

Da Vinci Requiem
The Perspective of Disappearance

Cecilia McDowall (b. 1951)

Leonardo da Vinci sketched and scribbled throughout his life, to record his observations, to test theories, and to develop new ideas or refine old ones. The thousands of sheets that were left at his death were gathered together by his friends and bound into a collection of notebooks. Cecilia McDowall has been familiar with The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci since discovering them on the family bookshelves as a child. They were a wedding present from her mother to her father in 1946 and were greatly cherished, giving much fascination to all. When she was approached by the Wimbledon Choral Society in 2017 to write a new work, the serendipitous timing of the anniversary of Leonardo's death with the concert date (almost 500 years to the day) made it an apt subject to choose.

Cecilia has said that she found the task of selecting the texts to set both interesting and enriching. The first decision was which sections of the *Missa pro defunctis* text to use. There are 12 common parts to the Requiem but she felt some were less relevant in today's climate; the *Dies Irae*, for example, seemed unsuitable, and the *Libera me* and *In Paradisum* are part of the burial service. Cecilia selected the *Introit & Kyrie*, the *Lacrimosa* (from the *Sequentia*), the *Sanctus & Benedictus*, the *Agnus Dei* and the *Lux aeterna*. Then there followed the task of selecting quotes from the Leonardo Notebooks or from other non-sacred sources. Leonardo wrote little about religion being more concerned, instead, with pragmatic details and scientific concerns, but he did write about how he saw man's place within the natural world. In addition, in this work, there is a poem written in response to one of Leonardo's paintings.

The *Da Vinci Requiem* carries the dedication 'in loving memory of Helly Bliss and for all those who grieve.' Helly was a dear close friend of the composer with an exceptional ability for bringing people together; she was tireless in her work for charity through music, all enhanced by her warm-hearted disposition.

The Requiem is scored for double wind, horns, trumpets, timpani, percussion (glockenspiel, suspended cymbal, side drum, tambourine and vibraphone) harp and strings. In seven movements, it is in arch form progressing from a dark contemplative opening towards a rousing apogee, giving way to a luminous, hopeful conclusion.

The first movement, *Introit and Kyrie*, is marked *sonorous, dark, flowing* and opens with a slow, unsettling chromatic line in the lower instruments (bass clarinet, bassoon, contrabassoon and low strings) whilst slowly ascending. The first twenty bars are underpinned by an ominous timpani roll surrounded by clarinet, harp and horn. The choir is introduced by a gentle rocking figure, which Cecilia has likened to the action of praying with rosary beads, and this gives comfort amid the dark and disquiet. The baritone soloist enters with the requiem text followed by the soprano soloist, singing Leonardo's words, 'why do you toil so much?' The soloists continue in dialogue above the chorus. The *Kyrie* introduces a brighter, lighter texture in a major tonality accompanied by wind and glockenspiel.

The second movement sets the poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), *For 'Our Lady of the Rocks'* by Leonardo da Vinci. Rossetti wrote the poem in front of the painting on display in the National Gallery. *The Virgin of the Rocks* was painted around 1507-8 and is believed to contain an invocation against the bubonic plague which was raging in Milan, where he lived at

the time. The poem was written in 1848, itself a time of political revolution and turmoil in Europe, and gives a very stark reading of the painting, perhaps intimating the dark and difficult circumstances of its creation, seeing in it death, pain, bitterness and the occult. This movement for soprano solo, described as *poised, with intensity*, introduces a dissonant, sharper edge to the work and is more lightly scored with its downward sliding strings.

The third movement, *with tender simplicity*, is for chorus only and forms a stand-alone anthem. It combines the *Lacrimosa* text with two quotes from the Notebooks touching on how the Lord should be obeyed, and on the origin of tears; 'tears come from the heart, not from the brain'. This movement is the most melodic of the Requiem, opening with a simple oboe line supported by strings.

The *Sanctus and Benedictus* is at the heart of the work. *Rhythmic, with energy*, it is vigorous with a syncopated drive to it. Brightly scored for trumpets and drums, the glockenspiel picks out some descending choral lines. In contrast the *Benedictus* is lyrical and expressive with a delicate flute motive above the chorus; the upper voices floating, angelic, and the men's voices reinforced by the timpani, give a flavour of monks singing plainchant.

The fifth movement, *Agnus Dei*, is marked *expressive, intense*, and opens with the plainsong incipit for the *Agnus Dei*. The plainchant gives the motive for this movement which threads its way throughout. It is scored for sombre wind, brass and low strings. The soprano soars over the chorus with text taken from Leonardo's Bestiary, in which he describes the purity of the lamb.

The penultimate movement for baritone soloist, *O you who are asleep*, sets only text by Leonardo in which he makes a comparison between sleep and death. It possesses a mood of calmness, like that of a lullaby, gently rocking in compound time between major and minor; between sleep and death. The soloist is accompanied by harp, clarinet and light strings.

The last movement, *Lux aeterna*, brings a bright, luminous, shimmering quality to it effected by tremolando strings. The text here combines the Latin mass with words attributed to Leonardo; 'once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you long to return.'

The closing bars feature a series of overlapping ascending almost-octatonic scales, starting in the bass and layering upwards through the voices; two solo violins ladder ever higher, vanishing into nothingness, concluding the work with a powerful allusion to Leonardo's artistic concept of 'The Perspective of Disappearance'.