

Proud Music of the Storm – Carlyle Sharpe

Proud Music of the Storm was commissioned for the thirtieth anniversary season of the Providence Singers. The work was premiered on November 3, 2001, under the direction of Julian Wachner, and has since been performed in Boston, Montreal, and San Diego. In 2007, the work was featured on the National Endowment for the Arts “American Masterpieces” concerts with the Providence Singers.

The initial attraction to Walt Whitman’s *Proud Music of the Storm* resulted from the powerful and universal themes it presented through its references to music. The original Whitman poem comes from 1868 and is shaped by the events of history, making particular reference to the Victorian era. Whitman’s poem is wonderfully balanced in the way it expresses themes ranging from despair to hope, and his words still resonate powerfully when considered in the context of our contemporary world.

The “Proud music of the storm” motive, stated by the chorus in the opening measures of the work, serves as a unifying device throughout and appears in various forms within the composition, principally in the first, fourth, sixth, and eighth movements. The fourth movement (“Ah from a little child”) is the centerpiece of the work and is based on the “Proud music of the storm” motive from the opening of the first movement. It is distinguished by the fact that it is the only *a cappella* movement, and it is the only movement that is physically detached from the other movements. All of the other movements flow seamlessly into one another to make up the large outer sections of the work.

For the most part, the movements for solo voice and orchestra tend to be rather introspective and are accompanied principally by the strings. The one exception comes in the fifth movement (“I hear the dance-music of all nations”) for mezzo-soprano. This movement comes as a sharp contrast to the quiet ending of the *a cappella* movement that precedes it. It is in a lively tempo, and the mixed meter rhythms are generated naturally by the word stress of the text. It is certainly the most jovial segment of text from the larger poem as it reflects on the “dance-music of all nations.”

The choral movement that follows (“Now Asia, Africa leave me”) maintains the same tempo and rhythmic interest of the fifth movement, however the mood becomes one of anger, generated by lines such as “Europe seizing inflates me” and “I madly struggling cry.” The “Proud music of the storm” motive begins this movement, although this time it is highly syncopated, and appears in the orchestra in different variations throughout a majority of the movement.

The last movement serves the role of epilogue, as the chorus presents the text in a pseudo-chorale style over a steady, repeated, quarter-note pulse in the low strings. Although this music is at first reminiscent of a dirge, it gradually turns hopeful and builds to a climax on the text “Poems bridging the way from Life to Death.” The music of this text was first heard in the *a cappella* movement, “Ah from a little child.” This time, however, all of the instrumental and vocal forces participate, resulting in a much more dramatic climax. The music that follows turns again to the “Proud music of the storm” motive and ends the work on the text, “Which let us go forth in the bold day and write.”

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Gesang der Parzen, Opus 89 – Johannes Brahms

Johannes Brahms was born in Hamburg, Germany, on May 7, 1833, and died in Vienna on April 3, 1897. He composed the Song of the Fates in 1882. In addition to the chorus, the score calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.

Brahms completed the *Gesang der Parzen* (“Song of the Parcae, or Fates”), Op. 89, in 1882, in his fiftieth year, and never again returned to the medium of chorus and orchestra. He chose a strongly classicizing poem by the greatest master of German lyric, Goethe (it is, in fact, drawn from his poetic drama *Iphigenia auf Tauris*). Like his earlier setting of Hölderlin’s *Schicksalslied*, this text treats the gulf between the gods in the heights and mankind below, hapless victims of the Fates.

As befits the darkness of the mood, Brahms creates a dark-colored choral sound in six parts, dividing the altos and basses into two parts each. The six-part chorus naturally falls into semi-choruses of women's or men's voices, and Brahms exploits the possibilities of echoing one group against the other. But for the most part the *Gesang der Parzen* is ascetic in its musical approach, avoiding showy florid passages and an easy consolation. Indeed, at the beginning of the final stanza of the text we expect, for a moment, the kind of turn to the major key that brings reconciliation in the *Schicksalslied* or the *Alto Rhapsody*—but here it does not happen. Brahms ends the final stanza resolutely in a dark and despairing close.

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Requiem, Opus 48 – Gabriel Faure

Gabriel Fauré was born in Pamiers, Ariège, on May 12, 1845, and died in Paris on November 4, 1924. The history of the Requiem, which extends between 1877 and 1900, is detailed below. Fauré conducted the first performance of the bulk of what we now know as the Requiem at the Church of the Madeleine in Paris on January 16, 1888, in memory of his parents. The final version with full orchestral accompaniment received its premiere at the Trocadéro on July 12, 1900, with Paul Taffanel conducting the Lamoureux Orchestra. In its fullest version the score calls for soprano and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, two each of flutes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, two harps, organ, and strings.

Gabriel Fauré stands apart from almost all the significant composers of his age. His long life spans the period from Berlioz (who was composing *La Damnation de Faust* at the time of Fauré's birth) to Berg, who had completed *Wozzeck* three years before Fauré's death). The late romantic era and the rise of modernism was a time of noisy excess, Fauré's music, though, is quiet, subdued, even tentative in effect. When other composers were writing gigantic symphonies and tone poems or lengthy operas, he was turning out songs and chamber music.

Notoriously uninterested in the process of instrumentation once he had conceived the musical material, he often had his students finish the job of orchestrating most of his works for larger ensembles. A composer of such artistic reserve is not likely to attract hordes of enthusiasts or to claim an important role for himself and his works. But the support that Fauré did attract was at the most exalted level--on the part of his fellow composers and his pupils, including Maurice Ravel, Georges Enesco, and Nadia Boulanger. Boulanger always regarded him as one of the greatest masters of his time, and passed on her enthusiasm to her pupils. It was a Boulanger pupil, Aaron Copland, who wrote one of the first substantial appreciations of Fauré in English. And it was Boulanger herself who conducted the first Boston Symphony performances of Fauré's *Requiem*.

Born in the south of France, Fauré studied in Paris not at the hidebound Conservatoire but rather at the École Niedermeyer, where he received an unusually broad musical education in three respects that set him apart from the products of the "official" school: a thorough understanding of older music from the Renaissance and Baroque eras, familiarity with the German tradition, including Bach and Beethoven, and a more-than-nodding acquaintance with such dangerous moderns as Schumann, Liszt, and Wagner--this last element through the good offices of the young Saint-Saëns, who from 1861 on was professor of piano at the school. Fauré himself went on to become one of the most distinguished teachers of the turn-of-the-century era.

French music in the late nineteenth century was divided into highly politicized camps--the Wagnerians, the Franckists, the followers of Massenet, and others. Fauré kept largely to himself, not joining any clique; even after making the customary pilgrimage to Bayreuth to hear the *Ring*, he revealed almost no influence of the experience in his own work. Thus his music has always stood somewhat apart, sometimes overlooked and misunderstood. He left virtually no big works of the kind that attract general audiences, but singers have always delighted in his exquisite songs, and chamber music performers have reveled in the range and variety of his work for various small ensembles. The two largest works to achieve general popularity are the suite arranged from his incidental music for a London production of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which dates from the late 1890s, and his largest choral work, the *Requiem*, the composition of which, in one stage or another, covered most of the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Fauré's *Requiem* is absolutely typical of his work in its avoidance of melodrama or overblown effect. His earliest conception was an intimate one, as far as possible from the heaven-storming theatrics of Berlioz's *Requiem*, which he detested. He made a careful selection of passages from the liturgical text, omitting all of the melodramatic images of the Last Judgment that had been the dramatic high points for

both Berlioz and Verdi. When the work was first performed in 1888, in memory of the composer's parents (his father had died in 1885, and his mother died at the end of 1887, while he was composing the *Requiem*), it consisted only of the following movements:

Introit et Kyrie
Sanctus
Pie Jesu
Agnus Dei
In Paradisum

It was scored for a small orchestra of low-pitched instruments (violas, cellos, double basses, harp, timpani, and organ) for a somber sonority brightened only by an unmuted solo violin in the *Sanctus* soaring high above the ensemble like an angel of grace (in the full orchestra version, Fauré uses the same violin melody, but gives it to combined first and second violin sections, muted, and puts it an octave lower). The soprano solo in the *Pie Jesu* was intended for a boy soprano, while the choral soprano line was taken by the children's choir that Fauré trained at the church.

Almost at once he expanded on this original plan. By June 1889 he had completed the *Offertoire*, which now comes after the first movement. And he decided to make use, just before the end, of a *Libera me* for baritone and organ that he had composed as early as 1877 (this brings in the one brief passage that recalls the dramatic "Dies irae" of the full Requiem text). This version, complete in its number of movements and with an orchestra enlarged to include horns, trumpets, and trombones, was performed at the Church of Saint-Gervais on January 28, 1892. The third and last version (and the first to be published) involved the addition of woodwind parts and the reduction of the prominence of the organ; it has become the standard version of the work, though the first version was published and recorded within the last decade.

Even in its largest version, Fauré's *Requiem* is a singularly tranquil and subdued piece, a work almost of classical elegance--not in terms of musical style, but in its extraordinary serenity and restraint. The chorus, for much of its part, sings in a chantlike manner with only a few outbursts ("Hosanna" in the *Sanctus*). One would be hard put to think of music more sweetly tranquil and serene than the *Pie Jesu* or more graceful than the unison violins and violas--so similar in character to the ritornello of a Bach cantata aria--introducing and underlying the *Agnus Dei*. Only once, and very briefly at that, are we reminded of the fear of death that was the central image of other Requiem settings as the somber D minor tread of the strings underlies the baritone's *Libera me* and the horns (but not the trumpets!) provide a nervous rhythmic background to the choral "Dies illa, dies irae"—the only explicit evocation of the Last Judgment in the score, and which flows, almost without break, into the delicate tranquility of the *In Paradisum*, where the harps and organ add a touch of celestial brilliance to the quiet close.

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