

Randall Thompson's *Requiem:* A Forgotten American Masterpiece

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Thirty years after his death, Randall Thompson remains one of the United States' most frequently performed composers. In his choral music especially, Thompson was a "monument of calm integrity in a musically turbulent half-century."¹ His mature compositional style was established early in his life and does not reflect many of the disparate paths of his contemporaries: he had no forays into serialism or electronics, nor did he use any folk material or pre-existing melodies as his inspiration. Harmonic conservatism placed him out of favor with some of the more academic theorists, but his music has always found a place with performers. His melodies are tuneful, singable, and both his large and small works show careful construction, attention to form, and symbolism.

One of Thompson's distinctive abilities as a choral composer was that of setting text, from the prosody at the level of melody to the overall affect in each work.² For this reason

¹ James Haar, "Randall Thompson and the Music of the Past," in *Randall Thompson: A Choral Legacy*, ed. Alfred Mann (Boston: E. C. Schirmer, 1983), 49.

² Elliot Forbes, "The Music of Randall Thompson," *The Musical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (Jan. 1949): 9. Elliot Forbes summarized the excellence in Thompson's text setting by saying that "... every phrase of text [is set] into a texture of voices that serves not only to sound the words but also to bring out their meaning by a particular choral color," and that musical lines have "the rhythmic equivalent in music to the natural rhythms of the words when spoken." Forbes went further to say that Thompson's text setting was excellent on a larger formal

it is somewhat paradoxical that many choirs have only experienced Thompson through his *Alleluia* (1940), which is an excellent example of Thompson's abilities in the area of structure, pacing, and form, but has a limited text. Nearly all of Thompson's other choral music is settings of English texts, often quite unique ones, and it is in these works that he shows his mastery of setting texts to music. Works like *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1936) and *The Last Words of David* (1949) are fine examples of carefully crafted, dramatic settings of English texts not set by any other composers, and they persist as part of the permanent repertoire. Thompson's penchant for English setting extends also to secular subjects, with *Frostiana* (1959) and its constituent parts still frequently performed today.

For a composer who achieved so much success in choral music, despite a relatively small output

structure, saying that in the linking of phrases "Thompson gets gradations of punctuation in musical terms which interpret and enhance those at the disposal of the poet."

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of only a few dozen works, neglected works are worth reconsidering. The *Requiem* (1958) is one such work. This study will show that the *Requiem*, though performed only a handful of times, was a work of great importance to Randall Thompson, and his greatest achievement in choral composition. While it is admittedly a substantial and complex work (double-choir a cappella, 60 minutes), the *Requiem's* failure to gain popularity is due mainly to non-musical factors, and many of the difficulties keeping it from being performed have been alleviated in the fifty years since its composition. Two recent complete performances by the Philadelphia Singers (the first in almost thirty years), and forthcoming recording of the work, finally realize aurally the excellence that has always existed in the score. The *Requiem* is Randall Thompson's masterpiece in English text selection and setting. It is also a thoroughly American work, and deserves a place of significance in this nation's musical history, as was suggested by some at the time it was written.³

Historical Background

To establish the uniqueness of Thompson's *Requiem*, both within his oeuvre and the greater choral tradition, it is necessary to discuss a significant amount of historical background. This author will first place the *Requiem* within Thompson's body of work both chronologically and with respect to genre, then turn to the events surrounding the composition itself, and close with

³ Daniel Moe. "The Choral Conductor and Twentieth-Century Choral Music," in *Choral Conducting: A Symposium*, ed. Harold A. Decker and Julius Herford, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 144. Moe mentions the *Requiem* as one of a few dozen "representative" Twentieth-Century choral works. Two specific performance reviews suggested lasting success: Alfred Frankenstien, "Randall Thompson Work Premiered." *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 24, 1958. Arthur Bloomfield, "Between Earthly, Heavenly Choir," *California Bulletin*, May 26, 1958.

comments on what writing a Requiem meant to Thompson philosophically. These several streams of evidence will show the *Requiem* to have been created through a unique confluence of events that allowed it to be the most purely inspired and deeply personal composition of Thompson's career.

Biographical Background and Catalogue

Randall Thompson was born in 1899 and spent much of his childhood in New England and New Jersey. His father was an English teacher at a residential private school, so Thompson's early education was in the liberal arts tradition. Emphasis on the liberal arts was solidified through his undergraduate and master's degree studies in music at Harvard University. Thompson showed promise in composition early, being awarded several student prizes at Harvard, and he eventually won a fellowship to the American Academy in Rome. Though his music is not European in nature, it was during these three years in Europe that Thompson solidified his style and wrote his first mature works, both choral and instrumental.

Upon his return from Europe, Thompson was very active in the upper circles of young American composers, developing relationships with some of the most important composers and conductors of the time. In 1926, Aaron Copland talked of Thompson being one of the several young voices in American music who would help establish a uniquely American style.⁴ Establishing a musical

⁴ Aaron Copland, "America's Young Men of Promise," *Modern Music* 3, no. 3 (March-April 1926): 13-20. Copland had commented specifically on Thompson's precision and craftsmanship in his compositions: "Each one of Thompson's compositions is finished with a most meticulous pen—not an eighth note which does not receive full consideration before it is put on paper."

tradition separate from European influences was something on the minds of this generation of young composers, including Thompson.⁵ He continued to gain valuable experience both as composer and choral conductor during his late twenties and early thirties, composing two symphonies and his first multi-movement choral-orchestral work *Americana* (1932).

In a major diversion from his work as composer and conductor, Thompson surveyed college music programs for the American Association of Colleges during the academic years of 1932-1935, after which he settled into an academic career. It took more than a decade to find a career position, with brief tenures at the University of California, Curtis Institute, University of Virginia and other institutions. During these nomadic years, Thompson wrote several well-known works, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1936) and *Alleluia* (1940), and *Testament of Freedom* (1943) being the most well-known. In 1948 he returned to Harvard as a professor, where he would spend the final sixteen years of his career. Thompson often found it difficult to compose while he was teaching, so the vast majority of his composing was done during breaks from the academic year, typically at the Thompson's summer home in Gstaad, Switzerland. Thus, it was extremely rare for Thompson to be able to spend more than a few weeks of uninterrupted time on a composition, even a large one.

With limited time for his efforts, Thompson still produced a series of several larger works while

⁵ Randall Thompson, "The Contemporary Scene in American Music," *The Musical Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Jan. 1932), 9-17. In this article, Thompson passionately urged American composers to work towards a style that was uniquely American, not dependent on the "European yardstick" for its approval. He warned that the "cult of the individual" was keeping American composers from presenting a unified voice, and encouraged composers to take advantage of the unique source material that they had in jazz, spirituals, and hymnody.

teaching at Harvard, including *Mass of the Holy Spirit* (1956), *Ode to the Virginia Voyage* (1957), *Requiem* (1958), *Frostiana* (1959), and the *Nativity According to Saint Luke* (1961). What is extremely unusual about the *Requiem* in this context is that it was composed during the academic year 1957-8, while Thompson was on sabbatical. At no other point in his teaching career did Thompson have that much time dedicated to work on a composition.

His complete catalogue shows a balance of sacred and secular works both large and small, accompanied and not. In a discussion of the *Requiem*, the most important influence comes from *The Peaceable Kingdom*, which was a piece inspired by his time in Europe during his twenties. It was there that Thompson was captivated by the drama of late-Renaissance madrigal cycles. *The Peaceable Kingdom* was his modern sacred extension of that genre, exchanging the secular poetry for equally dramatic texts from the book of Isaiah. This piece and the *Requiem* have some stylistic and structural similarities, and Thompson identified a connection between the two.⁶ The other large works surrounding the *Requiem* are significant to its history also, but mainly through the influence of timing and comparative difficulty, which will be discussed later with the work's reception.

Inspiration and Commission

Almost exclusively, Thompson composed his music in response to a commission. He took the matter of a commission seriously, carefully considering the purpose of the event, logistical

⁶ Randall Thompson, "Notes on a *Requiem*," in *Randall Thompson: A Choral Legacy*, ed. Alfred Mann (Boston: E. C. Schirmer, 1983), 33.

concerns, and abilities of the tasked musicians before settling on a text or ensemble.⁷ Because the requests often had a specific purpose, the inspiration for many of his works was drawn from the needs of the commission rather than himself.

The *Requiem* is a distinct departure from this model of deference to a particular commission. The first of the several factors leading to this inspired work was Thompson's meeting a young, terminally-ill choral conductor named Frederick Pratt II in the summer of 1954. Though they spent only one afternoon together, Thompson was moved by the young man's passion for the choral art, even though he had only months to live. That single meeting sparked in Thompson's mind the idea for a large choral work that dealt with the topic of death. His concept of the work was fully formed three years before he began to write, in stark contrast to the way a commission would provide an impetus for a work.

With a concept for a work fully in his mind, some fortunate timing also made the *Requiem* a result of a unique creative opportunity. In the spring of 1957, Thompson was commissioned to write a piece that would be a part of a series of concerts put on by the University of California (now the University of California, Berkeley) to celebrate the opening of their new music building. Being a former faculty member and founder of the University Chorus there, Thompson was an ideal person to be commissioned for such a work. The commission itself gave Thompson carte blanche to craft a piece to his liking. There were no stipulations on text, theme,

⁷ For instance, the commission from Amherst, Massachusetts for *Frostiana* originally asked him to set Frost's poem "The Gift Outright," but Thompson rejected it because of Amherst's historical role in the American Revolution. In the same work, Thompson intentionally varied the voicing of movements after considering what would be an assembly of church choirs with limited rehearsal time together.

length, accompaniment, or any other details. This creative freedom matched perfectly with Thompson's seed of inspiration from three years prior. Additionally, Thompson was about to take a sabbatical during the 1957–8 school year, the longest amount of uninterrupted time he had had to compose since his early thirties. These many factors, coinciding only once in his career, allowed for the *Requiem* to be one of Thompson's most purely inspired, carefully executed compositions, and one of considerable proportions.

When the *Requiem* was finally composed during Thompson's sabbatical of 1957–8, its proportions were indeed sizable. His concept for the work, established in 1954, was that of a dramatic dialogue akin to Elizabethan tragedy, within the sacred madrigal cycle concept he established in *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Consequently, his chosen medium was double-chorus a cappella, and although Thompson had originally set out to write something of about the dimensions of *The Peaceable Kingdom*,⁸ the final piece would fill more than an hour.

Philosophical Background

With the unique inspiration established, Thompson's *Requiem* gains more significance when considered within the greater tradition of Requiem compositions. Some of Thompson's own speeches and writings offer clues indicating that the *Requiem* was more to him than one of his many works, and can be seen as his personal statement on the subject of life and death.

⁸ Randall Thompson to Edward Lawton, May 23, 1957, Randall Thompson Papers and Family Papers (*85-M70, Box 28: Folder "University of California"), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Thompson's *Requiem* is part of a heritage of Requiem settings that had become more personal in nature over the previous hundred years. Settings of the standard Roman Catholic Requiem Mass text, such as those by Mozart and Verdi, are among the most enduring and authentic pieces in many composers' repertoires. Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* represented a departure from the traditional text, and in the following years composers began to personalize Requiem settings even more by modifying the traditional text or including contemporary poetry. Though these newer works on the subject of death are not Requiems in the traditional sense, their focus on the subject of death unifies their genre. Thompson's text construction for his own *Requiem* is highly individualized.

We can infer from two specific writings what composing a Requiem would have meant to Thompson. In 1974, Randall Thompson was asked to contribute to a special volume of the *American Choral Review* that was being prepared to celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday.⁹ While he could easily have written about one of several more popular or recent works, he chose to write about his *Requiem*, even though he had received disappointingly few performances in over fifteen years. His article about it was personal, going far beyond the compositional elements of the piece to address at length the story of its inspiration. As he looked back at his body of work, these choices show the place the *Requiem* had in Thompson's own mind.

Adding to the importance given to the piece in his article, in the spring of 1946, Randall Thompson had delivered a message at Princeton

⁹ Randall Thompson, "Notes on a *Requiem*," in *American Choral Review* 16, no. 4 (1974). Also republished in *Randall Thompson: A Choral Legacy*, ed. Alfred Mann (Boston: E. C. Schirmer, 1983).

University titled "Music, a Mirror." The speech reveals some of Thompson's thoughts about music in general and how compositions relate to their creators. He spoke directly about how other composers have viewed death, and how it can be seen as a "heritage of their feelings." He said that history is all we ever study, and that it is basically "an inquiry into the way men felt and into the feelings which made them act the way they did." Thompson thought of music as a special tool for the purpose of communicating feelings through time, more potent than literature, architecture, or painting:

The greatest composers have left us a heritage of their feelings. And the easiest and most accessible to us, the most readily comprehended, are the feelings which one might call 'concrete.' Music holds as many records of deep feeling as any other art and is, if anything, more intense in its power of communication of those feelings.¹⁰

Thompson said that we can draw true inferences about composer's feelings by experiencing their music; we have actual access to concrete feelings. Thompson used the issue of death as an example for illustration, citing Bach:

...let us draw a comparison with the Crucifixus of the B minor mass. Here there is no visual representation; only aural imagery, only pure feeling, pure sound. And yet to hear the Crucifixus is virtually to be present at the death of Our Lord. What Bach felt about that moment in history is so deep, so overwhelming, so incandescently, universally

¹⁰ Randall Thompson, "Music: a Mirror," (lecture, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, May 22, 1946), in *Randall Thompson Papers and Family Papers* (*85-M70, Box 33: Folder "Music, a mirror"), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

human that no mere narration or portrait or sculpture or poem could surpass it.¹¹

Clearly, Thompson thought music to be more powerful than other arts in communicating affect, or an environment of feeling about a particular subject, as Bach did. He continued with other composers, contrasting the characters of the pieces they wrote concerning the same subject:

But what about death as it appears in the Eroica Symphony of Beethoven? There, there is grief—human, and then a glimpse of a country unstained by grief or struggle—not just a ‘heaven’ either, but a strong kind of happiness,—powerful, passionate, sublime.

How did a great mind like Brahms feel about the Grim Reaper? He saw the vanity of human wishes; all that was transitory was only a likeness; his portrayal of the after-life in *The Song of Fate* was of a kind of Persian loveliness and light; for the *Requiem* he portrays a kind of comfortable heaven in which ordinary persons (not necessarily heroes) find solace eternal.

How did R. Strauss feel about Death and about Transfiguration? ...in his tone-poem, an ordinary man dies and his soul goes to heaven, with harps strumming and trumpets blaring.

These are all different aspects of death, all given to us in what, ultimately, amounts to pure feeling about the subject—an element which is now and always has been recognized

by all except pedants as indispensable to any genuine understanding or comprehension.¹²

By applying this speech to Thompson’s own *Requiem*, the piece can be rightly viewed as a personal statement. He was not making a detached musical statement that existed in abstraction, he was creating a piece of music that reflected his “concrete feelings” on the subject of death. Thompson was not restricted by the text in the *Requiem*, since he carefully assembled it himself. According to this view of music, when Thompson wrote the *Requiem*, he documented his feelings about death with the most powerful tool he had to communicate them.

This mirror, in fact,—devoid of all connotations such as birth, life, love, fate, tragedy, melancholy, joy, death, transfiguration—this mirror, I say, that gleams in music as in no other art, is as high—as supreme—an expression as the human spirit is capable of.¹³

Musical Analysis Text Assembly

This article has already alluded to the fact that the text of Thompson’s *Requiem* is one of its most distinctive features. Thompson, like Brahms and many others, departed from the traditional Latin text and instead assembled his own personal statement in the vernacular, using only biblical scripture. However, the text similarities between Thompson’s text and those of his contemporaries end at that point. While others, such as Brahms, used large cohesive portions of scripture, Thompson used tiny fragments, often

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

just single phrases, to craft an entirely personal story out of the Bible. Rarely was any piece of text used for a purpose similar to its biblical context, so while the words were scripture, the libretto for the drama was entirely Thompson's.

The dramatic dialogue was conceived as a conversation between two characters: Choir II plays the part of mourners, suffering the loss of a loved one. Choir I is the "chorus of the faithful," who through their message of redemption and eternal life attempt to comfort the mourners. The five distinct parts of the drama, as well as the major plot points, were settled three years before the work was composed:

Slowly it formed itself in my mind as being in five parts, in some ways not unlike the five acts of Elizabethan tragedy; and it would be cast in the form of a dramatic dialogue between the two choruses, one representing souls of the faithful; the other, mourners. I thought: Part I, *Lamentations*. The mourners grieve and no efforts of the faithful can console them. Part II, *The Triumph of Faith*. A debate on immortality, won in the end by the faithful through a mystic demonstration of eternal life. Part III, *The Call to Song*. With increasing intensity, the souls beseech the mourners to cast off grief through praising the Lord. Finally, in response to the souls' anguished cry, "Can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women?", the mourners break forth into song. Part IV, *The Garment of Praise*. A cumulative paean. Part V, *The Leave-taking*. The souls return to their rest and the mourners, all passion spent, submit to God's will and grieve no more for the loss of their loved one. "He asked life of thee and

Thou gavest him a long life, even for ever and ever."¹⁴

Thompson spent six weeks assembling the text. In all, he used sixty-four verses drawn from seventeen books of the Bible.¹⁵

Musical Realization

Because an exhaustive musical analysis is beyond the scope of this article, this analysis will use the innovative text Thompson crafted as the starting point, illuminating the most potent and original features he used to elevate the text and enhance the drama. It will show that the music of the *Requiem* is well-crafted, and effectively serves the dramatic intent of the text at every level.

Looking at the *Requiem* broadly, it is of very large proportions, especially for an a cappella work. Part I is realized in a single large movement, but the other four each have between three and five individual movements, totaling eighteen movements in the five parts. The general style and harmonic language of the work is consistent with the whole of Thompson's other works, though the double-choir medium and several musical quotes lend the greatest relationship to *Peaceable Kingdom*. The following description will show that Thompson creatively utilized the double-choir medium in a multitude of ways, as dictated by the drama. In the parts where the characters are most divided (Parts I-III), their musical themes, dynamics, tempi, form, and text are all radically different from each other. When the characters are unified

¹⁴ Ibid., 33.

¹⁵ This total includes one passage from the apocryphal book *Wisdom of Solomon*, a book Brahms had also used in *Ein deutsches Requiem*.

(Part IV-V), the eight voices, with complementing music, are deployed in a wide variety of combinations and textures.

Part I: Lamentations

As indicated by Thompson, the task of the first part is to introduce the two characters and their conflict, composed in a single large movement. The entire text of this movement is reproduced in Table 1 to illustrate several points. The opening text for Choir II (the mourners) is inwardly focused and establishes their emotional state, while the message of comfort from Choir I contains four emphatic statements coming from a different scripture reference. Each choir then further develops their characters with the remaining text, Choir II lamenting outwardly, and Choir I continuing to direct their commands to the mourners. Two important points about these selected texts resonate throughout the piece. First, Thompson chose texts with particular dramatic focus. Choir II’s text is directed both inwardly and outwardly, while Choir I remains focused on the other character. Shifts in focus persist throughout the *Requiem* in the original text selection and arrangement. Second, the texts further paint the characters’ mindset by means of poetic rhythm. In this movement, the chorus of mourners (Choir II) has a text replete with the rolling, even unsettled rhythm of anapest, while the contrasting confidence of the chorus of the faithful (Choir I) is emphasized by the strength and resolve of a trochee rhythm. Selecting and arranging the text, one of Thompson’s strengths, was clearly done with considerable thought into both the drama envisioned, and the music that would result.

Table 1: Full Text of Part I: “Lamentations”

| <u>Choir I (souls of the faithful):</u> | <u>Choir II (mourners):</u> |
|---|--|
| Mourn not, weep not, cry not, grieve not. (Nehemiah 8:9, Luke 8:52, Job 36:13, Ephesians 4:30) | Lamentations, and mourning, and weeping. (Ezekiel 2:10) |
| Refrain thy voice from weeping and thine eyes from tears. (Jeremiah 31:16) | The joy of our heart is ceased; Our dance is turned into mourning. (Lamentations 5:15) |
| Neither shalt thou mourn nor weep, Neither shall thy tears run down (Ezek. 24:16) | Mourn. |
| Grieve not, cry not, mourn not, nor weep. (Ephesians 4:30, Job 36:13, Nehemiah 8:9) | Mourn. |

The character of the distinct texts, including their rhythmic differences, are accentuated by the music. All of the music is derived from four musical themes, two for each choir. The music for Choir II is characterized by an inexorable throbbing in E-Phrygian mode and compound meter, often dwelling only on the word “mourn” (Fig. 1). “Lamentations” is also first of two instances in the work where Choir II is divided into two sub-choirs itself. This particular instance was Thompson’s way of painting Choir II’s mourning as endless by seamlessly alternating the sub-choirs’ mourning statements. In stark contrast, Choir I’s various statements of comfort are written with a bold, resolute quality, in simple meters and functional harmonic motion. The second pair of themes (Figs. 2 and 3), setting the next exchange of texts, preserve and develop the distinctions of the first themes. Both subsets of Choir II, again alternating, remain modal and rhythmically compound, showing lament

through a descending chain of seventh chords that fail to resolve. Choir I’s statements remain straightforward and functional, with contrary motion and extensive use of chromatic pitches.

“Lamentations,” more than any other movement of the Requiem, shows Thompson’s craftsmanship with regards to large-scale musical structure, much like a sonata form that often opens a symphony. In a broad ABA form, the four themes are alternated and superimposed variously. The general key scheme is I-IV-I with tonal centers E and A, and there is a retransition that serves as the principle musical climax at the close of B-section. At over seven minutes, it is the longest individual movement of the *Requiem*, and aptly sets the dramatic scene for the introduction of the second part.

(Figures 1–3 on next two pages.)

Figure 1: "Lamentations," measures 27–29.

The musical score consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 27-29) features four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal parts have lyrics: "Mourn not, weep not, cry not," with dynamic markings *p*, *mp*, and *mf*. The piano accompaniment includes a bass line and a treble line with a melodic line. The second system (measures 30-31) features four vocal staves and piano accompaniment. The vocal parts have lyrics: "Mourn, mourn," with dynamic markings *pp* and *p*. The piano accompaniment includes a bass line and a treble line with a melodic line. The third system (measures 32-33) features four vocal staves and piano accompaniment. The vocal parts have lyrics: "ing. Mourn, mourn," with dynamic markings *pp* and *p*. The piano accompaniment includes a bass line and a treble line with a melodic line.

Figure 2: "Lamentations," Choir IIa, measures 21–24.

The joy of our heart is ceas'd.

The joy of our heart is ceas'd.

The joy of our heart is ceas'd.

The joy of our heart is ceas'd.

Figure 3: "Lamentations," Choir I, measures 31–38.

Re-frain thy voice from weep-ing and thine eyes from tears. Re-frain thy voice from weep-ing and thine eyes from tears.

Re-frain thy voice from weep-ing and thine eyes from tears. Re-frain thy voice from weep-ing and thine eyes from tears.

Re-frain thy voice from weep-ing and thine eyes from tears. Re-frain thy voice from weep-ing and thine eyes from tears.

Re-frain thy voice from weep-ing and thine eyes from tears. Re-frain thy voice from weep-ing and thine eyes from tears.

Part II: The Triumph of Faith

If Part I is where the characters are introduced, Part II, “The Triumph of Faith” is the heart of the dramatic action, as the mourners and the faithful engage in a vigorous debate over the reality of eternal life. Because the text is literally a debate, the two choirs often sing alternating phrases, yet with radically different themes and textures. Dramatic pauses in the conversation add greatly to the difficulty of performing Part II, as evidenced in the later discussion of performance history.

The conversation opens with “Why make ye this ado and weep?” which shows the faithful probing the mourners about their troubles, to which the mourners respond with a series of desperate, hopeless statements from the tragic book of Job. Though their musical themes are distinct, the texture of the movement is sparse and imitative in both choirs. At the close of the movement, Thompson emphasizes the solemnity of situation by quoting the dark opening chords of Monteverdi’s madrigal *Hor che’l ciel e la terra*.

The main part of the debate takes place in the following movement, “What man is he that liveth and shall not see death?” which sets more text than any other. The musical contrast between the two characters is as stark as the texts that they set: the mourners bring a series of distressing prophecies in *forte*, accented, harmonically bare homophony (Fig.4). The illustrative passage shown in Figure 4 also closes (mm. 18-19) with a motive that is linked to the concept of “death” five times in this movement, and is clear quotation of Thompson’s setting of the word “howl” in movement four of *Peaceable Kingdom*. These many anxious statements are

answered in turn by the faithful with hushed, unhurried, chorale-like statements of peace. This texture is seen extended on the text “The eternal God is thy refuge,” where Choir I introduces a theme that returns several times throughout the *Requiem* to illustrate the reality of eternal life (Fig. 5). The mourners are not convinced at first, and continue in their intense despair, to which the faithful answer immediately with the prophesy, “Everlasting joy shall be unto them.” Departing from the antiphonal texture, these competing ideas of despair and prophesy are juxtaposed musically, leading to the musical climax of Part II in measure 67. In the end, the faithful win the argument, and the mourners stand in awe of what Thompson called the “mystic demonstration of eternal life.”¹⁶

The debate is closed finally with Choir I singing “Good tidings to the meek,” an anthem of comfort to the mourners in which Choir I tells them that they will be comforted by putting on the “garment of praise.” It is the first of several instances where one of the choirs sings an entire movement by themselves, and is consequently one of the movements most easily excerpted.

(Figures 4 and 5 on next page.)

¹⁶ Notes on a *Requiem*, 40.

Figure 4: II:2, “What man is he that liveth?” Choir II, measures 16–20.

ff *>* *>* *<ff* *rall.* *p*
 Shall we be con- sum'd, con sum'd, con- sum'd, shall we be con- sum'd with dy - ing?
ff *>* *>* *<ff* *rall.* *p*
 Shall we be con- sum'd, con sum'd, con- sum'd, shall we be con- sum'd with dy - ing?
ff *>* *>* *<ff* *rall.* *p*
 Shall we be con- sum'd, con sum'd, con- sum'd, shall we be con- sum'd with dy - ing?
ff *>* *>* *<ff* *rall.* *p*
 Shall we be con- sum'd, con sum'd, con- sum'd, shall we be con- sum'd with dy - ing?

Figure 5: II:2, “What man is he that liveth?” Choir I, measures 21–30.

Lento tranquillo
ppp
 The e - ter - nal God is thy re - fuge and un - der - neath
 The e - ter - nal God is thy re - fuge and un - der - neath
 The e - ter - nal God is thy re - fuge and un - der - neath
 The e - ter - nal God is thy re - fuge and un - der - neath
senza cresc.
 are the ev - er - last - ing arms.
 are the ev - er - last - ing arms.
 are the ev - er - last - ing arms.
 are the ev - er - last - ing arms.

Part III: The Call to Song

The faithful repeat their plea to the mourners (put on the “garment of praise”) with a succession of four choruses that comprise Part III. The first three are sung entirely by Choir I, as necessitated by the drama. In each one, the faithful implore

the mourners to sing to assuage their grief. As seen in Table 2, the texts are brief, and frequently connect the idea of singing with various comforting conditions, such as being “filled with the Spirit.” At the close of the first two choruses, there is also a line of text that narrates the response of the mourners to the request.

Table 2: Texts and musical settings of Part III

| Movement | Text (Choir II in italics) | Primary compositional features |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Be filled with the Spirit | Be filled with the Spirit, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord. But none answered. | Canon, <i>Lento</i> , C-major, three-part. |
| O let the nations be glad | O let the nations be glad and sing for joy. But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear. | Fugue, <i>Andante</i> , G-major and closely-related keys, four-part. |
| Sing unto Him | Sing unto Him. Talk ye of all His wondrous works | Antiphonal chords, roulade, imitation, <i>Allegro</i> , F-mixolydian, up to seven-part. |
| Utter a song | Utter a song. Can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women? <i>Blessed be the Lord God who only doeth wondrous things.</i> | Declamatory homophony, rubato, chromaticism. <i>Fugue</i> |

Thompson chose compositional features, at the levels of form and phrase, that would increase the dramatic tension through the first three choruses as Choir I’s pleas became more desperate. Formally speaking, the movements progress from simple to complex, beginning with a three-part canon and ending with an episodic movement featuring numerous forms and vocal combinations. To this increasing formal complexity, Thompson adds an increasing tempo, decreasing key stability, greater *divisi*, and a need for increasing virtuosity from the singers.

The canon and fugue subjects of the first two movements (Figs. 6 and 7) are straightforward and singable. In “Be filled with the Spirit,” Thompson was especially particular about the

timing and length of silences for their dramatic effect.¹⁷ Both this and the fugue movement that follow remain harmonically simple but are carefully crafted. “Sing unto Him,” by contrast, is constructed of four themes that are variously combined, featuring wide leaps, brisk roulades that require significant flexibility, and *divisi* up to seven parts (Fig. 8). “Sing Unto Him” is also notable for its quotation of other pieces and movements: by quoting an argument by the mourners from “What man is he?,” Choir I in a sense throws Choir II’s arguments back at them, and the “Life” motive is also quoted in measures 63-64.

¹⁷ Ibid., 40. Though this is the least-complex movement in the *Requiem*, Thompson said that it “took a disproportionate number of days to write (five), the problem of timing was so important.”

Figure 6: Canon subject from III:1, “Bee filled with the Spirit,” soprano, measures 1–6.

p dolce e semplice

Be filled with the spi - rit, sing - ing and mak - ing mel - o - dy in your heart to the Lord.

Figure 7: Fugue subject from III:2, “O let the nations be glad,” tenor, measures 1–3.

O let the na - tions be glad and sing for joy,

Figure 8: Themes from III:3, “Sing unto Him”

a. Leaps and sparse imitation, measures 1–2.

Allegro con spirito (♩ = 92)

Sing un-to Him, sing un-to

Sing un-to Him, sing un-to Him,

Sing un-to Him, sing un-to Him,

Sing un-to Him, sing un-to Him,

b. Roulade, measures 6–7.

The image shows a musical score for a Roulade, measures 6-7. It consists of four staves, each labeled 'sing.' at the beginning. The music is written in a single system with a large brace on the left. The notation is highly rhythmic, featuring many sixteenth and thirty-second notes, often beamed together. There are numerous accents and slurs throughout the piece. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The music is performed in a single system with a large brace on the left.

Following this great show of vocal athleticism that goes unanswered, Choir I resorts to chromatic declamatory statements in “Utter a Song.” Thompson used every expressive marking available to him to shape the timing and character of this passage of choral recitative (Fig. 9).

Figure 9: III:4, “Utter a Song,” measures 1–3.

The image shows a musical score for the passage “Utter a Song,” measures 1-3. It consists of four staves, each labeled with the lyrics “Ut - ter a song.” at the bottom. The tempo is marked “Andante moderato (♩ = 80), senza rigore: quasi recitativo”. The dynamics are marked “mf implorando” at the beginning of each staff, “f dim. e rall.” in the middle, and “p” at the end. The music is written in a single system with a large brace on the left. The notation is chromatic and declamatory, with many slurs and accents. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The music is performed in a single system with a large brace on the left.

In response to this final impassioned plea, Choir II finally and suddenly bursts into song with a fugue on the text “Blessed be the Lord God who only doeth wondrous things.” This act of praise is the solution to the primary conflict in the drama, so this moment that concludes Part III is the most musically climactic in the work.

Part IV: The Garment of Praise

The “Garment of Praise” was first mentioned at the close of Part II, as the vehicle for Choir II’s comfort, and Part IV is that fulfillment. It is a sequence of five movements, the first and last featuring similar music. The interior three movements are a series of what Thompson called “hortatory choruses,”¹⁸ each beginning with a call to praise followed by a chorus of praise involving both choirs.

The first and last movements, “Sing with the spirit” and “I am their music” bookend the drama of this section. In the first, Choir I instructs Choir II about how to praise: “Sing with the spirit, and sing with the understanding also.” By the end of the three praise choruses that follow, the mourners have learned the art of praise, and in “I am their music” sing the text “I will praise the Lord with my whole heart; till he fill thy mouth with laughing and thy lips with rejoicing.” Thompson sets this instructive text with nearly identical antiphonal passages between the two choirs, as the mourners are taught the lesson of the faithful. When the music returns at the end of Part IV, Choir II is again split into two sub-choirs as it was in “Lamentations,” but this time sings the music antiphonally within itself, showing the choir’s acceptance of the message.

Between these two solemn movements are the hortatory choruses that are actual “garment of praise” that the mourners are meant to “put on.” Since in these three movements the characters are finally of the same mind and can thus share musical material, they are Thompson’s opportunity to deploy the double-choir medium most flexibly and creatively. Though much of the writing is antiphonal, Thompson takes advantage of the many timbres available by grouping the voices freely, not at all limited to boundaries of the divided choirs.

In text and music, each of the three praise choruses is introduced by an exhortation to praise in unison from the baritones of Choir I. Each outburst of praise finds itself extending further than the one before: first the mountains and forests in “Let everything that hath breath,” then the whole earth and its distant islands in “Let them give glory,” and finally extending to the entire heavens and earth in “Praise Him all ye stars of light.” In every movement Thompson greatly varies textures and voicings based on the text, building each section with a specific text-painting theme (Fig. 10), such as the “multitude of isles” rising out of a “sea” of pedal tones in the second chorus, or when the various voices “leap like lambs” to close the third. An obvious connection to his other work is his symbolic depiction of a the “morning star” with a high soprano pitch sustained above the rest of the texture, much like he would do two years later in “Choose Something Like a Star” from *Frostiana*.

(Figure 10 on next page.)

¹⁸ Thompson, “Notes on a *Requiem*,” 43.

Figure 10: Examples of text painting in melodic themes from Part IV, "The Garment of Praise."

a. "Multitude of isles" from IV:3, "Let them give glory," measures 40–42.

The musical score is presented in two systems of four staves each. The first system (measures 40-42) and the second system (measures 40-42) show vocal lines with lyrics and piano accompaniment. Dynamics include *p*, *pp*, and *(p)*. A fermata is present on a note in the fifth staff of the second system.

System 1 (Measures 40-42):

- Staff 1: mul - ti - tude of isles be glad, let the mul - ti - tude of isles be — glad — there -
- Staff 2: isles be — glad — there - of, be glad there - of let the mul - ti - tude of
- Staff 3: be — glad — there - of, be glad there - of, let the mul - ti -
- Staff 4: glad there - of, be glad there - of, be glad there - of, be

System 2 (Measures 40-42):

- Staff 1: glad — there - of, be — glad — there - of, let the mul - ti - tude of isles be —
- Staff 2: of, let the mul - ti - tude of isles be glad, let the mul - ti - tude of isles
- Staff 3: of, be glad there - of, let the mul - ti - tude of isles be — glad —
- Staff 4: tude of isles be — glad — there - of, be glad — there - of, let the

b. “Morning stars” from IV:4, “Praise Him all ye stars of light,” measures 9–12.

Molto lento (♩. 54)

Soprano I *pp* 10

The morn - ing stars _____

Soprano II *ppp*

Mm (humming) _____

Alto I *ppp*

Mm (humming) _____

Alto II *ppp*

Mm (humming) _____

c. “Leap’d like lambs” from IV:4, “Praise Him all ye stars of light,” Choir II, measures 59–61.

p

and leap'd like lambs leap'd like lambs

leap'd like lambs leap'd like lambs

leap'd like lambs leap'd like lambs

and leap'd like lambs

Each melodic theme in the praise choruses is inextricably linked to the text fragment it sets, and Thompson placed the themes within forms that would enhance the affect of each one specifically. Consequently, the “Garment of Praise” features sudden and dramatic shifts in texture and dynamic intensity from one line of text to another.

V. The Leave-taking

The principal conflict of the drama resolved, the final part of the work is where the characters meet their respective ends. The mourners, now comforted, bid farewell to the souls as they return to heaven. This is accomplished in five movements: first, a chorus sung by both choirs confirming the faith of the mourners; three choruses of dialogue between the two choirs; and finally, an epilogue on the text “Amen and amen, alleluia.” In these movements, Thompson ties the entire work together first with symbolic text selection, then musically through form, quotations, and musical gestures akin to the late Renaissance and early Baroque models that inspired the form of the work initially.

The texts chosen for the outer movements were both symbolic. Looking at the text of the entire drama, it is possible to infer that what the mourners have experienced goes beyond comfort, and is actually conversion. “Ye were sometimes darkness” is a text taken from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, instructing new Christians on how they should live. And, from the many scripture references Thompson could have chosen for “alleluia, amen,” he chose Psalm 89, which was also the source of the most desperate texts Choir II uses in Part II, again emphasizing the change of heart in the mourners.

The setting of “Ye were sometimes darkness,” which opens Part V, is the first of many several musical links to the rest of the *Requiem*. As a large, broadly ternary movement involving both choirs, it functions as the positive parallel to “Lamentations.” The structure of the two movements is similar, but small-scale musical connections are also present that show the positive shift. First, the two choirs

no longer have starkly different themes. The ubiquitous undulating mourning theme from “Lamentations” (Fig. 1) is also replaced with a constant gentle marching passed throughout the choirs on the text “walk as children of light” (Fig. 11). The third clear connection is the use of the descending chain of seventh chords (Fig. 2) at the climaxes in this movement in measures 48 and 88 (Fig. 12). In contrast, this theme is presented here with strength: in all voices, duple meter, approached by step, and sustained on the open vowel of the word “light.” Through this quotation, mourning is literally transformed into light.

(Figures 11 and 12 on next page.)

Figure 11: V:1, “Ye were sometimes darkness,” Choir I, measures 72–74.

of light, of light,

pp

pp legato

Walk as chil - dren of light, chil - dren of light,

pp legato

Walk as chil - dren of light, chil - dren of light,

pp semi-staccato

Walk as chil - dren, walk as chil - dren, walk as chil - dren, walk

Figure 12: V:1, “Ye were sometimes darkness,” Choir I, measures 48–51.

poch. rall. a tempo, largamente

as chil - dren of light, of light,

ff f dim. p

as chil - dren of light, walk as chil - dren.

ff f dim. p

as chil - dren of light, walk as chil - dren of light.

ff f dim. p

as chil - dren of light, as chil - dren of light.

ff f dim. p

If the text is viewed as a libretto, the “Ye were sometimes darkness” is an aria. The three brief movements that follow are more recitative, with the characters saying their last to each other. “The Lord shall be unto thee” is Choir II’s final statement to Choir I. In it, Thompson extends the pedal tone concept of his previous “light” settings (Sop. 1, Figs. 10b and 11). On the text “everlasting light,” he introduces an F4 pedal in the tenor in measure 3, then passes it to alto and finally soprano, lasting through the end of the piece.

Thompson continued his madrigalesque symbolism in the final movement for Choir I, “Return unto thy rest.” Its dramatic purpose is the final disembodiment and ascension of the souls of the departed. Thompson carefully uses

musical gestures to paint the contrary emotions of satisfaction (with their task) and restlessness (to return to rest). Satisfaction is given with a complete absence of dissonance, but the harmonic progressions are surprising, and punctuated with uneasy silences. Furthermore, the gradual disembodiment of the soul is represented by authentic cadences ending in a unison pitch (Fig. 13). Thompson paints the ascension at the close of the movement with a whole-tone scale in the soprano from C-sharp4 to F-sharp5, harmonized in five voices. The pervasive symbolism Thompson attributed directly to Monteverdi, “This movement would never be mistaken for the work of the Divine Claudio, but I could never have written it if I had not studied with him—as I somehow like to think I did.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., 46.

Figure 13: V:III, “Return unto they rest,” measures 1–6.

The musical score for Figure 13 is set in 4/4 time and Adagio. It consists of four staves, each with a vocal line and lyrics. The lyrics are: "Re - turn, Re - turn, Re - turn un - to thy rest, O my soul." The dynamic markings are *ppp* for the first two measures, *pp* for the next two, and *p* for the final two. The music features a unison pitch at the end of the piece.

The final statement for Choir II is the brief movement “Thou hast given him,” a large part of which is a restatement of the “eternal life” motive (Fig. 5). It is the first of the quotations that is given by Choir II, further symbolizing their change. The movement is scored darkly to emphasize the solemnity of the moment, and closes with a return to the original tonal center of E.

“Amen and amen, alleluia” is an epilogue. The drama complete, this final scene is a picture of the two choirs reunited in the future. For most of the movement, the choirs have entirely different music, alternating between sections of a fugal theme from Choir II and chorale-like passages from Choir I. One final nod to the Baroque is clear at the outset, the fugue theme unmistakably resembling the theme of the “Dona nobis pacem” from Bach’s *Mass in B-minor* (Fig. 14).

Figure 14: V:5, “Amen and amen, alleluia,” tenor and bass, measures 1–5.

The image shows a musical score for tenor and bass parts. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The tenor part (top staff) begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic and features a melodic line with a fermata over the first measure. The bass part (bottom staff) begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a more rhythmic, eighth-note pattern. Both parts have lyrics: "A - - - men" and "and a - men." The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *dim.* (diminuendo) and a hairpin crescendo over the second measure of the tenor part.

Summary

The text of the *Requiem* is clearly one of its most notable features, and because the musical setting grew out of the text specifically, the text assembly is the central feature of the work. Thompson’s care in crafting the text was as meticulous as his compositional practices, and resulted in a text that—though taken from a pre-existing source—was something entirely new and individual. A great deal of forethought is evident in the text assembly with respect to intensity of language, text rhythm, symbolism, and message.

To this collection of texts, Thompson composed music that enhanced their meanings on all levels. While his sensitive prosody made the musical

lines easy to sing by matching text rhythms, Thompson also told the *Requiem* story through careful management of musical affect. Text-painting devices and good prosody gave the individual phrases of text unique settings, but the musical environment in which they were placed helped tie their ideas together, providing both textual and musical unity. Text did influence the selection of forms, but did not produce the formal structures themselves.

In view of the entire *Requiem*, it is clear that Thompson succeeded in building a cohesive musical structure that was perfectly wedded to his carefully constructed text. Individual phrases have natural prosody and are set within an affect that adds depth to their meaning. The themes are expertly arranged and varied into larger

forms and paced dramatically through the use of performance indications. Unity is achieved in both text and music separately, and in their relationship to each other. In total, it is fair to view the *Requiem* as Thompson's masterpiece of text setting, realizing Thompson's thoughts on the most personal of subject matters.

Reception and Performance History

Analyzing the musical concept and realization of the *Requiem* shows it to be excellently crafted and consistent with, or even beyond, the quality of Thompson's other choral works. Since many of those other works remain persistently popular, how did the *Requiem* fail to enter the permanent repertoire? Examining the history of the work following its publication will show that it was received initially with enthusiasm. There are some factors within the *Requiem* that worked to narrow its appeal, but there were and are some external factors that proved far more potent.

Initial Performances and Publication

Thompson was commissioned to deliver the score of the *Requiem* to the University of California Chorus in January of 1958, for a performance in May, but notes in the score indicating the completion date of each movement show that it was not complete until March 21.²⁰ Time for reproduction and transportation of the score meant that Edward Lawton, conductor of the chorus, had at most seven weeks to prepare a lengthy a cappella work. The rehearsal time proved to be inadequate, the choir performed with piano accompaniment, and a large portion of

²⁰ Thompson noted the dates of composition at the end of every movement, as he did throughout his career. The note at the end of "Amen and amen, alleluia" is the latest: "III-18-21-1958"

Part IV was omitted. The first audience witnessed an incomplete, under-rehearsed rendition of the *Requiem*. Despite the difficulties, initial reviews were enthusiastic,²¹ any critiques easily explained by the imperfect performance situation.²²

The first complete performance took place eleven months later at Harvard, under Elliot Forbes' baton and Thompson's supervision. The performance was professionally recorded, anticipating a wide distribution to come. A fine recording would certainly have helped the *Requiem* be more marketable for publication. In letters exchanged following the performance, both Thompson and Forbes were pleased overall with the result, particularly with how well the singers had captured the drama of the text.²³ However, one significant challenge of the work is clearly revealed in the recording. The structure of the *Requiem* limits the ability of a choir to re-pitch between movements, so the stamina of the singers is paramount. In this case, flattening compounded itself in an extreme way during Part II, resulting in the end of "What man is he?" and "Good tidings to the meek" being performed an entire minor-third lower than printed, extremely impractical given the tessitura of the bass part.²⁴

²¹ William Glackin, "A Happy Song of Death," *The Sacramento Bee*, May 31, 1958. Clifford Gessler, "Thompson Requiem Closes U. C. Morrison Music Festival," *Oakland Tribune*, May 23, 1958. Arthur Bloomfield, "Between Earthly, Heavenly Choir," *California Bulletin*, May 26, 1958. Alfred Frankenstien, "Randall Thompson Work Premiered." *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 24, 1958.

²² Alan Rich, "Current Chronicle," *The Musical Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (July 1958): 370. Rich charged a bit of "tedium," understandable since the omissions from Part IV resulted in seven consecutive movements of gradually slower tempo.

²³ Elliot Forbes to Randall Thompson, April 24, 1959, Randall Thompson Papers and Family Papers (*85-M70 Box 7: Folder "Forbes, Elliot"), Houghton Library, Harvard University. Randall Thompson to Elliot Forbes, May 8, 1959, Randall Thompson Papers and Family Papers (*85-M70 Box 7: Folder "Forbes, Elliot"), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²⁴ Thompson, Randall. *Requiem*. Harvard Glee Club and Radcliffe Choral Society, dir. Elliot Forbes, Technicord T15-16, 1959. The stamina of the choir may have also been harmed

Sales of scores following the two premiere performances were encouraging,²⁵ but the scores available from E. C. Schirmer at the time were still facsimiles of the handwritten original. Preparation of a formally engraved score began immediately, but it was not released until four years later, complete with piano reduction and several tempo revisions from Thompson. The facsimile score had satisfied much of the initial interest, and when the engraved score was finally released it sold very little.

Internal Factors

The *Requiem* is clearly a significant and challenging work for a choir to undertake. The sixteen-part *divisi* alone, without considering the difficulty of the individual parts, requires a large choir with individual singers that can sing independently. In this aspect, it proved to be a mismatch with many of the choirs who most frequently performed Thompson's earlier compositions. For the twenty years before the *Requiem*, Thompson had become known to choirs mainly through the *Alleluia*, a small work that can be performed by a student or adult choir of almost any size and ability. *The Peaceable Kingdom*, *Alleluia*, and *The Last Words of David* were all well-known, but the *Requiem* requires a larger and more skilled choir than any of those pieces. Since amateur choirs (often church choirs) were and are some of the most frequent Thompson performers, the *Requiem* would limit its exposure purely in its basic requirements.

by beginning the performance with J. S. Bach's motet *Singet dem Herrn*, itself a notably vocally taxing work.

²⁵ Robert MacWillimas to Randall Thompson, February 8, 1963, Randall Thompson Papers and Family Papers (*85-M70 Box 15: Folder "Schirmer Music Company"), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

If a choir did have sufficient membership to accommodate the *divisi*, how difficult is the *Requiem* musically? Reflecting on the overall difficulty of the *Requiem*, Thompson said: "There is no denying that it is a long and difficult work, tho [sic] I tried not to make it so. It is not so difficult, notewise, as many shorter works. Emotionally, however, it is extremely taxing, owing to the overwhelming beauty and intensity of the Biblical text."²⁶ In this, Thompson is correct—the individual vocal lines are not any more difficult than those in his other works, and it is not unusual for a choir to sing a number of short a cappella works in concert. However, when all of the shorter works are tied together emotionally, with no intermission or other break, the vocal and emotional endurance required increases the challenge significantly. Surviving correspondence shows conductors balking at the overall difficulty, not the quality, of the piece.²⁷

Programming options for the *Requiem* also present a challenge. Comparing *The Peaceable Kingdom* to the *Requiem* from this standpoint illustrates this well. The former is eight movements, and though it is more powerful and cohesive as a complete work, each of the movements rely on the others little enough that most can be performed as extractions. Consequently, when a choir purchases that work, they can view it as purchasing several pieces that can be used over a course of years. The *Requiem* can be performed in part as well, but most movements have such specific dramatic purposes that they make little sense separated

²⁶ Randall Thompson to Elliot Forbes, May 8, 1959, Randall Thompson papers and family papers (*85-M70, Box 28: Folder "University of California Commission"), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²⁷ Harold Schmidt to Randall Thompson, May 6, 1958, Randall Thompson papers and family papers (*85-M70, Box 14: Folder "Schmidt, Harold"), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

from their context.²⁸ It is unlikely that a choir would purchase the *Requiem* unless they were planning to perform the entire work.

Examining the programmability for specific types of ensembles shows the *Requiem* to be an odd fit for many of the most likely performers. For church choirs specifically, even with a large enough membership, they often do not have the rehearsal time necessary to prepare an hour-long a cappella work, especially if there were little opportunity to use parts of the work as weekly anthems. A similar issue exists for a university ensemble, who would likely need to commit most of a semester to preparing the *Requiem*, to the exclusion of any other repertoire. The only other type of amateur choir who would have the size and capacity to prepare the *Requiem* is an adult community ensemble, such as a symphony or oratorio chorus.

Even with the challenges of ensemble type, size, and ability level, the lack of performances in the *Requiem's* history is difficult to explain looking only at the music. There were certainly more choirs in the United States who could have mounted a performance if they chose to, but in the end, only five performances took place in fifteen years. More than fifty years since its publication, the number of choirs able to perform the *Requiem* has only increased, particularly in university-level choirs and professional ensembles. The overshadowing influence of other works explains initial overlook, but fades significantly as time progresses. Internal musical characteristics are not enough to explain this neglect.

²⁸ Several sections of the work were published separately and work well as extractions, which include four movements from Part V and all of Part IV as a unit. Only one movement from all of parts I-III was published separately ("Good tidings to the meek").

Non-Musical Influences

Two major external influences are the primary factors in explaining the *Requiem's* lack of initial success. The first is its position in Thompson's oeuvre. The second is a collection of issues surrounding the publication of the work, the evidence of which can be seen in personal correspondence.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Thompson's music was extremely popular with choirs and directors, but the *Requiem* was easily passed over for other more practical options from Thompson's catalogue. At the time, many choirs knew Thompson through *Alleluia* and *The Last Words of David*, both small octavo pieces. If these same choirs sought a large sacred work from him, *The Peaceable Kingdom* and the *Mass of the Holy Spirit* (written only one year before the *Requiem*) would be much more practical options in terms of length, difficulty, and extraction options. The thematic similarities between *The Peaceable Kingdom* and *Requiem* would easily make the shorter work seem to be a comparable (and less daunting) alternative.

Of all of Thompson's other works, the timing of *Frostiana* was the least advantageous for the success of the *Requiem*. Thompson had accepted the commission for *Frostiana* during the spring of 1959 (when the *Requiem* premiered at Harvard), and it was premiered the following fall. The enthusiasm for *Frostiana* was immediate, and it received many performances during the early 1960s. During the same period of time that Thompson was trying to build a reputation for the *Requiem*, it was overshadowed by another larger work that was easier, more tuneful, and far more flexible in performance options. The distraction produced by *Frostiana* was compounded by

Thompson's writing another dramatic sacred work, *The Nativity According to St. Luke*, in 1961. Though it fails to see regular performance today, *The Nativity* was performed many times during the 1960s, and since it is a more practical undertaking, it supplanted the *Requiem* in the "large dramatic sacred work" category.

The publication history of the *Requiem* is complicated first by the fact that there were two different scores, and second by the relative cost and dimensions of each. A lack of a quality recording for marketing purposes only amplified the problem.

The immediate availability of the facsimile score was able to satisfy all of the initial enthusiasm surrounding the two premiere performances. It was priced at \$2.25, and even at that price it was difficult for some of Thompson's most supportive conductors to commit to.²⁹ It took until 1963 to sell through the facsimile copies and release the engraved score, long after the overshadowing success of *Frostiana* had been established.

When the engraved score was finally released, its dimensions and the accompanying price left the *Requiem* completely out of reach for most choirs. The addition of a piano reduction had greatly increased the length (129 to 243 pages), and the first printing was an unusual size (A4 paper), leading to a price of \$7.50, more than three times the cost of the facsimile. That price, though fairly based on production costs, was extraordinary in context.³⁰ Several letters from the mid-1960s

²⁹ William Ballard to Randall Thompson, December 12, 1962, Randall Thompson Papers and Family Papers (*85-M70, Box 29: Folder "Evanston, Illinois"), Houghton Library, Harvard University. "We talked of the Requiem, but it is a bit long, and we probably couldn't afford to buy it."

³⁰ The octavo of *Alleluia*, by comparison, was at the time priced at \$0.35.

express hesitation, and even outrage, over the cost of the score.³¹ Today the score, printed on-demand on letter paper, costs more than \$45.00.³²

These non-musical influences persist, even though the potency of the internal factors lessens with time. To their credit, E. C. Schirmer has experimented with several methods to reduce the cost of the score, though a reduction in size and score rental proved impractical.³³ One largely unexplored and new area of opportunity is electronic distribution, though many of those possibilities would require re-engraving the score in a flexible electronic format.

Conclusion: An American Requiem

Many composers have written Requiem settings, and it is common for them to be interpreted as a window into the composer's beliefs about the most serious of subjects—life and death. Because the subject matter is of eternal importance, settings of the Requiem Mass and other death-related music are frequently viewed as some of the most pure and comprehensive examples of a composer's individual style, focused into a single work.

Thompson's *Requiem* is such a work. Within its massive structure is the essence of Thompson's compositional style, collected in a single musical expression. Though it was personal to Thompson,

³¹ Royal Stanton to Robert MacWilliams, April 4, 1965. Randall Thompson Papers and Family Papers (*85-M70 Box 14: Folder "S, 1966-"), Houghton Library, Harvard University. This particular letter expressed outrage, suggesting that the price would lead to rampant illegal copying.

³² "Requiem (Full Choral Score)" *Canticle Distributing*, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://www.canticledistributing.com/requiem-br-full-choral-score.html>.

³³ Robert Schuneman, interview with the author, January 14, 2011.

in many ways the *Requiem* was thoroughly American in concept and composition. Thompson was committed to seeing American music developed in a manner distinct from European traditions,³⁴ and was identified by Aaron Copland as one of a generation of American composers who could realize that goal.³⁵ Though there was an original inspiration from Renaissance madrigal cycles, the Thompson *Requiem* was not based on the liturgical text, which was developed in Europe and set by its composers for centuries. He did not substitute or add contemporary secular poetry for the Requiem Mass, as some contemporaries had (and Benjamin Britten would do four years later in *War Requiem*). In place of the Roman Catholic liturgy, Thompson returned to the Scripture alone to create his text from beginning to end, similar to the Protestant return to *sola scriptura* in the Reformation. Thompson's dramatic dialogue preserved the message of the Bible concerning death and life, but he used its words to deliver the message in an entirely new way.

The fact that the *Requiem* presents this message in the form of a debate adds to its American quality. In contrast to the Requiem Mass text, which is the statement of a particular church, Thompson's *Requiem* text shows conflict and dissent (particularly in Part II), which is a freedom uniquely valued in America. Setting such an important subject by means of dialogue is an original approach compared with those of previous composers who spoke (albeit dramatically) through a creed of a church. This text assembly was his first great achievement of the work, and the second was the musical setting, which in every way served to support and deepen the meaning of the text.

³⁴ Thompson, "The Contemporary Scene in American Music," 9-17.

³⁵ Copland, "America's Young Men of Promise," 13-20.

The *Requiem* is an intensely dramatic and emotionally taxing work to perform, beyond the capabilities of many of the choirs who regularly perform Thompson's music. This and several other reasons have kept this masterpiece from receiving the attention that it deserves. It is more than a neglected work—it is Randall Thompson's masterpiece in text selection and setting. His original libretto, assembled from a wide variety of Biblical passages, was Thompson's personal reflection on the topic of death. Each phrase of text was expertly set in terms of prosody, affect, and dramatic purpose, and resulted in a uniquely American interpretation of the Requiem form. Instead of being forgotten as a musically difficult, logistically impractical work by a widely-loved composer, Thompson's *Requiem* should be celebrated as one of the American choral masterpieces of the Twentieth Century, and the first truly American Requiem.

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