

**TOGETHER WE GROW: THE SHOULDERS WE STAND ON; REVELATION
21:1-6a; 11/1/09; ALL SAINTS SUNDAY; THY/WPC**

Three comments today. First, about this morning's choral work and composer. The official title of Maurice Durufle's 1947 masterpiece is "Requiem Mass for the Dead."

It is the most magnificent of his compositions – of which there were only a small number written between 1926 and 1978.

The composer, therefore, is not unlike other rare artists whose work, cut short by early death or the limitations of life, attains the highest standards of excellence and beauty. Many who've heard the Durufle *Requiem* say they only wish he'd composed more.

Maurice Durufle lived from 1902 to 1986. He was born in Louviers, France and from age ten studied music at the Rouen Cathedral School for Choirboys – where his father deposited him Easter Sunday, 1912 without any advance warning. Once he recovered and acclimated to his new life he went on to achieve great things; going to Paris, after Rouen, where he prepared for his examinations under the greatest organist/composers of his time including Louis Vierne, winning highest honors at the Paris Conservatory.

Not surprisingly, given his training in traditional sacred music, this *Requiem* is based on the Gregorian themes for the Mass. Durufle faithfully follows the liturgy for the Mass we are using today. In some instances, he said, the Latin text inspired him to depart from musical forms of the past, in other cases, he follows tradition closely.

The result is an eclectic work of extraordinary beauty grounded in the struggles of human existence, facing the mystery of death with resignation and the soul's flight to Paradise with hope.

Members of our choir have said to me they feel this *Requiem*, of all the requiems they have sung, is the most beautiful.

Richard Herr in a note attached to some Durufle biographical material he sent my way said he was lucky to have heard both Monsieur and Madame Durufle (a virtuoso organist herself) perform one of their last concerts together, in Dallas, in the mid-1970s. "Incredible" was his assessment of that program.

And Ellie Seib shared that the organ registrations for the *Requiem* are as difficult as any she has seen. Add conducting to playing the organ and what you have is the equivalent of doing brain surgery and chairing a Senate committee finding a solution for health care at the same time.

Second, a comment on listening to great music. One of Durufle's biographers notes that the Impressionist painter Claude Monet was working on his famous *Rouen Cathedral* series at about the same time the young Durufle was at the Cathedral School.

You can almost picture the young boy pausing between his studies and singing for daily Mass to contemplate the bearded, Whitman-looking painter on the Cathedral grounds; pallet in hand, canvas resting on easel.

It got me to thinking about Monet's landmark *Water Lilies* panels now on display at the Museum of Modern Art which I was lucky to see a few weeks ago. In those sublime works, Monet gives us a kind of metaphor for the experience of listening to a great requiem or any great music.

In *Water Lilies* Monet focuses on the water's surface so that clues to the artist's and viewer's vantage point are eliminated. It's not as if you're looking at the water from the little Japanese bridge arcing over the pond in Monet's garden from which he'd done many of his earlier paintings.

Rather, looking at those two 45' panels surrounding the viewer on the walls of the oval-shaped gallery on the second floor of MOMA gives the sensation of being immersed in the water itself.

The shimmer of light off the pond, the intermingling of reflections of clouds and foliage overhead blur the distinction between here and there. Somehow, the viewer becomes one with all of it – water, sky, foliage.

Maybe that's what great sacred music does. Maybe it blurs the distinction between being objective, outsider observers and immerses us – transforms us, in this case – in liturgy, music, Scripture, prayer, and sacrament

and makes us participants with the composer, with one another, with the Divine presence in our hearts,

with cherished memories of loved ones as we entrust them again into the eternal embrace.

Third comment – why we're here today. All of us have lost loved ones – some just months or even weeks ago;

all of us mourn the loss of the soldiers whose names we read each week and the civilians and children whose lives are casualties in the fighting; I suspect most, if not all of us, mourn even our enemies who were once children themselves before embarking on the path of warfare and are still, nevertheless, God's children.

The common ground we share here today is death; questions about our own mortality and purpose; questions about whether to face or not the pang of loneliness and hollow despair death brings with it.

What the church leaders understood in the 4th century when the festival of All Saints was inaugurated; what a composer like Durufle understood; what I heard some of our own choir members say in their praise of this music is this:

the only thing that can transform our grief into acceptance and one day perhaps even joy is to surrender ourselves into the promise we heard Rick Berger read a few moments ago. That's the gift of a great requiem – it enables us to let go of our rational objections to the unlikely promise that all shall be well.

There shall be no more weeping or crying for the Lord God will wipe away their tears and there will be no need for sun or moon or stars for the Lord God will be their light forever and ever.

There it is: surrender and transformation; inextricably linked; a sequence that leads from emptiness and despair to fulfillment and joy – even as we face our own or a loved one's death. Amen.