

VSO, Vancouver Bach Choir unwrap Mozart's enigmatic Requiem

By David Gordon Duke



*Kathleen Brett
Photograph by: Handout, Files*

Mozart's Requiem

The Vancouver Symphony and the Vancouver Bach Choir
Orpheum Theatre
Saturday, Monday, 8 p.m.
Tickets: \$20 - \$78.50

VANCOUVER — The Vancouver Symphony and the Vancouver Bach Choir offer their first grand collaboration of the season on Saturday and Monday nights, performing one of the most popular works in the choral-orchestral repertoire, Mozart's Requiem K. 626.

The idea of a popular requiem, a musical setting of the Latin Mass for the Dead, might seem an oxymoron, but not to Mozart fans, that still snowballing constituency with a seemingly insatiable demand for a last work that is, by definition, sombre and serious.

Mozart's Requiem has been wrapped in enigmas and questions from its inception. It was once popular to refer to a mysterious stranger who commissioned the 35-year-old composer: a good story, but one now thoroughly debunked.

The truth is bizarre enough: Mozart was writing for Count Franz von Walsegg, an eccentric aristocrat who had a penchant for anonymously hiring compositional ghostwriters whose work he passed off as his own.

The Requiem gained additional layers of complexity because it was left unfinished when Mozart died in December 1791 (his demise most probably exacerbated by the bad doctoring of the day). This has created headaches aplenty for conductors and performers who want to get at real Mozart, not the bits added to make the work performable by the competent but unremarkable Franz Xavier Süssmayr (1766-1803).

No question that Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* (both stage play and film) helped fuel our great Mozart boom, building on Alexander Pushkin's 1831 play *Mozart and Salieri*. While Shaffer's portrayal of wilful youthful genius is apt enough, it doesn't really reflect the composer in his early middle age.

Mozart's last great spurt of creativity, as documented by musicologist H.C. Robbins Landon in his *1791: Mozart's Last Year* (1988; rev. 1999), demands a more disturbing portrait of an artist buffeted by changing tastes and an unhappy working environment. It was several seasons since Mozart's last unqualified hit, and in addition to chronic money problems he had survived years of grim family troubles -- particularly the deaths in infancy of four of his six children.

So if some sleuths suggest the composer was most likely depressed in his mid-30s, who's to wonder? It makes his manic productivity during 1791 all the more miraculous: within the space of 11 months, Mozart completed two full operas, concertos for piano and for clarinet, two cantatas, a string quintet, nearly four dozen short pieces, and the sublime motet *Ave verum corpus* in addition to the unfinished hulk of the Requiem. (As satirist Tom Lehrer quipped, "It makes you realize how little you've accomplished.")

Lasting just under an hour, the Requiem can't fill out an entire program under today's concert traditions. Since the Requiem demands a quartet of solo singers as well as choir and orchestra, conductor Bramwell Tovey's happy inspiration is to preface it with selected works from the *annum mirabilis*, including complementary snippets from the singspiel *The Magic Flute* and the more weighty opera seria *La Clemenza di Tito*.

Soprano Kathleen Brett, who has just finished performing at Vancouver Opera's Golden Anniversary Gala, will be a key player on the Mozart team. Mozart roles have been the bedrock of the Campbell River-born Brett's operatic career.

She fondly recalls how she studied the part of Susanna from *The Marriage of Figaro* with Canadian opera greats Leopold Simoneau and Pierrette Alarie when they taught in Victoria, and first learned about the exacting blend of transparency, clarity and grace required for an effective Mozart performance.

"Care and precision" are *de rigueur* for Mozart, says Brett. "His exquisitely crafted phrases and melodies require very careful articulation." Even so, she finds the music "very sensual," and well understands its powerful appeal.

Aside from a solo showcase in one of Pamina's arias from *Magic Flute*, Brett's role in the Requiem is "small, but critical." She's looking forward to working with Tovey, the VSO and her fellow singers Elizabeth Turnbull, mezzo, Benjamin Butterfield, tenor, and John Relyea, baritone, a reunion of sorts since they've all worked happily together in the past.

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