

Petite Messe Pour le Repos

(Little Mass for Rest)

Some explanations

The aim of this document is to explain what I wanted to do when composing the *Little Mass*.

Note that the *Mass* is a *Requiem*. Its text is taken from Wikipedia. The whole work is split into several coherent parts:

- *Introitus*2
- *Sequentia*3
- *Offertorium*6
- *Sanctus*7
- *Agnus Dei*8
- *Communio*9

Each part contains one or more pieces that are harmonically and musically related. Note the special case of the *Sequentia* which takes almost half the *Mass* with a small number of themes. This is intended.

The next pages give some details on each part.

Introitus

This first part is divided into three pieces: *Introitus*, *Kyrie*, and *Graduale–Tractus*.

It is in a simple ternary form: *Introitus* and *Graduale–Tractus* are the first theme while *Kyrie* is the central trio (second theme).

The *Introitus* theme is the most important one. It permeates the whole *Mass* from start to finish. This theme begins with three long notes that are a plea to God for eternal rest (*Requiem*). First exposed by the piano, it is repeated by the soloist, sustained by long chords sung by the choir.

The *Kyrie* is another ternary form: *Kyrie, Christe, Kyrie*. It starts by a simple call by the counter-tenors, repeated (diminished) by the oboe and then by the choir. The *Christe* contrasts with the *Kyrie* by being more powerful; it is led by the soloist, while the choir brings energy. Then *Kyrie* is sung again by the choir and repeated one last time by the soloist.

The *Graduale–Tractus* is a two-strophe piece. *Graduale* starts by the *Introitus* theme, and then transposes it in its relative major (from *Dm* to *F*) to bring some hope (“*In memoria*”). *Tractus* (“*Absolve Domine*”) is a counterpoint sung by the choir and concludes by a sentence in *D major* for the hope of eternal light (“*et lucis æternæ*”).

Sequentia

This part takes about half the whole *Mass*. It contains some important pieces but contrarily to most composers I decided that the themes should all be related and reused¹.

The pieces in the *Sequentia* are:

- *Dies Iræ*3
- *Tuba Mirum*3
- *Rex Tremendæ*4
- *Recordare*4
- *Confutatis*4
- *Lacrimosa*5

Dies Iræ

This piece is meant to start the *Sequentia* with panache. It is short and very dynamic, based on the Gregorian 8–note *Dies Iræ* theme (cited at the beginning by the piano).

The cello brings its own rhythm, and the choir plays on marked notes, the voices competing with each other. The oboe stays *tacet* (silent) throughout the piece.

Tuba Mirum

The first moment of *Tuba Mirum* has an ternary structure.

The first theme is one of the themes that will be reused several times in the *Sequentia*. It is sung twice in this piece (“*Tuba mirum*” and then “*Liber scriptus*”). The trio (“*Mors stupébit*”) is a simple choir counterpoint.

¹ It explains why some people tell me “I listened to about half the *Mass*, and the themes seem not to be very distinct” (paraphrased). I understand that. It is an intended tension that builds toward the following parts. Please listen to *Lacrimosa* and beyond!

After this first moment, the piece continues with the piano hammering notes that represent the Judge Who Comes. It is followed by successive entries of the instruments and then the choir singing “*Judex ergo*”.

The last moment is an imploring prayer (“*Quid sum miser*”) sung by the soloist with a very light instrumental accompaniment.

Rex Tremendæ

The piece begins by a short and quiet instrumental period (double phrase) that brings the music back from *G minor* (*Tuba Mirum*’s ending tonality) to the root *D minor* tonality.

The *Rex Tremendæ* itself is a short and energetic piece. It is interrupted by the quiet instrumental theme that introduces the conclusion of this prayer (“*Salva me fons pietatis*”).

Recordare

Recordare brings the second main theme of the *Sequentia*—but not straight away.

It begins with a simple plea (“*Recordare, Jesu pie*”) followed by a simple four-voice song (the choir and the soloist).

The actual theme begins on bar 320. The piano introduces a very characteristic balancing theme, into which the soloist sings “*Juste judex*”. The melody itself is similar to the *Tuba Mirum* one (the first main *Sequentia* theme).

Confutatis

Confutatis is the last-but-one part of the *Sequentia*. It reuses its main themes.

The piece starts by a powerful declamation of the text (“*Confutatis maledictis*”). It is followed by the “*Oro supplex*” prayer, sung with the *Tuba Mirum* theme.

“*Confutáti maledíctis*” is then sung again, but in a completely different atmosphere: using the *Recordare* theme, it shows the sadness of the damned and brings another light on the last part of the sentence: “*voca me cum benedíctis*” (call me with the blessed).

Lacrimosa

Lacrimosa, the text, starts with words similar to the opening of the *Sequentia*: “*Lacrimósa dies illa*”.

This is shown in the music by using a variation on the *Dies Iræ* theme. This is a very dark variation: this instrumental part is very slow and in the locrian mode.

The shift to *D minor* (bar 525) brings a small light compared to the beginning of the piece. The soloist sings the first part of this sad prayer, with answers from the choir. “*Judicándus homo reus*” is brought by a sharp crescendo and sung in half voice, with great tension.

“*Huic ergo*” is a (slower) variation on the *Lacrimosa* theme.

The prayer concludes on the main *Requiem* theme (see the *Introitus*) with the *Tractus*'s *D major* that brings a small light before a sad and fervent *Amen* in a minor plagal cadence.

Offertorium

The *Offertorium* is split in two pieces: *Domine Jesu* and *Hostias*. Both pieces are in *G minor*.

Domine Jesu is composed as successive descents towards Hell, before coming back up to the light, drawn by the archangel Michael (“*Sed signifer*”).

Hostias begins by an instrumental theme, then sung by the choir. The piece finishes by a hopeful *G major* “*Fac eas*”.

Both parts end with the same sentence: “*Quam olim Abrahæ*”, an *a capella* choir composed using as a Renaissance gymel led by the soloist as tenor.

Sanctus

This part is split in the two classical pieces *Sanctus* and *Benedictus*.

Sanctus

Sanctus is the only ternary piece of the *Requiem*. This is a very classical representation of the Holy Trinity.

The figure 3 is everywhere in the piece: in the piano theme, in the number of repeats of the *Sanctus* word (thrice by the soloist, and by the choir in response), and in the number of repeats of the whole sentence.

By contrast, *Hosanna* is in binary form, and the soloist is *tacet*.

Each repetition of the theme is in a different tonality brought by the instruments. The first sentence is in *G major*, the second in *C major* and the third in *F major* which is the relative major tonality of the starting tonality of *Benedictus* (*Dm*).

Benedictus

Benedictus is meant as a soothing piece with beautiful melodies framed in a stunted sonata form.

After a short introduction, the first theme (*Dm*, starting bar 178) and the second one (*Fm*, starting bar 196) are given by the oboe, with the cello in counterpoint and the piano playing a more rhythmic yet gentle music.

The second theme is re-exposed bar 210, with the soloist singing in place of the cello. The small development (*Dm*, bars 235–249) is a variation on the second theme. The recapitulation starts bar 250, with the first theme and the second theme (bar 269) both in *D minor*.

The piece closes in a climax with the *Hosanna* from *Sanctus*, this time with the soloist.

Agnus Dei

This part is in one... well, part.

Agnus Dei is built as a big crescendo, with the unique sentence sung three times with building power. The “*Dona eis*”, each time, is sung fervently by the choir with a very light harmonic support from the piano.

In the wake of that power, “*requiem sempiternam*” (eternal rest) is sung in a soft but intense final plea.

Lux Æterna

This last part is written in two main moments.

The first moment is the *Lux Æterna* prayer. It is composed of two themes played several times in varied forms, a bit like a sonata form but without a clear development. Instruments play an important role while the choir keeps fervent and quiet.

The first theme (*Gm*) is a variation on the main *Requiem* theme. The second theme (*Cm*, bar 23) is a syncopated melody.

Although the first theme is only slightly changed in its second exposition (bar 46) by letting the choir sing instead of the soloist, the second theme (bar 63) is re-exposed by the instruments only and in a slightly darker form in the *D minor* tonality which is kept until the end.

The first theme is played one last time bar 71, nearing the actual *Requiem* theme and played by the instruments only (prefiguring their end in the second moment), and the second theme bar 88 with the choir and the soloist.

This moment is closed by the “*Cum sanctis*” prayer, an *a capella* choir in a gymel form, again led by the soloist as tenor.

The second moment starts bar 114. It is the last reprise of the complete *Requiem* theme. This last call is the swan song: the instruments literally draw their last breath on it (indicated by *lascia morire* on the score; let die).

This moment is closed, again, by the “*Cum sanctis*” prayer. The final chord ends the whole *Mass* in a hopeful Picardy Third (an open *D major*) meant to lead the deceased towards Heaven.