

# Berlioz Requiem | Program notes

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When Adrien de Gasparin, the French Minister of the Interior, approached Berlioz in March 1837 about writing a requiem to memorialize the victims of the Fieschi revolution in July 1830, Berlioz's immediate reaction was, "What a *Dies irae!*" In a letter to a friend, Berlioz said that his mind was flooded with ideas, and could barely write them down fast enough. But soon his ideas settled, and Berlioz began composing rapidly. Speed was of the utmost importance, since the intended premiere of the work was only four months away.

The day before the work's planned premiere, Berlioz received word that French politicians feared that having a three-day event memorializing the victims of a revolutionary coup might inspire citizens to revolt against the current regime. Commemoration of the July 1830 revolution had been scaled back to a single day, and Berlioz's *Grande Messe* was not to be included. Despite Berlioz's desperate pleas, it seemed that his work would never be performed.

Unexpectedly, the cannon at Les Invalides was fired on October 16, 1837, indicating a major military loss, and Berlioz was summoned to the Ministry of War. Word had reached Paris that General Charles-Marie Denys de Damremont, who had led the French army at Algiers in the conquest of Constantine, had perished. A ceremony commemorating the death of Damremont and the French soldiers who were killed at the Algerian siege was to take place in December, and Berlioz's *Grande Messe* was to be the music for the solemn occasion. The performance was an astounding success, and it cemented Berlioz's reputation as a composer of the highest order. Berlioz himself valued this work so much that he said late in life if all of his compositions were to be destroyed save one, he would "crave mercy for his *Grande Messe des Morts*."

The *Grande Messe des Morts* [Requiem] is laid out in ten movements. The first movement, "Requiem et Kyrie," forms the foundation of the work. The minor key and brooding nature of this opening movement establish the overall concept of the work: the power and grandeur of God, versus the frailty and weakness of humans. One of the few moments of repose in this movement surrounds the word *luceat* (shine), where an unexpected major chord represents a beam of light briefly illuminating the darkness and gloom of the movement.

Movements II through VI set the *Sequence* of the Requiem Mass, which depicts the Day of Judgment and Apocalypse. The second movement, "Dies irae," begins with a brooding bass melody that musically anchors the entire first part of the movement. As the music progresses, it rises in both volume and key until four brass bands sound with stentorian vigor announcing the Apocalypse ("Tuba mirum"). Here Berlioz also sets the music for multiple timpani (writing full timpani chords!), which create a visceral and dramatic rendition of the earth shaking. The third movement ("Quid sum miser") shows humanity looking on at the aftermath of the Apocalypse. This brief introspective movement is characterized by sparse orchestration, representing desolation, and consists of musical shrapnel from the previous movement.

In "Rex tremendae", the brass bands return, announcing with grandeur and pomp the presence of Christ the King, while humans petition humbly and sometimes urgently ("Libera me") for the salvation of their souls. Of particular note is Berlioz's setting of the text *acribus* [bitter], where the strong musical dissonance paints the meaning of the word.

The "Quaerens me" is set for a capella chorus, in the Renaissance style of Palestrina. While Berlioz himself admitted he did not like imitative Renaissance polyphony, the style was very popular in 19th-century France, and the idiom is perfectly suited to the prayer-like nature of the text and a fitting contrast to the two movements surrounding it.

The "Lacrimosa" is the final movement depicting the *Sequence* of the Requiem Mass. Berlioz's orchestration illustrates the text: the basses at the opening represent the growling dogs of Hell, the isolated string upbeat notes represent the whipping of the cursed, and the ensuing horn notes, the groans of the condemned. As the realization of eternal condemnation becomes more tangible, the music builds in intensity, until the movement ends with the four brass bands blaring and the bass drum pounding out the beating of the heart in sheer terror. At the end of the movement the music fades away, as we move from visions of Hell and condemnation into Purgatory.

The "Offertorium" was regarded by Robert Schumann as one of Berlioz's most ingenious creations. Throughout almost the entire movement the chorus oscillates between A and B flat while the orchestra performs a polyphonic fugue, representing the swirling cosmos surrounding the chorus of souls trapped in Purgatory. At the end of the movement, the souls of the chorus are finally freed, as God's promise to Abraham's promise is granted, and the chorus ends the movement on a hopeful D major harmony—the same harmony as for *luceat* in the first movement.

In the "Hostias" movement, a chorus of men offers prayers of supplication on behalf of the deceased. An unusual orchestration of only flutes and trombones pervades much of the movement, representing the wide chasm between Heaven and Hell as well as the vast distance between lowly humanity and God. Unexpected harmonies depict the atmosphere of the mysterious and inconceivable universe.

The "Sanctus" is the only movement in the *Grande Messe* which provides a visual depiction of Heaven. A tenor soloist, surrounded by a women's chorus (the voices of angels), praise God, surrounded by sustained strings, much like the halo effect used by Bach during the recitatives of Jesus in his Passions. The "Osanna" text is set fugally, as all of Heaven and Earth praise God in the highest. In the reprise of the "Sanctus" text, Berlioz adds pianissimo cymbals and bass drum to rhythmically punctuate the music.

The final movement, "Agnus Dei," consists almost entirely of music already presented in the *Grande Messe*. Music from the "Hostias" appears first, followed by music from the middle section of the "Requiem et Kyrie," and finally the closing meditative music of the "Rex Tremendae." A coda of swirling strings on a variety of unrelated harmonies portray the diversity and wonder of the universe as the chorus sings "Amen," and the music finally settles into a G major harmony, representing finality and repose.