

THE BACH SOCIETY OF SAINT LOUIS

A. Dennis Sparger, Music Director and Conductor

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DURUFLÉ REQUIEM

7:30 pm., March 3, 2019

A Gorgeous Mess . . .

A New York critic, upon hearing Duruflé's Requiem performed in a large reverberant space, hailed the work as "a gorgeous mess." "Gorgeous," to be sure!

My first encounter with this beautiful music was at an ACDA national conference held in Kansas City in 1979. The performance was conducted by Roger Wagner, a conductor intimately acquainted with the Requiem and one of the choral "giants" at that time. Unfortunately, it was presented in an old theatre with heavy drapes, carpeted aisles and padded seats. A decade later, while attending an international choral festival in Toronto, I heard it again, this time in a reverberant church where the acoustics more fully revealed the composer's vision, and it has been a personal favorite ever since. Today is the sixth time I have conducted the Requiem.

The Man...

Maurice Duruflé was born in 1902, in Louviers, a small city in the region of Haute-Normandie. He began to study piano at the age of five. At the age of ten, he became a chorister at the Rouen Cathedral Choir School, where he studied piano and organ and, for the next seven years, absorbed the liturgy and Gregorian chant that became such a significant part of his musical spirit.

In 1919, at the age of 17, Duruflé moved to Paris where he began private organ lessons. The following year he entered the Paris Conservatory where he expanded his musical studies to include harmony, fugue and composition. In 1927, the 25-year old was invited by one of his instructors, Louis Vierne, to be his assistant organist at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Two years later Duruflé became the principal organist at St. Étienne-du-Mont in Paris, a position he held until his death. He completed his studies at the Paris Conservatory in 1932, graduating "with first prizes in organ, harmony, piano accompaniment, and composition."

About three months after his final examinations, the 30-year old graduate married Lucette Bousquet, who became his muse. During their marriage, his most creative period, he composed his "undisputed masterworks." They were granted a civil divorce in 1947.

Duruflé, himself, became professor of harmony and organ at the Paris Conservatory in

1943, a position he held until 1970. There he met Marie Madeleine Chevalier, an organ student at the Conservatory. A gifted musician—she was appointed principal organist at the Cathedral of Saint Véran in Cavaillon at the age of 11—the 26-year old student was soon recognized for her outstanding talent by the 45-year old Duruflé, who appointed her to be his assistant at St. Étienne-du-Mont. When the Pope granted him an annulment in 1953, they married, and from this time on they jointly held the organ position at St. Étienne-du-Mont.

Throughout the 60s and early 70s they made several concert tours, traveling as far as Russia and the United States, often performing as an organ duo. In 1975, the couple was injured in a car accident. Tragically, Duruflé suffered severe injuries, and, being largely confined to his apartment, was forced to give up performing altogether. From this time on, the position at St. Étienne-du-Mont was left to Marie-Madeleine.

Maurice Duruflé died in 1986, and it is our loss that his self-criticism permitted him to publish only 14 works. Although not a prolific composer, each of his pieces was “meticulously” written. His biographer, James Frazier, concludes, “Among the greatest organists of the 20th century, Maurice Duruflé was also the eminent composer of some of the most sublime repertoire ever composed for organ, orchestra, and choir. He was a teacher, a recitalist, a virtuosic improviser of impeccable degree, and a man of the church.”

The Music...

In the early 1940's, Duruflé was working on an organ suite based on Gregorian chant, when his publisher commissioned him to compose a Requiem mass. He incorporated his sketches from the organ suite into the new work, basing it throughout on the chants from the requiem service. “Around the plainchant,” writes critic Robert Hugill, “Duruflé wove a gorgeous tissue of sound, unifying disparate elements with sensuous harmonies and seductive scoring.”

Duruflé composed three versions of his Requiem between 1947 and 1948. The fourth and final version—the one featured tonight—was published in 1961, and is scored for organ, three trumpets, timpani, harp and strings. This version, while offering more color possibilities than organ alone, approaches the dimension of his earlier full orchestral version, especially when performed in a reverberant space such as the magnificent Cathedral Basilica.

Like Gabriel Fauré, who completed his Requiem in 1890, Duruflé selected texts from the traditional requiem service that intentionally focused on inner peace and eternal rest. While avoiding the terror of the last judgment, portions of his Requiem are still powerful and stirring. The composer offers his own insight on how he approached the text: “At times the text is paramount, and therefore the orchestra intervenes only to sustain or comment. At other times an original musical fabric inspired by the text takes over completely.... In general, I have attempted to penetrate to the essence of Gregorian style and have tried to reconcile, as far as possible, the very flexible Gregorian rhythms as established by the Benedictines of Solesmes with the exigencies of modern notation.”

The Requiem is a work of faith and tranquility for his troubled century, but also for our time. Musical restraint and intimacy are perfectly balanced with majesty and power. If the purpose of music is to touch the soul, then Duruflé, through his Requiem, has secured his place in history. His “gorgeous mess” continues to provide consolation and inspire hope.

A. Dennis Sparger, D.M.A.
Music Director and Conductor

I

Stephen Eros, Assistant Conductor

Abendlied Josef Rheinberger (1839-1901)
Bide with us, for evening shadows darken, and the day will soon be over. Luke 24:29

Nunc dimittis Gustav Holst (1874-1934)
Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace. Luke 2: 29-31, Gloria Patri

II

For All the Saints (Sine Nomine) Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

III

The Lord Is My Shepherd, *Ps. 23* John Rutter (b. 1945)

Pie Jesu Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)
Alice Anne Light, Mezzo soprano

Seek Him that Maketh the Seven Stars, *Amos 5:8, Ps. 139* Jonathan Dove (b. 1959)

Lord God of Abraham (Elijah) Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
Alexander Dobson, Bass-baritone

IV

I Have Called You by Name, *Isaiah 43: 1-4a* Stephen Paulus (1949-2014)

INTERMISSION

V

Requiem, Op. 9 Maurice Duruflé 1902-1986)

Alice Anne Light, Mezzo-soprano Alexander Dobson, Bass-baritone
