

Interview: Tom Regan and Patricia Van Ness, Fall 2004

Q: The new Requiem is in memory of your friend, Boston choreographer and dancer Julie Ince Thompson (1951-2003); can you talk about why you wrote it in her memory, and what she meant to you?

A. Julie and I were longtime collaborators (she used my music in her choreography), and we were close friends. I was commissioned to compose the Requiem in 2002 but didn't begin it until the week of her death, and it just naturally flowed that it would be in her memory since I was thinking of her when I was writing.

Q. Was it more difficult to write the Requiem because of her death?

Yes. This was probably the hardest piece I've written. In the abstract, I had always intended my Requiem to be one of consolation, but it was impossible for a time to write that when I was not consoled myself. I kept writing and throwing things out and saving bits of others as I moved along during the year. There are many battered and discarded versions of this Requiem! Eventually Peter Sykes (my musical mentor and confidant) advised me to write a lot of chant, a form that I often use to express emotion. That advice helped both me and the piece. Chant figures prominently in this piece (as it does in most of my music) as does chant-based polyphony.

Also complicating things was the fact that I wanted to write this for others too: I wanted the people who were very close to Julie to feel, if possible, the sweetness of consolation and love from the very first note. It's really true that without the experience of her death I would have written a Requiem, but it wouldn't have been the one I ended up with.

Q You used the standard Requiem text. Why?

A. I felt honored to be part of the great tradition of composers who have written Requiem Masses. You know I love Latin. And I did add one poem of my own, in English. The Requiem text, however, was difficult for me during this past year; it seems to beg for mercy from God. This is opposite my beliefs about God, whom I view as abundantly compassionate and merciful - at least I believe that when I'm not in the midst of a loss. During loss I tend to forget an essential thing for me: that there is a God at all.

It took me nearly a year to come to peace with this text. First, I realized that, for me, the text was a cry, an exquisite poem, in the midst of this loss, to express my doubts about the existence of God. Second, it became an internal dialogue within myself, allowing me to be merciful to myself, for all the natural and sometimes ugly feelings of grieving: i.e. for not being able to save our beloved friend from death; for being alive when she isn't; for my anger toward, and disappointment in, her.

Q You've thought a lot about grief this past year!

Yes. You'll notice that the first and last movements of the Requiem are essentially the same. What I am attempting to say is that, had we but known it, when we began grieving (in the *Introuit*)

and when we somewhat resolved the grief (*In paradisum*), we were, through it all, surrounded by the same divine love. We just didn't know it. And that's one of the biggest problems with human grieving.

Not that it's a problem we can solve, because we can't eliminate grieving from our lives. Our bodies, our guts, our hearts, our minds, our lungs -- everything is going to grieve, given loss, no matter how smart we are. This Requiem just attempts to reinforce that divine love is there regardless of how we feel.

Q: You've worked with Sanford Sylvan before. Did that affect the composition process?

A: Yes. Sanford and I worked together once before. What I learned from that experience is how beautifully his voice works with chant. I tend to really like to write monody, and he sings it like an angel. He sings it with such grace and form and power, but he doesn't ever overwhelm you with it. He just sounds like it was meant to be sung that way. It's so beautiful. And so I wanted to showcase him with chant, and that's pretty much what I did.

Q. How did you intend to use the orchestra?

A.: I used them only as a foundation and cushion that gives the listener and the chorus a feeling of security, and also for warmth and color. Oboe I love -- such a beautiful color -- and I sprinkled it around.

Q: Though this is a sacred work, is there also a sensual element to the Requiem, as in your previous compositions?

A: Oh yes, I think it's *all* sensual. I do. I think the sacred and the sensual are completely intertwined. And I think all my works are very, very sensual. They just beg to be caressed! (laughter) I think the Requiem is incredibly sensual. And the sensuality is sound, that elegance and simplicity I'm always looking for in sound, in my music. So if you want to make that into a sacred thing you certainly can because I think that's completely 'of God.' It all *completely* overlaps as far as I'm concerned.

Q: So it made no difference in saying, well, this is a sacred piece, or this is a secular piece?

A: No. I thought of our big piece together before, the Sappho/Tenth Muse piece, as being a sacred work, because they're all the same to me. I think of all my music as being sacred and profane at the same time (laughter). In a good way.