

## Maurice Duruflé—Requiem

The name of Maurice Duruflé is not widely known even among regular classical music listeners. In his lifetime the French composer only published a handful of works. The most famous is undoubtedly his Requiem; yet even this work is most often encountered as a kind of “B-side,” paired with recordings of the celebrated Requiem penned by Duruflé’s elder countryman Gabriel Fauré. But as you will hear in this concert, this is one of the great works of the 20th century — a brilliant and moving ode to the dead, expertly woven from the threads of ancient Gregorian chant and 20th century harmonies, timeless in its haunting, meditative beauty.

For the composer, this music wasn’t just an inspired mash-up. It was the material that framed his life. At the age of 10, Duruflé was taken by his father to the famed Cathedral at Rouen. The boy thought it was just a visit; but when they arrived, he learned that his father had enrolled him in the boy choir school. Thus, Maurice Duruflé found himself, at that pivotal stage of adolescence, steeped in one of Europe’s most famous schools of Gregorian chant.

It proved a pivotal influence in Duruflé’s life. He was a strong student, and eventually was accepted into the Paris Conservatoire, where he became acquainted with the music of early 20th century French masters — notably Fauré as well as Debussy and Ravel. At the Conservatoire Duruflé was taught by the widely respected composer and music critic Paul Dukas (known today primarily for his colorful work, *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*).

Duruflé inherited Dukas’ luminescent style of orchestration — and also his meticulous, slow approach to composition and revision. Throughout his life Duruflé continually returned to his earlier works, editing and rewriting (and sometimes discarding works entirely). He came to view himself, ultimately, as a composer of limited range. “I am incapable of adding anything significant to the piano repertoire, view the string quartet with apprehension, and envisage with terror the idea of composing a song after the finished examples of Schubert, Fauré and Debussy,” he claimed.

In 1947, Duruflé decided to write a Requiem to memorialize those who had perished in World War II. Like Fauré before him, Duruflé rejected the Romantic-era conception of the Requiem as a quasi-operatic drama of death, hell, and redemption. He instead chose to craft a musical rumination on rest and peace built on melodies from ancient Gregorian chant — melodies that, for the composer, were as familiar as breath and life itself.

The opening “Introit” begins with the voices floating above undulating strings. The music of this burial chant is imbued with a simultaneous sense of profound warmth and ever-shifting rootlessness — both harmonically and rhythmically. This latter characteristic continues more or less throughout the Requiem and is, in ways, the most notable structural influence of the style of Gregorian chant that Duruflé encountered at Rouen, where chant was taught as an essentially free succession of short groups of notes, each given roughly equal value.

The “Domine Jesu Christe” begins mysteriously, almost operatically, with low instruments building a foundation upon which rises a remarkable swell of emotion. The “Sanctus” that follows propels ever forward in a mood of suppressed elation before erupting in a glorious musical frenzy; the mood then settles into restful bliss.

This leads to the spiritual centerpiece of Duruflé’s Requiem, the “Pie Jesu.” This brief stanza of liturgy is typically included as the final lines of the “Dies irae” (“Day of Wrath”) in most Requiems. However, Duruflé felt that the fire and brimstone of the longer text had no place in his Requiem: The world had lately seen too much of that. To him, the important part was where that text led: to a plea to the Lord, asking that He grant eternal rest to those who had perished.

The “Libera Me” begins with a stern trumpet call; there follows an increasingly chaotic musical section as the choir begs for salvation on Judgment Day. Finally, the “In Paradisum” arrives and the angels welcome the dead to heaven. Here especially, the floating character of the music seems to transcend time; the music ends with a fading fermata that perfectly evokes the eternal rest promised by redemption.