Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Ave Verum Corpus, K. 618

Although Mozart wrote a copious amount of music for the Catholic liturgy, the vast portion of it was written while he remained in his native Salzburg. Along with the precocious works of his youth, he regularly wrote for the chapel of his employer, Archbishop Colloredo, the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg, whom Mozart served in the official capacity as court organist. With Mozart’s dismissal from the Prince-Archbishop’s service in 1781 (accompanied, as Mozart admitted, by “a firm kick to the backside” from the Archbishop’s Chamberlain) and his subsequent relocation to Vienna, he no longer had any necessity to write church music, other than the incomplete C minor Mass, K. 427 that he wrote for his betrothal to Constanze Weber.

By 1791, Vienna had soured on Mozart, and he found it difficult to make ends meet in the competitive musical culture of the city. While Constanze and their son Karl journeyed to the spa at Baden for the restorative cure of the mineral springs in June of 1791, Mozart stayed in Vienna, visiting occasionally but largely communicating with his wife and son by letter and postcard. Anton Stoll, the organist and choirmaster of Baden’s parish church, was a friend of the Mozarts’ and frequently programmed his music with his choir. While in Baden in mid-June, Mozart composed the brief motet for choir and strings, Ave Verum Corpus, in appreciation of Stoll’s friendship and for his care of Constanze on her trips to Baden.

The work is in a simple chorale texture, with the string parts largely doubling the voices and commenting between the verses. The piquant and masterful use of chromaticism (especially in a surprising modulation from D major to F major) lifts this brief work from the ordinary to the sublime and the work concludes in an atmosphere of sweet serenity.

Gustav Mahler: Adagietto from Symphony No. 5 in C-sharp minor

What lengths would any of us go to impress a Significant Other? Dinner, candy, and flowers are all very nice, but not very original. An original poem or song? It could work, but unless you’re a professional poet or musician, such an artistic attempt at romance could be painfully embarrassing.

Fortunately for Gustav Mahler, he already had four symphonies under his belt by the time he met Alma Schindler at the home of a mutual friend in November 1901. Alma was an intelligent, talented and beautiful young woman, and an accomplished composer in her own right. When she met Mahler, he had risen from his humble beginnings in the opera houses and concert halls of Prague, Leipzig, Budapest and Hamburg to become the Music Director of the Vienna Court Opera, the most prestigious conducting post in the German-speaking world.
Mahler fell for Alma immediately, and proposed three weeks later. Alma’s family went to great lengths to persuade her to refuse him, concerned about his Jewish background (he had converted to Catholicism in order to accept the Vienna Court Opera post), his middle-class upbringing, and his age – he was 19 years her senior. She was also taken back by his 20-page letter to her, dated December 19, 1901 in which he outlined his expectations that she give up her composing career for the sake of their marriage. Nevertheless, the couple formally announced their engagement four days later and they were married on March 9, 1902 at the Karlskirche in Vienna.

Through 1901 and 1902, Mahler worked on his Symphony No. 5, which he considered a thorough rethinking of his symphonic style. The *Adagietto* serves as an oasis of serenity between the upheaval of the scherzo and the exuberance of the finale. It is one of the only movements that Mahler conducted separately from the rest of the symphony. After Mahler’s death, it became the practice to perform the *Adagietto* as a memorial work, much as Leonard Bernstein did at the funerals of both Serge Koussevitzky and John F. Kennedy, with a typical performance lasting anywhere from twelve to sixteen minutes. More recently, letters between Alma and the Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg have revealed that instead of a lament, the *Adagietto* should be performed slightly slower than *Andante*, and that it is not a song of grief, but an ardent love letter from the composer to his young wife, delivered wordlessly by the strings of the orchestra.

The *Adagietto* opens with whispering strings and a quietly murmuring harp that introduce a hesitant violin melody, wistful and longing, like a plant tendril rising to greet the sun. This achingly beautiful tune is taken up by other string sections, elongated and elaborated upon, rising to climactic moments and falling away again into chamber-music delicacy. There is passion and ardor in addition to sweetness and serenity, all the way to the final nostalgic and poignant final bars.

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Requiem in D minor, K. 626**

On the surface, it would seem to be a mystery worthy of the talents of Sherlock Holmes and his trusty sidekick, Dr. John Watson. In the summer of 1791, a solemn and mysterious stranger arrives at the Vienna lodgings of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The stranger doesn’t give his name, but he brings a commission from an unknown nobleman for a Requiem Mass. The nobleman provides a down payment of fifty ducats, with the promise of a further fifty upon receipt of the score. In ill health, with his debts piling higher and higher, Mozart accepts the commission, and begins to work feverishly on it. With the ever-increasing feeling that the work is a premonition of his own demise, Mozart wastes away, pouring the last precious ounces of his life into the Requiem that he would leave unfinished at his death on December 5, 1791. Because of his enormous debt, Mozart is buried in a pauper’s grave and his final resting place is lost to history. Is it possible that someone commissioned the Requiem and called upon the Powers of Darkness to ensure that this would be Mozart’s final work? Could it be his professional rival, Salieri? Someone from the Viennese court? Perhaps even his wife?

Even a contemporary Sherlock taking up the cold trail of the case over two centuries later would find that the facts of the case do not fit the conclusions. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that the commission for the Requiem came from Count Franz Walsegg-Stuppach, an Austrian nobleman who had a dilettante’s interest in music. Because of his wealth, he could afford to commission works from
talented Viennese composers and then pass them off as his own. The tall stranger who delivered the commission was one Franz Anton Leitgeb, the manager of a gypsum mine near the Walsegg estate. While it is true that Mozart gladly accepted the commission to reduce his indebtedness, he may have planned to use the work to fulfill his obligations for his new unpaid position as Deputy Kapellmeister at St. Stephen’s Cathedral, with the hope that a new major choral work would help improve his career and his bank balance. Holmes or perhaps his Baker Street Irregulars would have easily discovered that on December 14, 1793, a grieving Count Walsegg led a performance of a Requiem in D minor in memory of his late wife at the Cistercian monastery in Wiener Neustadt.

As for the conspiracy theories on Mozart’s death, it is a relatively simple matter to exonerate poor Antonio Salieri. The legend that he was responsible for Mozart’s death evidently began as a rumor, but it was given literary assistance by the Russian poet and playwright Alexander Pushkin, whose play Mozart and Salieri appeared in 1830. Rimsky-Korsakov produced a one-act opera based on the play in 1897, and it was the subject of a silent film by Victor Tourjansky in 1914. Peter Shaffer adapted the same story for his play Amadeus in 1979, memorably brought to the screen by Miloš Forman in 1984.

Beyond these literary and cinematic flights of fancy, there is little evidence to implicate Salieri. Although we have no real evidence that Mozart and Salieri were close friends, a composition rediscovered in November 2015 has been proven to be a collaboration between the supposed rivals. The other theories on Mozart’s death range from arsenic poisoning to subdural hematoma (with mercury poisoning being among the more probable causes), but without solid forensic evidence, they are but speculation and await corroborating evidence. In all likelihood, Mozart perished from a combination of overwork (he was working on both La Clemenza di Tito and The Magic Flute in the fall of 1791), disease and quack medicine.

As for Mozart’s poverty, it is estimated that his annual income in Vienna would have been the equivalent of $150,000 today, though at the end of his life his financial management did take a turn for the worse. We also know that Mozart was buried in a communal grave not because he couldn’t afford his own burial plot, but for the sake of public safety – he died while a bout of plague raged through Vienna, and the Emperor ordered all corpses (not just plague victims) to be buried in communal graves well outside the city limits in the hope of controlling the spread of the disease.

With Mozart’s death, Constanze still had to deal with fulfilling Count Walsegg’s commission; given her household’s financial condition, it’s unsurprising that she quickly moved to have the work completed by other hands in order to secure the other fifty ducats. Her first choices, Maximillian Stadler and Joseph Eybler, found themselves unequal to the task, so Constanze turned the job over to Franz Xavier Süssmayr, who completed the score and turned it over to Leitgeb for delivery to Count Walsegg.

The completion of the Requiem has sparked considerable debate. The opening Introit and Kyrie was the only movement Mozart completed, though most of the remainder had been left in short score with the instrumentation indicated in detail, up through the first eight bars of the Lacrimosa. It had been assumed for years that Süssmayr had written the Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei himself, but a sketch sheet discovered in 1962 indicated that Süssmayr had access to further sketches for the work that have since been lost, and Constanze’s remark that Süssmayr did “what anyone could have done”
supports the idea that he had carried out Mozart’s intentions as fully as possible. While Süssmayr’s version remains in the standard repertoire, other alternative completions by Richard Maunder, Duncan Druce and Robert Levin can be heard both in the concert hall and on recordings.

The Requiem and Ave Verum Corpus are the first liturgical works from Mozart’s pen since the incomplete C minor Mass, K. 427, of 1782. In the intervening decade, Mozart attended musical soirées at the Vienna home of Baron Gottfried van Swieten, who was a passionate admirer of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Friedrich Handel. It was van Swieten who commissioned Mozart to make an arrangement of Handel’s Messiah, and Mozart began to make his own arrangements of Bach fugues, adding his own preludes. This interest in Baroque counterpoint manifests itself in many sections of the Requiem.

The work follows the standard format for the Requiem Mass, eliminating the Gloria and Credo movements and adding the Sequence (Dies irae, Tuba mirum, Rex tremenda, Recordare, Confutatis, Lacrimosa, Domine Jesu Christe, Hostias). Mozart adds the dark colors of both clarinets and trombones to his orchestra, and trumpets and timpani are used prominently throughout. The opening Requiem aeternam opens with a solemn tread in the strings, over which clarinets and bassoons weave flowing melodic lines. The choir enters with mellifluous counterpoint, contrasted by more homophonic sections and solo voices. The subsequent fugal Kyrie is based on a subject that bears strong resemblance both to the chorus “And With His Stripes” from Handel’s Messiah, but also to the finale of the String Quartet in F minor, Op. 20, No. 5 by Mozart’s friend and mentor, Joseph Haydn. The Dies Irae is a stormy portrayal of Judgement Day, the implacable pronouncements of the choir delivered above the ominous fanfares of the trumpets and the agitated figures in the strings. Tuba mirum is introduced by the solo trombone, in duet with the solo baritone. The majestic Rex tremenda bears strong resemblance to a Baroque French overture, with the choir declaiming over the marked dotted rhythms in the orchestra, but Mozart responds beautifully to the text “salva me” (save me) by gradually softening the harsh rhythms into a heartfelt plea for mercy. Cellos and clarinets introduce the seraphic Recordare, where the soloists weave rapturous melodic lines above the gentle cascades of scales in the orchestra. Confutatis brings us back to the Day of Judgment, where we hear both the roaring flames of Hell (men’s voices, string ostinato, trumpets, timpani) and the penitent supplications of those facing damnation (women’s voices, violins), with the only hint of salvation coming in the final major chord. The sighing lilt of the Lacrimosa perfectly conveys the lamentations of humanity rising from ashes to be judged. Domine Jesu Christe returns to the agitated mood of the Dies Irae, quiet supplications from the voices shouted down by outbursts from both orchestra and chorus, and concluding with the fugal “Quam olim Abrahae.” The gentle Hostias sings sweetly, but darker textures return with a reprise of the “Quam olim Abrahae” fugue. The brief Sanctus is the manner of a Bach cantata movement but suddenly bursts into the joyful Hosanna. In the Benedictus the four exultant solo voices are interrupted only by solemn chorales in the trombones and strings before a brief return of the Hosanna fugue. The stately and sober tread of the Agnus Dei gradually transforms into a return of the music from the opening Requiem aeternam, and the work concludes with a reprise of the opening Kyrie fugue on the words “Cum sanctis tuis.”