

# Using music to speak about death

By Herbert Rakatansky

Death is our greatest mystery. Since it is a universal experience but subject to only secondhand reporting, what is written relates to the contemplation of death or the effects of the death of others on the survivors. Rituals and mechanisms to deal with death are deeply embedded in our society. Expression of feelings about death via music is one important such process.

Music expresses emotions in a way that words cannot. And a lot of music has been written to express various emotions associated with death, ranging from sorrowful dirges to the jazz played at New Orleans funerals. Classical music abounds with music about death. Most operas concern one or more tragic deaths, and death scenes are common.

There is also a great variety of “death music” in the symphonic repertoire. Some of the music is about the actual dying process itself. “Death and Transfiguration” by Richard Strauss is a famous example. Music is a shared experience between the performers and the audience and best experienced in person. The 2011-12 season of the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra offers the opportunity to participate in five examples of music associated with death. Each selection displays a different emotion and attitude about our shared mortality.

The Third Movement of Gustav Mahler’s “First Symphony” (September) is a grotesque funeral march. It is a parody based on the children’s song “Frère Jacques.” We must take death seriously but we can laugh at it as well.

In the “Symphony Fantastique” by Hector Berlioz (October), there is a section called “March to the Scaffold.” Anticipation of imminent death has never been better musically described in such a dramatic and frightening manner. One can picture the scene and feel the emotions of the condemned and the crowd.

The Second Movement of Ludwig van Beethoven’s “Third Symphony,” “The Eroica” (March), is a classic funeral march, mourning the death of a great hero. One cannot but help feel the sorrow. Indeed, I recall this music associated with the death of President Franklin Roosevelt in 1945. Beethoven’s genius prevails. No greater funeral march has been written.

Dmitri Shostakovich wrote his “Seventh Symphony” (April) at the beginning of World War II. Among the descriptive scenes of war are several sections that the composer himself identified as requiems and memorials to victims of the war.

Death is the tragedy of war, and Shostakovich does not let us forget. Requiems are traditionally Christian services set to music and performed at funerals. The emphasis is on the departed. A multitude of composers have written requiems. A few of these have such musical potency that they are performed as concert pieces.

Those by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (his last work, and not completed), Giuseppe Verdi (dramatic and operatic), Berlioz (apocalyptic and serene at the same time) are examples, among others. But Johannes Brahms’s “German Requiem” (May) is different. It is directed at the living, a powerful, touching affirmation of humanity. This great masterpiece is a fit finale to our series of musical brushes with death.

While not planned as such, these musical examples offer a selection of diverse emotional experiences relating to our inescapable destiny. Music does not solve the mystery but it does illuminate the human condition. This many-month experience, concluding with the Brahms, can enrich our lives by helping us to be aware of, and express our feelings about, the great unsolvable mystery of death.

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