

PROGRAM NOTES: “On the Death of the Righteous”

Finding a text to be a part of a piece that would share a program with Verdi’s “Requiem” was an interesting challenge, and led me to the works of John Donne, a 16th-century poet and preacher. I realized I needed something that would respect a requiem’s definition, which is to be a mass for the dead. Coming upon Mr. Donne’s sermons, I discovered a particular text that describes the non-judgmental quality of a death of one who is righteous...this seemed an appropriate emotional angle to precede a requiem.

Of course, the challenge for the composer is creating an emotional state that is equal to the text’s, and thus a music of enough weight and seriousness, without being particularly dark; to be lacking in judgment in musical sound and to reflect the even balance of opposites, upon the death of the righteous.

The text is thus...

On the Death of the Righteous

They shall awake and they shall say, Surely the Lord is in this place, and this is no other but the house of God, and the gate of heaven.

And into that gate they shall enter,
And in that house they shall dwell,
Where there shall be no cloud nor sun,
No darkness nor dazzling,
But one equal light,
No noise nor silence,
But one equal music,
No fears nor hopes,
But one equal possession,
No foes nor friends,
But one equal communion,
No ends nor beginnings,
But one equal eternity.

Keep us Lord so awake in the duties of our callings, that we may thus sleep in Thy Peace, and wake in Thy Glory...

Sermons, VIII, ‘191 John Donne

“On the Death of the Righteous” was commissioned in 2009 for, and in celebration of, Alan Harler’s 20th season as music director of the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia.

--Jennifer Higdon