

## **A tour of the outer limits**

*by Jørgen I. Jensen*

### **The impossible**

A major, fully developed requiem – a mass for the dead – for soloists, choir and orchestra, perpetuating the grand tradition of requiem masses; a musical unfolding of the whole medieval Latin text with roots all the way back to the early Church; written by a Danish composer with a cultural consciousness that is contemporary in every way

One cannot help wondering how this is at all possible. It shouldn't be, given the spirit of the times, which requires topical, manageable, sensational, sophisticated, instantly affective art. In fact at the moment the spirit of the age largely propagandizes for total, emotionally uncomplicated 'presence' of the positive, feelgood variety, massively rejecting the past as no longer meaningful.

There is only one reality, one touchstone – ME, the ego – and it might almost seem that the composer John Frandsen, besides so much else, has intended to give all the egos all the relevance they might wish, centring on the fact that every ego is finite and must die. It is here that a greater world begins to make its appearance.

It can also be said in a more ordinary way: John Frandsen has found a new path into the ancient text. Or rather, two new paths. In the first place his actual musical idiom is classical and modernist at one and the same time. But everywhere in the orchestral texture of the work, note repetitions create new experiences of time. This may have been done under the influence of minimalism, but it has been worked out quite independently and plumbs new depths, finds new sonorities, new proportions – above all a new intensity in the moment that meets the present-day listener halfway.

The unity of the classical and the modernist emerges with great inevitability and transparency. The point is not that we as listeners should be emotionally manipulated by the music, although a wealth of passages strike the listener with the greatest immediacy and power. The intention is that we should embark on a journey from element to element in the Mass, from movement to movement, such that in the end, as is the case with most great works, we have penetrated deeper into these texts about the Christian Day of Judgement and their message of grace and peace. But at the same time we have lived through them so vividly that, when the work is over, we can see the totality from a distance and feel we have escaped from a kind of bondage – imposed not by the work, but by our own mental (mis) conceptions.

## Simon Grotrian

The other new, characteristic feature of John Frandsen's *Requiem* is that in between the Latin Mass texts with their great plenitude of tradition, he has interpolated a number of brand new religious texts by the Danish poet Simon Grotrian (b 1961)

When Grotrian emerged on the poetry scene in Denmark at the end of the 1980s, he was immediately recognized as a new, highly significant Danish poet – hard to categorize, but at all events not too far from Surrealism, with major clashes of verbal combinations, and with an especially positive and responsive attitude to the mysteries of Christianity

Nevertheless it came as a great surprise when Grotrian, in the decade after 2000, began to write and publish rhymed, strophic hymn texts They are couched in a style where one can in all respects still recognize the poet, yet at the same time they are formed with a new, intense orientation towards the divine 'Thou' – in other words they touch on a tradition that many people had thought long over

The texts, with a mixture of Surrealism and naïvism in the language, reveal a minimalistic, freezing, raw-nerved subject who is not alien to our time, and to whom many people can nod in recognition But this has never before been articulated as in these new texts

One can also say that the poems emerge as the counter-image every age needs, and in the present that means a counter-image to a world that cultivates surface and glamour

Grotrian's hymns are distant relatives of those of the classic Danish hymnodists Brorson and Inge-mann, and with great empathy John Frandsen has grasped Grotrian's texts and absorbed them into his musical universe In the *Requiem* they appear, in accordance with the pattern of the texts, in strophic form, with firm key signatures, with a modest organ accompaniment, and sung by a rock singer And yet they have their own present-day tone and links with the music in the other parts of the work

There thus arises a demanding alternation in John Frandsen's *Requiem* between the ancient and the modern texts For their great singularity is that while the apparently objective Latin Mass elements involve a labile, uncertain subject, an ego that can fall into doubt along the way – doubt concerning his own destiny on the Day of Judgement, especially in the section about the *Dies irae*, the Day of Wrath – Grotrian's texts can reflect an insignificant subject with his back to the wall, but also one who in contrast has no doubt whatsoever and is firm in his faith; which is perhaps the most provocative thing about the new poems

As a preliminary study for this feature of the *Requiem*, John Frandsen has tried out Grotrian's texts at more humble events around the country in various churches There, Grotrian's texts have been read and sung – indeed even sung by congregations – and linked with Biblical texts and other liturgical vocal works for solo voices

As a motto for his work John Frandsen has inserted a hymn by Grotrian in the score – an invocation whose first verse immediately establishes what is in play and what register one must adopt in a present-day elaboration of a synthesizing religious work:

Lord, let me turn like a clock  
that has a grasp of the score of death  
the vocal chords trill in their array  
through all the breakdowns of the day

*Requiem aeternam* “Grant them eternal rest” The large work can be divided into three parts First, three introductory movements: *Requiem*, *Kyrie* and a poem by Grotrian (“This world is an imitation”) Then the gigantic text *Dies irae*, Day of Wrath, which is specific to the Requiem Mass Along with two Grotrian poems it extends from movement 4 up to and including movement 13, if one can consider the subsequent *Lacrymosa* section as independent – others count it as part of the *Dies irae*, but it did not originally belong to the text

After this the third part comprises the remaining sections of the Mass, consisting of texts that are better known, also in Danish services

Although the experience of music is something strictly personal, and in reality one can never give others advice on how they should listen, it is still hard to refrain from recommending new listeners to hear the very first, not very long movement a few times In this way one comes closer to the tonal idiom and gets a key to the whole of John Frandsen’s musical universe and method

Or in other words, through a couple of listenings one comes much closer to the various simultaneous layers in the composition, its simultaneous dimensions, especially in the orchestral texture, which give the whole work its special character

As the very first notes in the violins we hear some ‘ethereal’ intervals in the high register Although many notes are in motion, at the same time one becomes aware of the two-part texture with its archetypal intervals One almost has the urge to invent a word that does not exist, ‘intervallic melody’, to describe this emphasis on the two-part structure at many points in the work – as if the music wants to make contact with the very oldest polyphonic music from just over a thousand years ago, the so-called two-part organum

The intervals are fourth, fifth and tritone throughout; never thirds, as in Classical and Romantic music

The choir enters with the text about the dead, *Requiem aeternam dona eis*, “Grant them eternal rest”, at first also with the archetypal intervals But at the same time in the low strings – and perhaps one only hears this gradually – there are note repetitions, not as formative or evocative rhythms, but as something meant to strike the present-day listener at the same time as all the rest; the note repetitions stutter or bounce – punctuating, pulsating

The idea must be that they provide an extra clue to the listener at the borders of consciousness. In the Classical and Romantic compositions it is assumed that the listener has advance knowledge of musical forms, harmonies, melodies and rhythms. That is also the case here; in that sense the work is part of a great tradition. But beyond this these almost staccato note repetitions in innumerable places function as a somewhat stuttering or nervous reality, suggesting that for present-day man – perhaps ever since the beginning of modern life – consciousness is not something fluid, not a continuous flow, but intermittent rhythms, spasmodic figurations, even if, as here, it is done very discreetly and with an immediate flow in the various progressions. In a way we re-encounter our own assumptions in all these note repetitions along the way.

And they are also there again in the low strings when the word *requiem* reappears at the very end of the large work, so that the whole work comes to resemble a spiral motion. And this happens at the same time as the choir is in progress with the great interpretation of the texts, so that simultaneous layers arise in an almost gentle polyphony.

One is aware of another feature right from the beginning: the tempo is of course slow, but the movement does not have a landscape-like feel as in earlier settings of the requiem text. Right away, very fast figurations appear, first of all in the flute, at the same time as the note repetitions. These quick eruptions or exchanges in slow movements are created at many points in the work, which can thus evoke several experiences of tempo in the listeners at the same time.

### **The great tradition**

Listing just some of the composers who have written a major requiem, one finds what can only be called an awe-inspiring collection of masterworks: Mozart's *Requiem*, Berlioz' *Requiem*, Fauré's *Requiem*, Verdi's *Requiem*. And – although it is with German texts after the Lutheran Bible – Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem*. John Frandsen must have known and immersed himself further in large parts of this tradition; not to plagiarize, of course; on the contrary, to truly know the nature of what he has achieved: the renewal of the genre.

It is also part of the story that in recent times there have been examples of composers who have the actual 'magic' or association-rich word 'requiem' in works that do not use the Latin text at all, but who with the title itself signal something that is situated at the outer limits. In Scandinavia this is true for example of Vagn Holmboe's *Requiem for Nietzsche* and the Swede Sven-David Sandström's large-scale choral work of the 1980s, *Requiem*. At the beginning of the same decade came the Dane Hermann D Koppel's *Requiem*, involving the use of Old Testament texts in particular.

Otherwise, as far as I know, there is only one Danish precursor of John Frandsen's work – that is, a requiem with the Latin text for soloists, choir and orchestra. This is Berlioz pupil Asger Hamerik's *Requiem*, written in the 1880s and given its first performance in the USA in 1895. For many years Hamerik was musical director in Baltimore, until he returned home, and also had his requiem performed a single time here. The work was taken up again in the 1980s and recorded on CD.

And then there is Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* from 1962, in which the Latin texts are combined with poems from the trenches of the First World War. A similar relationship applies here, in a new age, in John Frandsen's work, between the old Latin texts and Grotrian's brand new ones. Farther back lie polyphonic compositions such as Pierre de la Rue's *Requiem*, which takes its point of departure in the Gregorian melodies which are used as the cantus firmus. And there is Johannes Ockeghem's *Requiem*, with which the Danish composer Bent Sørensen has engaged in dialogue in his vocal requiem, where movements by the Gothic master alternate with new choral movements by Bent Sørensen himself.

And farthest back lies the monophonic Gregorian Mass: *Missa pro defunctis*, the Mass for the Deceased – or *Requiem*.

Most composers in recent times no longer use the original Gregorian melodies, but prefer to situate the text in the musical language of their own time. But special circumstances apply to the melody of the *Dies irae* – the Day of Wrath, the longest of the texts in the Requiem Mass. The text was probably written by the Franciscan friar Thomas of Celano – he was also one of the first to write a biography of St Francis of Assisi – in the middle of the thirteenth century, as a 'sequence'. It thus belongs definitively to the Middle Ages, specifically the Late Middle Ages, while several of the other text elements go back to the early Church and the Christianity of the first centuries.

*Dies Irae* – the Day of Wrath. The text is a cry from the outermost limits. The great literary theorist Northrop Frye, who completely renewed the study of the Bible in relation to literature in the west, called the text "that mad, obsessed poem *Dies Irae*." That doesn't sound too friendly, but one of the functions of the text – mad and obsessed as it is – is a kind of overcoming through 'homeopathy', a breaking-down of all the terrible visions of judgement and torment that could assail mankind in the Middle Ages and later, by showing them as harshly as possible. To my knowledge the text is used extremely rarely in the church services, either Catholic or Protestant. It has its place in the great requiem compositions in the concert hall, where the listener is on more neutral religious ground.

However, the original melody, in its beginning, is almost magical, evocative to an extreme degree; so powerful that most requiem composers have not used it for the *Dies irae* section and have instead created new music for the text. But again and again, the melody itself has fascinated composers and has been used as a symbol of death and the demonic by Berlioz, Liszt, Rachmaninov and – as a hint – by Mahler. Yet Berlioz used it not in his *Requiem*, but in his *Symphonie fantastique*.

The only composer I know who used the ancient *Dies irae* melody in a modern requiem for soloists, choir and orchestra is the above-mentioned Asger Hamerik, in his half-American, half-Danish *Requiem*. Otherwise the melody was in fact also known in this country because Poul Schierbeck used it in his

outstanding score for Carl Theodor Dreyer's film *Day of Wrath* – it also appears in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. All this is mentioned because John Frandsen has created something quite new in the field between the traditional text and melody and a modern musical idiom.

The actual words *Dies irae* appear in the new requiem – this has probably never been tried before – as a cry, with intensely careening motion in the voices of a choir bordering on the ‘speaking choir’

This discharge is succeeded by powerfully syncopated rhythms and dissonances that form the first strophe

The day of wrath, that day, shall dissolve the world to ashes as foretold by David and the Sibyl

Just afterwards, undeniably as a total surprise, there follow in the low strings the seven first and extremely characteristic notes of the original Gregorian melody It is well disguised – the original melody has its own flow, but this version is formed with jerky, highly dissonant chords The placing is undeniably totally original The reason one so definitively recognizes the melody amidst all these dissonances is that it is heard not only in the upper, but also in the lower part of the compact progression

Only at the very end of the whole *Dies irae*, after nine ample movements, are the actual words *Dies irae, dies illa* heard with the original melody

It lasts only two bars and a single beat But this is also sufficient to create something quite new The words so to speak fall into place at the end, in the ancient melody Text and melody find each other, but such that they are not sung about the future, but about “the day of wrath, that day”

In other words it could in reality be every single day It is as if the whole *Dies irae* section of John Frandsen’s *Requiem* has been a consecration, an initiation that leads towards – yes, this very day Or perhaps even just a moment in each day Like Blake, one can say that there is a moment in every single day that Satan cannot find, and then one must add that in each day there can be a glimpse, a chill from the great fear of death; which one can then, after having heard the musical interpretation, understand from a distance and begin to break free from

### **From element to element**

Here the *Lacrymosa* section, which follows just after the *Dies irae*, has been given its own meditative movement, again at a slow tempo with the quick figurations along the way in a high-pitched, chamber-music-like soundscape The next text by Grotrian, “Dear God, Dear God” is, if not a turning-point, at least a notch marking where something new is on its way in the work Until now the earth has been condemned to death, like human life itself, but here we meet the modest voice again expressing that it does not have the strength to think about whether God and Heaven exist at all They do, of course, and must be invoked

The individual movements that now follow in the work all have slightly more exotic patterns of sonority, or at least can have The old, and for many people more common Mass segments, including some that appear in the Danish service, have been given more freedom of sound

It is impossible to get any closer to so much of this rich work and its striking sequence of elements or movements. One must be content to single out a few characteristic features that may help us to distinguish the individual segments from one another and see them as stations on a journey.

The section *Pie Jesus*, "Gentle Jesus" makes a constant plea for the repose of the dead, and certain marked note repetitions appear in the timpani, just as repetitions feature in the harp in the next section, *Domine Jesu Christe, Rex Gloriam*, "Lord Jesus Christ, King of Glory." It is in this section that one finds the sentence "quam olim Abrahae promisisti" ("which once Thou didst promise Abraham"). Most requiem composers have had a special fondness for treating these very words with extended forms, for example as a fugue. John Frandsen approaches it quite differently: he takes the text towards a violent eruption that parallels the *Dies irae* text with rhythmic stresses both telling and gestural. This is one of the places where one seriously begins to wonder how it has been possible to connect up all the intense moments in an epic-dramatic form in a major work that takes up a whole concert evening.

The *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* that follow are Mass segments that may also appear in translation in the Protestant service (respectively as "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts" and "Blessed is he who cometh in the name of the Lord").

In John Frandsen's work the texts are given a decidedly rhythmic form with constantly changing time signatures. The exclamation "Hosanna!" later in the same movement is accompanied by two tom-toms – tuned hand drums – in quick triplet rhythms and a stereophonic texture.

The actual Hebrew word 'Hos(i)anna' originally meant 'saved', but is one of those few words – like 'Hallelujah' and 'Amen' – that have lost their first precise semantic meaning and instead become a kind of musical word – in the case of Hosanna a cry of adoration. These ejaculations are situated – rather uniquely, one imagines, in western sacred music – midway between words and music. They suggest Christianity or the Bible or Judaism – but without any quite specific referential function. Instead one listens to their sound as such.

In this movement the choir in John Frandsen's *Requiem* is reduced to a smallish, swinging chamber choir. The tempo marking *Allegretto danzante* suggests something gestural in connection with the well known Mass segments in these apparently 'skewed' rhythms. In a way this points to the phenomenon of ritual dance, a rare thing in the Christian church.

The next Grotrian hymn indicates that with the last movements we are on the way towards the higher world of light. The text is extremely characteristic. The first two lines are close to the standard hymn style; original, but easy or at least possible to identify with. But then – wham bam! – comes a Surrealist sentence which nevertheless goes on – almost as if saved at the last moment – to fall into place in a more profound theological sense.

He never forgets me  
in the night of the pit  
He solves my solitude's riddle

when the moon is squeezed  
and puts down his hat  
He sails the fruit in boats

The last three movements need no further comment The music, soloists, choir and orchestral instrumentation are in keeping with the brightness of the words The movements are called *Lux aeterna* ("Eternal light shine upon them"), *Libera me* ("Set me free, Lord, from eternal death")

Then come Grotrian's last lines:  
What is the nutcracker waltz  
as we stand in gold up to our necks?  
The Lord scatters His heavenly bliss  
vultures cannot eat it

At the very end comes *In Paradisum* – the promise of the angels who are to lead the saved soul to Paradise, where he will meet the martyrs and finally be guided into the New Jerusalem

It ends as it began, with the meditative invocation of eternal rest The music of the beginning, also with the bouncing strings, appears again But as listeners we have now risen a degree and from there can see the present everyday world right here in a new light

## History

And it is in this real, present world that the great requiem compositions of recent times have first and foremost found their place They have been tied much more to history – often to its tragically shocking events – than to the rituals of the church for the individual Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* was written for the consecration of the new cathedral in Coventry – the old one had been devastated by bombing during the war And on 'the other side', each year in February a memorial concert is held in Dresden with performances of some of the great requiem masses – in memory of the bombing of this German city of culture at the end of the war, which even large neutral reference works in the allied countries have later called an act of sheer terror with several hundred thousand dead and the whole city levelled with the ground

John Frandsen undoubtedly did not think specifically about these connections – after all, we live in a different age And yet, here we go again – in one day a madman murdered 69 young people on an island in the Oslo Fjord "I have decided to dedicate my Requiem to the memory of the victims of the massacre on Utøya in Norway on 22 July 2011" True, the work was completed by that time; "but" the composer continues, "such an ice-cold, cynical atrocity is an assault on certain quite fundamental social and religious values, and it has aroused a collective sense of fear and helplessness that calls for the healing power of ritual and liturgy"

The last words are worth noting In the modern age, in the 20th century in the west, people could lament the lack of rituals – most clearly Rainer Maria Rilke in "Requiem for a Friend" in 1908:



Customs, o how we need customs! They pass away, we talk them to death

It would appear that this state of affairs did not last long: John Frandsen's work is an example of how mankind is once more – perhaps only fumblingly – beginning to see that the ancient formulations of ritual can paradoxically provide new information, unlike our own thoughts. The composer continues by saying that with his dedication he wants to distance himself as much as possible from the perpetrator's invocation of Christianity.

“My God is not the same as his. But who then is my God? A disaster like this strikes directly at our darkest doubts and the paradox of Christianity. If Our Lord is benevolent and omnipotent, why does He let this kind of thing happen?”

We shall never find the answer to this. We can only cling to faith, hope and love. But the wild, violent *Dies irae* sequence at least gives us the possibility of screaming out our fear of death – only to let ourselves be lifted afterwards towards Paradise and eternal light” (From the programme booklet at the first performance on 5 April 2013)

*Jørgen I. Jensen, 2014*