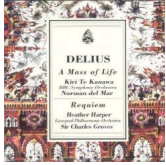


Delius - A Mass of Life – Requiem (1991)

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 11 July 2013 16:07 -

Delius - A Mass of Life – Requiem (1991)



CD 1: 01] *A Mass of Life : Part I - 1. Invocation - Chorus* 02] *A Mass of Life : Part I - 2. The Song of Laughter* 03] *A Mass of Life : Part I - 3. The Song of Life* 04] *A Mass of Life : Part I - 4. The Riddle* 05] *A Mass of Life : Part I - 5. The Night Song* 06] *A Mass of Life : Part II - 1. In the Mountains* 07] *A Mass of Life : Part II - 2. The Song of the Lyre* 08] *A Mass of Life : Part II - 3. The Dance-Song* CD 2: 01] *A Mass of Life : Part II - 4. At Noon in the Meadows* 02] *A Mass of Life : Part II - 5. The Song of Rapture* 03] *A Mass of Life : Part II - 6. The Paen to Joy* 04] *Requiem - 1. Our days here as one day - 2. Hallelujah, Hallelujah* 05] *Requiem - 3. My beloved whom I cherished* 06] *Requiem - 4. I honour the man who can love life* 07] *Requiem - 5. The snow lingers yet on the mountain* Kiri Te Kanawa, soprano Pamela Bowden, mezzo-soprano Ronald Dowd, tenor John Shirley-Quirk, baritone Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra BBC Chorus Norman Del Mar - Conductor

Long an admirer of Nietzsche's poetry, Frederick Delius composed *A Mass of Life* while at the height of his powers, blending passages from Also Sprach Zarathustra into orchestral textures of great expressive depth and striking beauty. Although *A Mass of Life* in its entirety dates from 1904-5, most of the concluding section was written earlier and performed on its own at an all-Delius concert in London in 1899. After the score's completion a substantial portion was heard at Munich in 1908, but it was not until the following year that the whole work was given for the first time when Thomas Beecham (1879-1961) conducted it in London at Queen's Hall on 7 June, 1909.

During that conductor's lifetime, apart from two performances by Hamilton Harty in the 1930s, three by Malcolm Sargent between 1944 and 1954 and a handful of single performances by others, all the work's hearings were at Beecham's hands. Notable among them were those at the Delius festivals he organised in 1929 and 1946 and his last, in 1951, for which he brought from Germany the 23-year old baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau to make his English début. Beecham made the first-ever recording of the work in 1952-3.

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At all these performances, except for the last and in his recording, the Mass was sung in the English translation of the German which Beecham himself had commissioned for the 1909 première to replace the hopelessly unidiomatic text by John Bernhoff printed in the original score. Beecham said he needed something that could be sung before an English audience 'without creating either amazement or hilarity', and he asked the composer and writer on music William Wallace (1860-1940) to provide it. In recent years, A Mass of Life has increasingly come to be sung in the original language. Wallace's translation is printed here, alongside the German.

At the time he composed the work Delius was at the height of his powers. He had long been in thrall to the writings of the poet and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), but it was when the conductor Fritz Cassirer (a champion of his music who had premièred his operas *Koanga* and *A Village Romeo and Juliet*) assembled a selection of passages from Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* ('Thus spoke Zarathustra') that Delius felt impelled to pour his admiration for its author into music. He had no time for religions or creeds, and scorned Christianity with what he saw as its hopeful promises of 'life-eternal'; he was as devoted as his hero to the concept of man as superman, energetic, strong, fearless and ultimately capable of domination. All the same, his instinct was always for Nietzsche the poet rather than the philosopher, and he chose only such passages as suited his musical conception. Four soloists and large choral and orchestral forces are employed in a sequence of eleven movements divided into two parts. The singers share Zarathustra's words, though he himself is embodied in the baritone soloist, who has by far the largest share of the work. The text, biblical in style and mingling poetry, metaphor and irony declaims, meditates but always blends into the orchestral texture, Delius's favoured composing style. --- naxos.com

This secular requiem for soprano and baritone solo, chorus and orchestra has perhaps been hampered in its concert life by being a defiantly unChristian and, for that matter, unIslamic work. Delius preached the gospel of glory in the high noon of life and meeting death fearlessly in his knowledge that after death there was nothingness. This was a merciless message to the audiences of the 1920s with perhaps every other member of the audience touched by loss in the Great War. The unremitting bitterness is exacerbated by the rather elitist dedication 'To the memory of all young artists fallen in the war. Here was no comforting message; nothing of the popular comforting spiritualism of those days with hands of the bereaved reaching to grip the hands of the uniformed dead. Seemingly John Foulds' *World Requiem* retained its mid-1920s popularity because it spoke of reunion. Julius Harrison's *Requiem of Archangels* is a work, by repute, allied with the Foulds. Delius's *Requiem* has more in common with Bantock's celebration of *Carpe Diem* where death is associated with the phrase 'turn down an empty glass' and the

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dead lie 'star-scattered' shells on the grass. For Bantock and Delius this life was all there was and then negation. Their message was: bask in life and all its joys.

The anti-religious message of the Requiem was intensified by having the choirs sing 'alleluia' and 'La il Allah' antiphonally - a blasphemous coup. It is no wonder the work found no place at The Three Choirs! In fact the infamy of juxtaposing such religious material might, in more recent times, have drawn down on Delius what fell on Salman Rushdie for his novel The Satanic Verses. But the music is amongst the best Delius. More concise than A Mass of Life and vastly more effective. Its sad sweetness is utterly uncloying and part of its grip on success is down to the clarity of the mingled lines and textures which achieves a wonderful transparency from which Herbert Howells and Patrick Hadley were later to learn. --- Rob Barnett, requiemsurvey.org

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