

PROGRAM NOTES: REQUIEM, op. 76

The Requiem is one of the most important works, spiritually as well as musically, in Fine's oeuvre. Its conception spans the first 18½ years he was a Christian, and it is the final version of the "Requiem-Symphony" (now destroyed), the first work he attempted to write as a Christian. "The original torso," says the composer, "was sketched as far as the Rex Tremendae and would have borne the influence of Tchaikovsky, Verdi, and Mahler. The Sanctus would have been a scherzo based partly on the traditional Dies Irae motive with the influence of Bruckner. But at the time I was trying to write it I did not know how to continue past the scherzo." In any case, the work would have been immature; Fine evidently recognized the prospect when he transferred the scherzo to his immature, Brucknerian student symphony in D minor. Only after another fifteen years of life, including the turbulent periods in Michigan (1977-1980) and Georgia (1982-1987) would Fine pick up the Requiem again. Again the composer: "The original was the work of a new convert acting on blind faith that the world would end soon. Without losing this viewpoint, the final version has added a fully matured disillusionment with all that I have seen in the world, and a certainty as to how it would end." We must also add that another work by Fine, by the composer's own admission in his memoirs, also benefited from a long maturation period--the Double Viola Concerto op. 52.

Evidently the Requiem required a musical maturation as well in its gestation. Between the torso of 1974 and the completed work of 1992 he wrote several other sacred works, from which he borrowed for the Requiem. The Introit and Agnus Dei are fully based on the Kyrie and Agnus Dei of his Anglican Service op. 28, and the last movement is an expansion of his In Paradiso op. 62. Fine also saved many motives from the torso, including the opening of the Dies Irae (Ex. 1):

the theme of the Mors stupebit (Ex. 2):

the opening of the instrumental development at Bar 614 of the Dies Irae (Ex. 3):

the main theme of the Offertory (Ex. 4):

and the choral fugato that closes the exposition of the Offertory (Ex. 5):

Many new influences are also manifest, chiefly the basing of the Dies Irae on The Stars and Stripes Forever--the most obvious manifestation of Fine's disillusionment with his country. The Tuba mirum is, apparently, unique. In the fall of 1989, Fine was impressed by a sermon given at Memphis' Messianic Jewish congregation, B'rit Hadasha, terming Rosh Hashanah as the Day of Judgment; the result is a nine-part brass canon based on shofar rhythms. "Why nobody," says the composer, "not even Berlioz or Verdi, does this is inexplicable." Other influences are rap music and blue-movie music. All are subsumed into Fine's neoromantic, partially serialized style rich in polymodal treatments and counterpoint.

The textual conception also changed considerably from 1974 to 1992, from a standard Latin Requiem to an eclectic one with most of the texts (except the Dies Irae) in English and the Catholic Libera me replaced by the Anglican Commendation. For this purpose Fine used his own translations from the Latin.

The concept of a "Requiem-Symphony", even though not in four movements, is preserved in Fine's use of symphonic forms in the Requiem. The Introit is in a concise rondo form, the second, fugal episode of which is the Kyrie. Each reprise of the main theme ("Rest eternal") is enriched by some character or motive from the episodes; the rondo form thus acquires a sense of expansion.

The fugue subject of the Kyrie is a twelve-tone theme, a rare instance of this kind of writing in the Requiem; its contour strains to rise, as though to suggest that mercy is difficult to obtain. We must also mention one motive from the first episode (Ex. 6):

notable for its cyclic usage in the Dies Irae and Sanctus.

As the Dies Irae has fallen from use (except for Ligeti's avant-garde use of it in his three-movement Requiem and Britten's troped use in the War Requiem), a twentieth-century appraisal of it is difficult. It is so sprawling that any form besides strophic or variation form is immensely difficult to use for it. Fine's solution is a hybrid--a large rondo form with overtones of sonata-form (mainly articulated by Stars and Stripes motives) and a double development section. The first is a vocal setting of the Recordare in passacaglia form, with an 18-bar passacaglia theme; the second is an instrumental development, beginning with Ex. 3 above. Organic unity between these two sections is lent by the passacaglia theme being an extreme augmentation of Ex. 3. Whereas most Dies Irae's end in calm codas, this one does not. A powerful crescendo at the end, after the recall of the Introit's main theme, shows that Fine's attitude about man's fate is pessimistic. The influence of hard rock shows in the use of a hi-hat cymbal to accompany the main theme. A word must also be said about the polyrhythms in the main theme-group: the opening motive of the Stars and Stripes, obsessively repeated, is in 7/4, and Ex. 6 from the Introit, which accompanies it, is in 5/2, but they are combined in the framework of an allabreve tempo!

The other movements, even if smaller in scope taken all together against the Dies Irae, are even so no less unusual. The Offertory is written out in conventional sonata-form (the only movement so written), but orchestrated without violins; also, one clarinet is in B-flat, the other in A, with exposed passages of interplay between them. In accordance with his Episcopal beliefs, Fine eliminates the words "But let St. Michael the standard-bearer", making him the only Requiem composer to do so. The middle section, like the Recordare, is a passacaglia on a new theme, featuring the soloists, against which appear motives from the main theme-group.

The full orchestra returns in the Sanctus (chorus) and Benedictus (tenor solo), with another unusual inspiration--obscene rap. According to Fine, this derivation is analogous to the Renaissance practice of basing sacred works on secular tunes. The Benedictus is also notable for a cyclic reference that apparently no other Requiem makes: the Hosanna (which is not a shout of praise but a cry for help) recalls the Rex Tremendae from the Dies Irae. To allow for this, the Anglican form Glory be to Thee, Lord most high is used in the Sanctus instead of the Hosanna.

For the Agnus Dei Fine returns to his Anglican Service, borrowing the same movement and expanding the threefold statement into a small rondo form by the addition of two episodes. The first is a bassoon cadenza; in the second a percussion ensemble enters and develops the cadenza motive to the climax.

The Commendation, the only new text in the Requiem, is said or intoned in the Anglican service at the time of interment. Its autumnal atmosphere and defiant life-affirmation, "Yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia", contrasts it with the movement it replaces, the Libera me with its recapitulation of the Day of Wrath. Fine sets this text as a soprano aria with chorus in ABA form, working the Alleluias into the recapitulation. The key--a mysterious A minor inflected by a modal D-sharp--is deliberately far removed from the main key of E-flat minor for two reasons: first, to portray the mystic life-affirmation in the face of death, and second, to resolve without pause into the In Paradiso. Originally written as a soprano aria for Lilah York, a Memphis Symphony colleague bereaved of her daughter, it is rewritten in the Requiem for chorus and full orchestra. The original ABA form is preserved, but expanded greatly with contrapuntal elaboration and also several cyclic references, the climax of which is the twelve-tone theme of the Kyrie. The key is also noteworthy: a polymodality of E-flat mixolydian (a rich resolution of the relentless E-flat minor) and B dorian, with a great deal made of the enharmonic C#/Db thus derived.

The unique choices of text and musical devices described here make the Requiem a great statement of Fine's faith, which balances born-again, Jewish, and Anglo-Catholic beliefs. By its borrowings and other influences, it also tells a life story.