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# Sing Out

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## MUSICA FICTA: A VERY BRIEF EXPLORATION

*Choralfest* 2023  
ADELAIDE  
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## OUR COVER:

Musica Ficta:  
A Very Brief Exploration



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# A Critical Analysis of Maurice Duruflé Requiem Op.9

by Dr Aleta King



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Duruflé's Requiem is thought to have originated from a collection of his fledgling organ compositions which were based on Gregorian chant melodies originally derived from the Catholic Liber Usualis.<sup>1</sup> This idea is generally attributed to a written comment made by a former student of Duruflé who is quoted as saying:

"Duruflé had been working on a suite of pieces for organ based on the chant melodies of the Requiem. At first, he had intended to write four or five pieces inspired by Requiem themes. He already had composed a 'Lux Aeterna' and 'Sanctus'. Then he began to realize that the texts of these plainchants should not be separated from the melodies. So, he began to transform his composed pieces...and add to them a work for voices and orchestra."<sup>2</sup>

Duruflé's fascination with Gregorian chant as a compositional resource stems from his musical immersion in Gregorian chant traditions whilst a chorister at Rouen Cathedral Choir School about two hours northwest of Paris, France.<sup>3</sup>

The transition from organ score to choral score came about during the Second World War when the French government offered a financial incentive by way of commissions to support prominent French composers whose musical output was considered politically conservative. Duruflé received one of the first commissions in May 1941 and this may have been the impetus needed towards a Requiem scored for choir and orchestra that he eventually completed six years later in September, 1947. The completed work was premiered two months later in Paris on the Catholic Church's All Souls Day, 2nd November, 1947.<sup>4</sup> The Requiem was later published by French publishing house Durand in 1948.<sup>5</sup>

The original scoring of the Requiem as premiered in 1947 is for choir (SATB), mezzo-soprano and baritone soloist, and full orchestra. Around the same time Duruflé also appears to have revised this original scoring to a reduced orchestration comprised of 3 trumpets, timpani, harp, organ and strings (violin I, violin II, viola, cello, double bass). In 1948 Duruflé re-scored the Requiem again, this time for choir, soloists and an orchestral reduction arranged for organ.

Much scholarly discussion centres on Duruflé's supposed source(s) of inspiration for his Requiem. The debate appears to gravitate around the question of compositional originality with one journalist even suggesting that Duruflé's borrowing of existing Gregorian chant melodies as the basis of his compositional material could be considered 'elegant theft'.<sup>6</sup> Certainly Duruflé indicates that his time immersed in the Gregorian chant traditions as a young chorister had a profound and pervasive impact upon his compositional output.<sup>7</sup> However, even though it is perhaps not a new thing for composers to borrow from the past, Duruflé's original compositional treatment of these Gregorian chant melodies is where the true elegance emerges. This is particularly evident in his refreshingly beautiful harmonies, and his use of rhythm, metre and bar lines carefully arranged to preserve and enhance the authenticity of the rhythmic freedom inherent in the original chant melodies.

Unpublished program notes attributed to the composer himself and given to Robert P. Eaton by Duruflé's wife, Madam Marie Madeleine Duruflé, reveal the way in which the composer viewed the use of Gregorian chant melodies as the compositional foundation of the entire requiem:

"This requiem is composed entirely on the Gregorian themes of the Mass for the Dead. Sometimes the musical text has been respected in full, the orchestra intervening only to sustain or to comment on it; sometimes I was simply inspired by it or sometimes removed myself from it altogether".<sup>8</sup>

It is immediately evident that Gregorian chant melodies from the Mass for the Dead are the foundation of the Requiem in the A section of the opening movement Introit which begins with an exact statement of the Requiem aeternam (bar 2-20 in the tenor and bass parts of the score) found on page 1807 of the Liber Usualis. The B section *Te decet* (bar 26-38) also bears a striking similarity to the corresponding chant melody in the Liber Usualis (p.1807). A return to the A section brings with it a restatement of the Requiem aeternam text in the choral parts however the original Gregorian chant melodic theme is now heard as the "principal melodic material in the orchestra".<sup>9</sup> Also notable is Duruflé's use of modality that is inherent in the Gregorian chant melodies and which the composer highlights and exploits through the choral and orchestral scoring. For example, the tonal centre of the Introit is clearly F and there is a major (ionian) character in the melody although the corresponding orchestration hints at the minor (aeolian) character of the relative D tonal centre. However, if one assumes a major character to the melody,<sup>10</sup> Lydian is implied at bar 12 twelve in the soprano melodic line. This Lydian character is heard again at the *Te decet* from bar 26 onwards.

The second movement *Kyrie* features the *Kyrie* melodic chant from the Liber Usualis (p.1807,1808); this time as a cantus firmus rhythmic augmentation in the orchestration at the beginning and end of the movement. The third movement *Domine Jesu Christe* features fragments of the corresponding chant melody from Liber Usualis (p.1813,1814) that can be heard in the baritone solo part and also in the orchestral and choral texture.<sup>11</sup> The melodic and harmonic lines in the soprano and alto parts (bar 2-21 and bar 56-63) of the fourth movement *Sanctus* bear striking resemblance to the equivalent chant melody on p.1814

of the Liber Usualis. The fifth movement *Pie Jesu* solo melody is also very similar to the final two phrases of the *Dies Irae* chant melody on p.1813 of the Liber Usualis. The sixth movement *Agnus Dei* and seventh movement *Lux Aeterna* are almost exact statements of the equivalent chant melodies on p.1815 of the Liber Usualis.

In contrast to the previous seven movements, the eighth movement *Libera Me* makes quite a dramatic departure from the original Gregorian chant melody found on p.1767 of the Liber Usualis. Interesting to note is the sudden appearance of the opening phrase of the *Dies Irae* theme from the Liber Usualis p.1810 but altered rhythmically to create the intense dramatic effect implied in the meaning of the text. There is also a brief restatement of the *Lux Aeterna* text (bar 88-104) although the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic material appears to be original in that it bears no resemblance to that of the sixth movement.

The closing ninth movement *In paradisum* again begins with an exact statement of the equivalent Gregorian chant melody from the Liber Usualis p.1768, 1769 until the end of the text 'Jerusalem'. Significantly the final phrase beginning with the text 'Chórus Angelórum' bears no resemblance to the Liber Usualis melodic chant and therefore Duruflé appears to close with his own melodic, harmonic and rhythmic material.

Duruflé's Requiem has also been subject to much comparison with the Requiem of his predecessor Fauré; particularly with regard to formal structure. Fauré chose the following eight movements in this order: Introit, *Kyrie*, Offertorium, *Sanctus*, *Pie Jesu*, *Agnus Dei*, *Libera Me*, *In Paradisum*. The suggestion being that Duruflé's form is almost identical with the only difference being the addition of the *Lux Aeterna* in between the *Agnus Dei* and the *Libera Me*, making a total of nine movements. The two works share other similarities too. Both are scored for choir, orchestra and two soloists. Fauré chose to write for soprano and baritone soloists.



Duruflé wrote originally for mezzo-soprano and baritone soloist although he later indicated that choral sections could also perform both solo parts.<sup>12</sup> Both composers chose to omit the fearsome *Dies Irae* although Duruflé alludes to the *Dies Irae* momentarily in bar 52 – 55 of the *Libera Me* with a slightly altered rhythmic and melodic fragment of the opening phrase of the original Gregorian chant melody found in the Liber Usualis.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Duruflé challenges the opinions of music critics<sup>14</sup> by citing Debussy and Ravel as being the most influential to his development as a composer, and to a much lesser extent Fauré, which is significant in light of the persistent comparisons between the two composers and their requiems.<sup>15</sup> A thorough analysis of Duruflé's Requiem would suggest that although the formal structure may bear some similarity to Fauré's Requiem it is evident that there is sufficient originality of compositional thought to set them apart significantly.

Duruflé must have been considered quite traditional in his approach to composition in a post-impressionistic era when compared to some contemporary European composers like Schoenberg, Berg and Webern who were experimenting with twelve-tone atonality fashionable at the time.<sup>16</sup> However, one would suggest that his compositional approach still manages to challenge and extend beyond the boundaries of tonality into atonality but from a different angle and for a different expressive purpose not unlike other contemporary European composers; namely Bartók, Messiaen and Stravinsky.

For example, the third movement *Domine Jesu Christe* employs an array of darker and lighter tonal centres that



sharply contrasted one against the other and that mirror and highlight the emotion of the lyrical text throughout. Like all of the great composers who preceded him, Duruflé clearly understood the great expressive power to be drawn from the at times violent contrast between very distantly related sharp and flat keys in quick succession for maximum expressive effect.

In conclusion, from a performance perspective the recommended authentic listening experience has to be an historic 1959 recording of Duruflé's Requiem with his wife Marie Madeleine Duruflé as organist, Hélène Bouvier as mezzo soprano soloist, Xavier Depraz as baritone soloist, Choraes Phillippe Caillard and Lamoureux Orchestra of Paris conducted by the composer himself. This rare live recording has been reissued in CD format (Warner Apex 2564 61139-2) and some, if not all, movements are also readily available to listen to on the digital music platform Spotify. According to the 2010 Penguin Guide to Recorded Classical Music this recording is "particularly valuable as it offers a spontaneously dedicated performance under the direction of the composer that blossoms into great ardour at emotional peaks...the composer proves a splendid exponent of his own works".<sup>17</sup> A review that would surely have pleased the composer who appears to have been an 'exacting perfectionist' and therefore highly critical of his musical oeuvre.<sup>18</sup>

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