

THE BOOK OF REQUIEMS, 1450–1550. FROM THE EARLIEST AGES TO THE PRESENT PERIOD, ED. DAVID J. BURN

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‘Few liturgies have inspired composers more than the mass for the dead, commonly known as the Requiem mass’.¹ These words were chosen by Pieter Bergé, David Burn and Antonio Chemotti to introduce the first volume in the series *The Book of Requiems*. One can hardly argue with such a claim. The Requiem is indeed a genre that has always been a protagonist in the history of Western music, from the fifteenth century to the present day. With thousands of extant settings, it represents a musical tradition that probably owes its success to the enduring allure of its liturgical texts, but also to the flexibility of its ritual meaning, which makes it suitable for many different musical interpretations.

Surprisingly, in spite of its dissemination, very few scholarly works address the early history and development of the Requiem as a genre. For many years, scholars and performers interested in the inception of the Requiem had to rely on a single – and barely accessible – study that tried to address the mediaeval and early modern repertoire as a

whole: Harold T. Luce’s PhD dissertation *The Requiem Mass from its Plainsong Beginnings to 1600*,² defended at Florida State University in 1953. In more recent times, two volumes – sharing the same evocative title *Dies Irae* – adopted similar all-embracing approaches. The first, by Robert Chase,³ aims to be a sort of Requiem encyclopaedia, covering its entire history and considering also non-Catholic rites, such as the Byzantine-Greek and the Russian Orthodox, as well as funeral music in more general terms. Though often useful, Chase’s book is littered with inaccuracies, probably a consequence of the diverse material taken into consideration, which is not easily manageable by a single author. The second book is a collection of essays edited by Pieter Bergé (also one of the editors of *The Book of Requiems*) and Jan Christiaens.⁴ This is more focused on the Western tradition, but it has a popularising approach – thus focusing on

1 *The Book of Requiems, 1450–1550. From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period*, ed. David J. Burn, Leuven 2022, p. 15.

2 Harold T. Luce, *The Requiem Mass from its Plainsong Beginnings to 1600*, Florida State University 1953 (PhD dissertation).

3 Robert Chase, *Dies Irae: A Guide to Requiem Music*, Lanham 2003.

4 *Dies irae: Kroniek ven het Requiem*, ed. Pieter Bergé, Jan Christiaens, Leuven 2011.

the most important settings in the entire history of the genre – and, being in Dutch, it has a limited readership. To this list, one could add also two further monographs devoted to a specific setting or context, Owen Rees's *The Requiem of Tomás Luis de Victoria* (2019) and Antonio Chemotti's *Polyphonic Music pro mortuis in Italy: An Introduction* (2020).⁵ Rees's book contains a thorough analysis and historical contextualisation of Victoria's *Requiem* for six voices, but devotes limited space to comparing it with other settings, understandably keeping the focus on Victoria. Chemotti's monograph on Italy, meanwhile, though providing an excellent introduction to the role of music in Italian funerary customs, addresses the musical repertoire itself only in general terms, limiting detailed musical analysis solely to settings of the responsories.

All in all, the reader interested in a scientific introduction to the early history of the genre has had to navigate a fragmented secondary literature. Thus, the publication of *The Book of Requiems* is most welcome, since it aims at filling precisely this scholarly lacuna, offering a series of volumes that finally consider the Requiem as a specific genre, with its characteristic features and conventions and with its historical relevance, 'from the earliest ages to the present period', as the subtitle of the series specifies.

The first volume in the series, discussed in the present review, is devoted to the years 1450–1550, and it was edited by David J. Burn. It includes eight essays that focus on the emergence of the polyphonic Requiem, composed in different European regions from the Low Countries to France and Spain. The composers discussed are Johannes Ockeghem (by Fabrice Fitch), Pierre de la Rue and Antoine de Févin

(Honey Meconi), Antoine Brumel (David J. Burn), Dionisius Prioris and Jean Richafort (Jennifer Bloxam), Pedro de Escobar (Tess Knighton) and Claudin de Sermisy (Stephen Rice). These eight case studies on settings by specific composers are preceded by two introductory chapters, serving as a point of reference for the following analyses. The first, 'The Plainsong Requiem Tradition' by Sarah Ann Long, is a well-documented introduction to the plainchant tradition of the Requiem mass; though it mainly focuses on the Parisian customs, it provides an excellent background for those who are unfamiliar with the intricate textual tradition of plainchant or with the history of Christian rites. The second chapter, by John Milsom, is a comparison of Communion settings by different composers from the perspective of counterpoint; it provides an example of how composers were able to achieve very different results by building on a polyphonic paraphrase of the same plainchant model, and it opens a path for further comparative research into a broader repertoire.

The editor clearly put considerable effort into maintaining cohesion between the essays, and in many respects, this works very well. Each chapter has the same internal structure: the first page contains some preliminary information regarding the chronological and geographical origin of the Requiem, existing sources and modern editions, as well as a selected bibliography; then comes the 'Formal Scheme' of the Requiem, followed by sections on 'Historical Context', 'General Form and Style' and 'Analysis'. Obviously, since this is a composite book written by multiple authors, the presence of minor inconsistencies is understandable. For example, not all the 'Formal Schemes' respect the same structure: those introducing the settings analysed by Jennifer Bloxam (Prioris and Richafort) also include the tonal type, while the others do not. Some concepts and references are repeated several times in the different chap-

⁵ Owen Rees, *The Requiem of Tomás Luis De Victoria (1603)*, Cambridge 2019; Antonio Chemotti, *Polyphonic Music pro mortuis in Italy (1550–1650): An Introduction*, Lucca, Warsaw 2020.

ters; but while this may be a little redundant if one reads the entire volume, it can be valuable for those interested in one specific setting. Beyond the structure of the chapters, one notes a plurality of approaches that shows how research into this repertoire can be based on different premises.

This book might interest both scholars familiar with Requiem or Renaissance polyphony in general as well as students or general readers who want to get to know this repertoire better. On one hand, the essays are very readable, and all the fundamental questions regarding specific Requiems are well addressed: from the lost Requiem by Dufay (pp. 15 and 77–78) to the original structure of Ockeghem's setting (pp. 79–83), from the particular range of La Rue's Requiem (pp. 99–100) to the unique *cantus firmus* used by Richafort (pp. 70–71). At the same time, readers already accustomed to this repertoire will also find many new ideas and starting points for further research. I found one of Honey Meconi's suppositions particularly fascinating: she suggests that La Rue might quote in his *Requiem* other funerary compositions, in order to amplify and highlight the meaning of the text of the Requiem mass, moving from the 'darkness and depth' of the Introit to the 'eternal light' of the Communion (pp. 109–110). David Burn's identification of a certain influence of the Italian lauda on Brumel's setting, especially in the use of *fauxbourdon*, is also pertinent (pp. 114–115), as is his hypothesis that the Sequence of this mass might have had a different structure originally (p. 120). Similarly fascinating is Tess Knighton's suggestion that Escobar's *Requiem*, like Ockeghem's, might be incomplete in its only extant source; she recommends caution when dealing with compositions that are found in one source only (pp. 150–151). Also noteworthy is Jennifer Bloxam's interpretation of Richafort's *Requiem*: building on insight already proposed by John Milsom, she focuses on the

use of quotations from Josquin's works as a way of musically enhancing the meaning of the '*Circumdederunt me*' *cantus firmus* (pp. 175–176).

We can expect many interesting things from the subsequent volumes. It is not exactly clear what criteria were used to select the eight Requiems in this first volume or why others were not chosen—to mention but the five-part Requiem by Cristóbal de Morales published in Rome by the Dorico brothers in 1544. This is an aspect that could have been addressed in more detail in the introduction, but it does not represent a major issue for the period 1450–1550, since there is only a limited number of extant Requiems to choose from. It is a much more complex issue for the following centuries, however, for which it is reasonable to expect larger volumes than this one. The anthological nature of *The Book of Requiems* leaves room for further and multi-directional research into both the Requiems included in this volume and those that are not. Observing the first page of each monographic chapter, for instance, one notices that while the specific bibliography is fairly significant for some Requiems (for example Ockeghem, La Rue, Escobar), others have fewer dedicated studies (Prioris, Fevin). Furthermore, some settings would definitely benefit from a new critical edition, especially Brumel's, Richafort's and Sermisy's, which were edited more than fifty years ago. It is to be hoped that *The Book of Requiems* will stimulate further research into this enormous repertoire, enabling scholars and students to appreciate it and musicians to perform it.

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