

DAVID J. BURN (ED.), *THE BOOK OF REQUIEMS: FROM THE EARLIEST AGES TO THE PRESENT PERIOD, 1450–1550*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022). ISBN 978-9462703261, 208 pp, €70 (hardback).

The requiem is one of the few genres of sacred music that is still very much alive beyond religious circles today; its canonical works are performed regularly while new settings are composed frequently. While there are many studies of individual requiems it may come as a surprise that so far there have been few comparative discussions of the genre's history, unlike the case of opera, symphony or string quartet—at least in English or German. There is Luc Voirin's *Un historique du requiem* of 2001,¹ which was followed by Robert Chase's *Dies irae: A Guide to Requiem Music* in 2003.² As well, there is Requiem Survey, a multi-authored online database offering basic information on 5,722 requiem settings by 3,482 composers.³ All three sources are encyclopaedic in nature, offering basic information on a large number of pieces but with no in-depth information, let alone analytical observations or aesthetic assessments.

The Book of Requiems: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period sets out to change this state of affairs. This is the first book in what will be a multi-volume series, with Pieter Bergé and David J. Burn (both requiem experts based in Leuven) as general editors. Bergé is co-editor of *Dies irae: Kroniek van het requiem* (2011), one of the few available comparative surveys of the genre, which discusses six requiems written before 1600, seven from between 1600 and 1900, and ten composed since 1900.⁴

According to the general editors and Antonio Chemotti (co-author of the volume's introduction) the purpose of the new series is to provide:

essays, each written by a leading expert, on the most musically and historically important Requiems in western music history [...]. In so doing the *Book* is intended as an authoritative reference publication that will serve as a first port of call for musicologists, music theorists, and performers both professional and student interested in deepening their knowledge of a Requiem they love, in

¹ Luc Voirin, *Un historique du requiem* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001).

² Robert Chase, *Dies irae: A Guide to Requiem Music* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2003).

³ Kees van der Vloed (webmaster), 'The Requiem Survey', <http://www.requiemsurvey.org/>. While the figures quoted are accurate as of 6 February 2023, the site was last accessed on 19 February 2023.

⁴ Pieter Bergé and Jan Christiaens (eds), *Dies irae: Kroniek van het requiem* (Leuven: Lipsius Leuven, 2011). The book can be downloaded for free from this website: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/51178>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

discovering new ones, and in appreciating how Requiems relate to one another and to wider musical culture.⁵

While the welcome number of music examples may indicate that professionals and students are the intended readership here, this need not exclude the general public as the writing is very accessible, and the chapters are not excessively lengthy, while still being highly informative. The introduction is just three pages long. While this is sufficient for a single volume it could perhaps have been more extensive as an introduction for the entire series, for example by addressing which pieces may or may not be included—will requiems with non-liturgical texts (Brahms, Weill) or purely instrumental ones (Henze) be discussed?

The first two chapters are introductory in nature, with Sarah Ann Long discussing the plainsong requiem tradition and John Milsom outlining polyphonic compositional techniques in Renaissance requiems; although the musical attributes addressed in Milsom's chapter would equally apply to any other genre. Long covers a broad range of local variants in texts and chant melodies, while Milsom impressively explains the different types of polyphonic texture in a manner that should be easily accessible to non-experts.

The main part of the book consists of eight chapters dedicated to the requiem settings of Johannes Ockeghem (authored by Fabrice Fitch), Pierre de la Rue (Honey Meconi), Antoine Brumel (David J. Burn), Dionisius Prioris (M. Jennifer Bloxam), Pedro de Escobar (Tess Knighton), Antoine de Févin (Honey Meconi), Jean Richafort (M. Jennifer Bloxam) and Claudin de Sermisy (Stephen Rice). These chapters are all structured similarly: the first page outlines the work's genesis (country / region and date of composition), followed by lists of sources (mainly manuscript ones, where applicable also early prints), modern editions, and a select bibliography. This is followed by a table outlining the piece's "formal scheme", listing the incipits of movements and sections, indicating its formal structure and scoring, and differentiating between polyphony and chant sections—where useful, this is complemented by information on mensuration, cleffing and finals. The subsequent texts are split into the three sections 'Historical Context', 'General Form and Style', and 'Analysis'. The chapters on individual settings are between twelve and twenty-one pages long, with the word count increased in the case of longer, more complex and / or influential settings or where the transmission, date of composition, and sometimes even authorship are unclear and warrant a more

⁵ David J. Burn (ed.), *The Book of Requiems: From the Earliest Ages to the Present Period, 1450–1550* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2022), 15.

detailed discussion. The quality of the texts is high throughout, and the authors regularly acknowledge alternative interpretations by other scholars.

To take the ‘Ockeghem’ chapter as an example, Fitch opens it with an assessment of its genesis and relation to Du Fay’s setting, referring to the positions of scholars such as Margaret Bent, Jaap van Benthem, Michael Eckert, Alejandro Planchart, Richard Wexler and himself. Of equal interest is whether Ockeghem’s setting is to be placed before or after Du Fay’s, yet the evidence is not sufficient to reach a firm conclusion (the work is thus placed between “c1450” and “c1497 / 1504?”.⁶ Fitch also weighs the arguments regarding its lack of completeness and stylistic unity, admirably outlining how his own views were altered by the work of other scholars such as Benthem. It is not impossible that what we know as Ockeghem’s Requiem is a compilation of movements from several pieces so that it was only “created” in the act of copying (hence 1504—the approximate date at which the only existing copy was written—featuring as the latest possible date of the work’s “creation”). In the ‘Analysis’ section, Fitch outlines the work’s increasing complexity from its more static opening to the more polyphonic later movements, again assessing what speaks for an earlier or later date of certain movements. His arguments encompass aspects of notation, texture, and the use and combination of voices, such as lengthy duo sections in the middle movements—yet ultimately no final conclusion is possible again. Fitch’s chapter is a great introduction to the work for those not familiar with it, yet simultaneously it is a good summary of the existing problems, and specialists’ differing views on them.

I, for one, eagerly await further volumes of this series. It is not clear how many there are to come—neither the book itself nor the publisher’s website give any hint about prospective plans. Some remarks in the book make it clear that the authors already know which works will be covered in the next volume, though regrettably nothing beyond that is mentioned. Despite its title this volume covers rather less than a full century. As we have seen, Ockeghem’s setting may well have been written later than 1450 while the latest requiem discussed here (de Sermisy’s) is dated as “c1530”. Given that a full volume is in effect dedicated to perhaps some seventy to eighty years out of a period that produced significantly fewer requiem settings than those of later times, it suggests we may expect quite a number of volumes over the coming years. Despite its 208 pages, for some, the price of €70 may be rather high, yet the efforts that went into the concept and execution of this volume, as well as the high quality of both content and production values, indicate that the series is well worth the investment. This project is indeed very likely to become the authoritative reference publication in this area.

⁶ Burn, *Book of Requiems*, 73.

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