied with Morten Lauridsen—immersed herself in collections of poetry by writers she admired. Along with the contemporary American Amy Fleury, these include Barbara Crooker, Laura Foley, and the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön. Like Conley, she uses no texts from the traditional Latin requiem mass in her eight-movement work. Indeed, *How to Go On* is even further removed from any sacred associations and "is less grounded in the afterlife" than might be expected from a requiem.

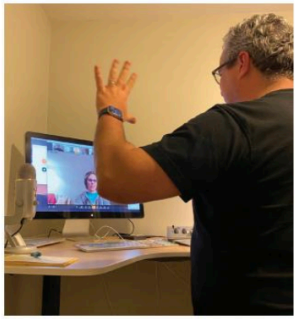
The Way Forward

In the words of the title poem by Barbara Crooker, "How can we go on, knowing the end of the story?" Humanity is just beginning to process the immense losses caused by COVID-19. Within the world of music alone, the pandemic has had devastating effects—and many are wondering precisely this: How do we go on?

Brandon Elliott leads the Choral Arts Initiative in the 2016 premiere of Dale Trumbore's How to Go On.

The fallout of the coronavirus lockdown has had uncanny relevance for Frank's *Conquest Requiem* as well. After the Nashville Symphony performances had to be cancelled, Frank recalled how she had hoped that the message of the *Conquest Requiem* "could speak to an array of suffering and the resilience of the living. I never imagined a health epidemic on the scale of COVID-19, which has paralyzed daily life as we know it. After this experience, we will all be changed. Art and its celebration of life will resonate all the more deeply with us."

The *Conquest Requiem* happened to be the first Nashville Symphony project that had to be cancelled in mid-season owing to the sudden closures. Music director Giancarlo Guerrero believes the coronavirus situation has underscored the piece's relevance for today even more strikingly. *Conquest Requiem* mourns "the tragic implications of new diseases brought by the colonialists that made a whole society disappear. It's a requiem that considers the first real example of globalization, the negative things along with positive ones that are still having repercussions." The closures came before the chorus and orchestra had been able to rehearse together, but the choir has continued with rehearsals via Zoom. "When the *Conquest Requiem* is rescheduled," says Frank, "I know the orchestra and choir and soloists will own its message even more than before."



Tucker Biddlecombe leads the Nashville Symphony Chorus in a Zoom rehearsal of Gabriela Lena Frank's Conquest Requiem. *Originally planned for March, the Nashville performance was cancelled because of COVID-19 and will be rescheduled.*

As of this writing. *An African American Requiem* has been rescheduled to be presented for the first time on January 22, 2021 (with an unprecedented live, bi-coastal simulcast to maximize access). "I can only imagine that a requiem will have added poignance, after so much loss around the globe, including losses in our own country that have disproportionately affected African Americans," FitzGibbon reflects. She says that rehearsing the piece, even over Zoom, has "felt like a small balm in this difficult time" and continued to provide a sense of shared purpose. "It has felt like something sacred to be working toward this premiere." ▬

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