

REQUIEM FOR MY FRIEND

Zbigniew Preisner

Kaspszyk J (conductor). Sinfonia Varsovia Orchestra.
Zimak R (director). Towarnicka E (soprano). Varsov
Chamber Choir. Paris, France: Erato, 1997, 68 mins.
£16.99, CD. Cat no 3984-24146-2



Why is it that the majority of composers are men? And why do grief and sorrow play such an important role in music? We can only speculate, but perhaps men find music a particularly good medium for expressing their emotions. If this were true, then music would deserve a permanent place on the shelves of grief counsellors. Music might, then, be a means of getting to know more about the way men deal with their feelings and it could perhaps offer a non-verbal way of coming to terms with loss.

Research on coping makes clear that there are differences in the way the two sexes handle stressful situations¹. There is still some debate, but studies indicate that women engage more frequently in emotion-focused coping, while men tend to use a problem-oriented approach^{2,3}. This may imply an advantage for bereaved women because, according to cognitive stress theory, when the cause of stress cannot be resolved, emotion-focused coping is more functional⁴. However, there is some evidence that both coping styles are essential after a bereavement⁵, but that external constraints prevent women, though not men, from engaging exclusively in their preferred style of coping⁶. So it seems that industrialised societies are structured in a way that encourages people to hide their feelings⁷. Looking at the higher mortality and morbidity risks of the male, men are apparently more vulnerable to the negative health consequences of bereavement than women. This is often taken to mean that women's ways of confronting their emotions are superior and, in some circles, the female way has become the norm. If we feel sad, we should share it, talk about it, cry, or at least let friends and family know that we are going through a difficult time.

But our focus when talking about ways of coping with emotions may be too narrow. I am not a musical expert and I have no evidence to support my hypothesis, but perhaps for some people (men, in particular) music offers a better

way of dealing with feelings than words – talking or writing. If anything can completely penetrate the depths of my male soul, it is music and what is more (and this may be idiosyncratic) particularly music that reflects sadness and sorrow. Strangely this effect seems to be independent of the style, character or period of the music, but one piece that I consider to be superlative is Zbigniew Preisner's *Requiem for My Friend*.

Zbigniew Preisner, born in Poland, is considered to be one of the most influential contemporary composers of film music. His compositions were first published in 1983 and he has written masterpieces for many of Krzysztof Kieslowski's films, including his *Three Colours* trilogy, and for Deborah Warner's *The Last September*. His collaboration with Kieslowski was intense and soon developed into friendship. Entrepreneurs both, they decided to write a musical life story, which was to be a hybrid of mystery play and opera. Fate had different plans for them: their collaboration came to a sudden end when Kieslowski died in 1996 and this loss inspired Preisner to compose a requiem.

Requiem for My Friend has two parts, *Requiem* and *Life*, both in nine movements. The first is for soprano, organ, two countertenors, tenor, bass, string quintet and percussion; the second, for soprano, voice, countertenor, recorder, alto sax, piano, sixty-piece orchestra and forty-piece choir.

At first, I thought that these two were in the wrong sequence: life after all precedes death. Preisner himself says that the two sections are unrelated, and that actually only the first is written in the memory of Kieslowski but, although I am well aware that I am not entitled to disagree with the composer, I tend to think he is wrong. Firstly, the two halves are welded together so that the listener can hardly differentiate between them in atmosphere and character. Secondly, I think that there is nothing coincidental about the juxtaposition of these pieces. For me, *Requiem* (or death) and *Life* represent the two basic aspects or dimensions of grief: dealing with the loss and picking up life again (loss orientation and restoration orientation). They can be appreciated as separate entities, but the essence is reflected in the combination.

The first movement of *Requiem*, 'Officium', is pure humility. Almost completely without instrumental support, naked, seemingly bodiless voices beg God to grant the dead eternal rest. In the next, 'Kyrie eleison', the soprano continues to pray for mercy. The tone is set, all you can do now is surrender to the music or put on something else. If you surrender yourself, you will find that the tempo and choice of instruments have an almost hypnotising effect. Your thoughts can float freely on the warmth and technical perfection of the soprano

and the countertenors with the instruments as a simple accompaniment.

In *Life*, Preisner gradually brings us back to the world with a surprising combination of instruments (an alto saxophone, for instance, which fits perfectly with the traditional scoring), and an energy created by the gradually increasing number and volume of the instruments and the increasing tempo. It ends beautifully in a tenuous prayer for help and strength to believe in the meaning of the future.

Why does this requiem make me feel as though I have been stabbed in the heart, especially considering that I am not religious at all? I think it is because the character of the composition resembles my own. I am not considered to be an expressive man. I keep my (negative) emotions to myself, only sharing them sometimes with my wife, a handful of friends and my son. I see no point in talking about my troubles and, when I do, I try to keep it to the minimum, not so much because I want to spare others but because I am just not a communicative kind of person. Although I would not advocate this as a good way of dealing with feelings, keeping things to myself has generally served me well (thus far, fingers crossed). It seems to me that Preisner's *Requiem* bears a great similarity to my way of going about things – passionate though restrained, nothing redundant, every tone necessary as well as sufficient.

No doubt such well-respected composers as Mozart and Verdi have, so far, been much more influential but my preference undoubtedly lies with Preisner and I hope you will find an opportunity to get acquainted with this *Requiem* soon. After all, hearing is believing. BC

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