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Illuminations: a proposed taxonomy for death-inspired works in Western art music

Abstract:

Throughout the history of Western art music, death has been a major stimulus for composers, and it continues to be so for contemporary musicians. Composer responses to death have been predominantly associated with emotions of grief, sadness and loss. An examination of responses in the Western art music repertoire of the past five hundred years, however, reveals that there is a diversity of composer reactions, from mourning through prophetic imaginings to resignation, and extending to spiritual affirmation or theological affirmation of an afterlife. Informed by surveying a number of composers' diverse responses, this article outlines differences found in order to propose a taxonomy of varying creative musical approaches to death.

Biographical note:

Martin Lodge is a composer and writer on music. His compositions have been commissioned and played by performers in many places, including New Zealand, Australia, China, Korea, USA, Germany and France. While writing mainly for Western art music instrumental forces, his compositions also have included traditional Maori instruments and traditions, and multimedia work. He also has published innovative scholarly studies on New Zealand music, particularly on the country's music history and music historiography. Currently he is working on several composition projects connected with his own near-death experience in 2010. Two of these projects have texts provided by authors Vincent O'Sullivan and Witi Ihimaera respectively. Martin Lodge is Associate Professor and Head of Composition at the University of Waikato Conservatorium of Music in Hamilton, New Zealand.

Keywords:

Music writing – Western art music – Classical music – Death – Olivier Messiaen – David Farquhar – Victor Ullmann – Peter Sculthorpe

One of the last works written by French composer and Roman Catholic Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) was the large-scale orchestral piece, *Éclairs sur l’Au-Delà* (Illuminations from Beyond). Of this music, Messiaen said:

I imagined myself in front of a curtain, in darkness, apprehensive about what lay beyond: resurrection, eternity, the other life... I try simply to imagine what will come to pass, which I can sometimes perceive in ‘éclairs’ – flashes or illuminations. (quoted in May 2017)

The resulting hour-long work for large orchestra is cast in eleven movements, in which the final of these, ‘*Le chemin de l’invisible*’ (The invisible path), and ‘*Le Christ, lumière du paradis*’ (Christ, the light of paradise) provide a triumphant and transcendently affirming conclusion to Messiaen’s meditation on the mystery of death. Considering how negatively death is often viewed, *Éclairs sur l’Au-Delà* reminds us that a diversity of creative responses to the end of an individual’s life is possible.

In the sphere of Western art music, there is a long tradition reflecting that diversity of response, and not only because the Christian church has been a strong supporter of music over the past two thousand years. In addition to leadership from the church, changes in social conditions, and more recently the impact of psychology and the physical sciences, have encouraged a wider spectrum of individual responses to the inevitable experience of death. That in turn has affected the artistic response of composers. There is a range of human and creative musical responses to death to be heard in music, and it extends well beyond the dualism of mourning and religious affirmation of an afterlife. Very little critical work has been published on this topic, the only monograph being John Sarkett’s religiously oriented, ‘brief survey of the most universal human phenomenon death – as depicted and treated in the most abstract of art forms: music, i.e. classical music’ (2015: 13). The author conducts his survey broadly by genre, and chronologically within the genre subheadings. The result is a long list with descriptive commentaries, frequently referencing a Christian theological belief system. Sarkett’s survey, while interesting, does not attempt to identify deeper musical, technical, cultural or emotional patterns within the spectrum of works considered. There are no scholarly citations provided to support the author’s observations.

An inspiration for proposing a taxonomy as a framework to assist understanding of a complex issue in creative work as rich in emotion and subtlety as music inspired by death is, has been William Empson’s work in the field of literary criticism. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson aims to clarify the use of deliberate ambiguities of various kinds found in literary writing by categorising the ambiguities into just seven main identifiable types. Empson explains his aim as being to sort his topic out into broad categories and arrange these with increasing subtlety into a ‘logical exposition’ (1961: 7). Such a taxonomy can never be the last word on a subject, but it can provide a useful starting point for clarifying and organising information. That is the intention with the present proposal regarding composers’ responses to death. For reasons of scale, the present survey is limited to male composers who worked in the Western art music tradition. It is hoped that others may wish to take this initial contribution and pursue it across wider horizons of chronology, style, gender and geography.

As a starting point, by surveying a range of works to be found in the Western art music repertoire of the past five hundred years, it is possible to suggest a general taxonomy in which composers' responses fall into one or more of six main categories: celebration of the beyond and/or religious affirmation; imaginative prediction and prophecy; death and love; fear; sadness and loss; and, music of mourning and requiems.

Bearing in mind the important role music has played in Christianity over the millennia, there are – as may be expected – numerous compositions that celebrate Christian visions of an afterlife. Messiaen addressed such transcendental matters in a number of his works, often finding an embodiment of the divine in the natural world, especially by transcribing birdsong. His *Éclairs sur l'Au-Delà* includes transcriptions of birdsongs from Africa, Greece, Australia and New Zealand. Far from rejecting the physical world, Messiaen's musical expressions of the divine include the corporeality of nature, especially God's natural musicians, the birds (Hill and Simeone 2005: 369-70). The transitory, physical world of nature reflects the eternity that lies beyond.

Another composer who composed with a positive view of death was Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750); his prodigious output includes works with texts that affirm the Christian doctrine of eternal life after physical death for followers of the faith. There are a number of large-scale Passion works created for Good Friday services that reflect on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and numerous smaller works that focus on the promise of resurrection and an afterlife available for everyone. This belief is expressed repeatedly in the religious cantatas that Bach wrote. He composed hundreds of such cantatas, originally for weekly performance as part of Lutheran church services, but such is their musical quality that today they have entered the musical repertoire by virtue of their purely artistic quality. The cantata *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* (How beautifully the morning star shines) BWV1, for example, is typical in its setting of a text in the first person in which the writer looks forward to his own death as a gateway to paradise, the concluding chorale stating:

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| <i>Wie bin ich doch so herzlich froh,</i> | How glad of heart am I, |
| <i>Daß mein Schatz ist das A und O,</i> | That my treasure is the A[lpha] and O[mega], |
| <i>Der Anfang und das Ende;</i> | The beginning and the end; |
| <i>Es wird mich doch zu seinem Preis</i> | To his reward |
| <i>Aufnehmen in das Paradeis,</i> | He will take me into paradise, |
| <i>Des klopf ich in die Hände.</i> | And so I clap my hands |
| <i>Amen!</i> (Bach 1851, 51-52) | Amen! |

Bach almost certainly worked closely with his librettist, Stübel (as he did for a large number of his cantatas), to shape the theological perspective of this cantata (Wolff 2001).

The second proposed category includes imagining what death might be like as an experience, and communicating that prophetic insight through music. Richard Strauss (1864–1949) provides a striking example of this in his large scale orchestral tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*. For someone who lived such a very full, vigorous and artistically fruitful life, perhaps surprisingly Strauss had a lifelong awareness of, and interest in, death. At twenty years of age and rising as a star in the firmament of German music, he wrote a tone poem for large orchestra called *Death and Transfiguration*,

completed in 1889. This tone poem is a programmatic work, which is to say it is based on a narrative scheme. For this work, Strauss devised the narrative events and provided a detailed guide to his intention in the music. The tone poem traces the life of a philosophical idealist, an artist not unlike himself, who, on his deathbed, reflects back on his life, from innocent childhood through youthful passions to his lifelong striving towards unattainable goals. Upon death, the hero finally releases his soul into the unknown ‘to find, gloriously achieved in eternity, those ideals which could not be fulfilled here below’ (Strauss quoted in del Mar 1986a: 78). This ambitious programme is conveyed in brilliant orchestration and powerful sonorities from Strauss’s large orchestra (del Mar 1986a: 85).

At the time Strauss composed *Death and Transfiguration* he said that it was purely a product of his imagination, and not based on personal experience. However, two years later he fell seriously ill with pneumonia (del Mar 1986a, 89) and, perhaps as a result, came to feel the music had an element of unintentional prophecy about it. He went on to quote from this youthful work several times in his later compositions, generating an interlacing of the themes that refer to death and to transfiguration. A distinctive musical theme or short melody with a particular meaning is known technically by the German term *Leitmotiv*, a formulation developed extensively by the composer Richard Wagner (1813–83). For Strauss, the central theme of *Death and Transfiguration* became a personal *Leitmotiv*, used repeatedly in subsequent work. The most famous self-quotation from *Death and Transfiguration* that Strauss made came at the other end of his life, about sixty years later, when he completed his *Vier letzte Lieder* (Four Last Songs): ‘Spring’ (words by Hesse), ‘September’ (Hesse), ‘On Going to Sleep’ (Hesse) and ‘In the Twilight’ (von Eichendorf). The collection was so-named not by Strauss, but posthumously by his publisher. These songs were indeed Strauss’s farewell to life, and the idealistic theme of passing into transcendence through the doorway of death that he had created imaginatively as a twenty-five-year-old he reaffirmed as an eighty-five-year-old. The same musical *Leitmotiv*, the short tune that represents death and rising above it, is heard once more to signal the elderly composer’s acceptance of what was once merely imagined. As he prepared for his own death, Strauss celebrated a life well lived, and expressed an acceptance of death as part of the natural order of things in his song *Im Abendrot* (In the Twilight), which takes the sun setting as a metaphor for life’s light fading to darkness (Strauss 1950: 23–28). It seems that the composer discovered his youthful prophecy to be vindicated, since he reported to a family member shortly before he died: ‘Funny thing, Alice, death is exactly as I composed it in *Death and Transfiguration*’ (del Mar 1986c: 471).

Other notable composers to have written works with a more or less specific intention to convey a prophetic insight into the experience of death include Franz Liszt (1811–86). The title of his symphonic poem *Les Préludes (d’après Lamartine)* reflects, in part, some of the philosophical speculation found in Alphonse de Lamartine’s *Nouvelles Méditations Poétiques* of 1823 (in Guyard 1969). In his programme note for *Les Préludes*, Liszt asks: ‘What else is our life but a series of preludes to that unknown Hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by Death?’ (1848: 3). *Les Préludes* expresses a mixture of emotional and philosophical responses to death: the mystery, challenge, fearful anticipation, and excitement of contemplating one’s own death.

Inspired by a black and white photographic reproduction of artist Arnold Böcklin's painting titled *The Isle of the Dead*, Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943) composed a tone poem of the same name. Rachmaninov, with Böcklin's portrayal of death in mind, explores his imaginings of what the experience of death might resemble. Böcklin presents an atmospheric image of an island cemetery, which is inspired by the Classical Greek representation of death as a boat journey from the physical world crossing into the spiritual. Rachmaninov's *The Isle of the Dead* adopts the unusual time signature of 5/8, perhaps to represent the movement of water eddying around the boat, or it may suggest the gloomy oar strokes of the sepulchral boatman. Perhaps the absence of an expected sixth beat in the 5/8 metre disturbs the listener's sense of natural movement and symmetry in each oar stroke cycle (Piggott 1972: 18)? In this work Rachmaninov appropriates a melody from the Christian mediaeval plainchant *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath), which refers to the final apocalypse and judgment of the world by God as prophesied in the Bible. The belief in a divine judgment and consignment of every dead person to hell or paradise adds a powerful emotional burden to the already striking image of the ghostly boat journey into infinity that underpins Böcklin's painting *The Isle of the Dead* (Norris 1976: 106). In much the same way as Strauss transferred themes from his *Death and Transfiguration* to become *Leitmotiv* references to death in his subsequent works, Rachmaninov used the *Dies Irae* theme as a significant *Leitmotiv* signifying death in his later compositions. The *Dies Irae* has distinctive musical characteristics, and a well-known provenance. It is renowned for conveying an unambiguous reference to death and apocalyptic endings whenever it is heard. Its attributes appear to have become important psychological signposts for Rachmaninov, as it was quoted in so many different works, such as his virtuoso piano studies, *Études tableaux*; the cantata *The Bells*; the Second Suite for Two Pianos; the solo piano Prelude in E minor op.32 no.4; Piano Concerto 4; Symphony 3; and his set of *Symphonic Dances*. Thinking about death – the process of it, the experience of it, and what may come after death – was for Rachmaninov, evidently, a significant lifelong point of reflection (Norris 1976: 108-9).

The relationship of love and death has consistently attracted composers' attention over the centuries, producing countless approaches that could be discussed in this third category. Given the sheer number of available responses to love and death that could be drawn on, this paper turns to the apotheosis of this approach to music, a strong proponent of the concept of the 'total work of art' (Wagner tr. Ellis 1993), Richard Wagner (1813–83). Wagner expanded opera to include full drama, lighting, stage design, costumes, poetry, mythology and philosophy. He was the first major composer to apply the principles of the emerging new science of psychology to his musical narrative by channelling expression of them into a unique fusion with ancient Nordic saga, German Romantic philosophy, Classical Greek tragedy and mythology. These narrative resources, he fused with his virtuosic knowledge of composition, grand opera's emotion and flamboyance, and technical advances in large-scale symphonic composition, to produce his *Gesamtkunstwerke* (total works of art) on power, love and death. He called these works music dramas (Millington 2017). The apogee of Wagner's linking of death with love is the *Liebestod* (German for love-death), in the final scene of his music drama, *Tristan und Isolde* (Wagner 1973: 610-55). Tristan and Isolde, the hero and heroine of this eponymous music drama, find fulfilment of life in love, but

that love is only spiritually consummated in death. The linking of erotic fulfilment with death has been traced to Wagner's reading of the philosophy of Schopenhauer, but the roots of his thinking actually seem to be more varied and less systematic than this single source (Millington 1992: 145). Wagner's intention with the *Liebestod* appears to be the portrayal of a transcendence of the physical world through the mingling of erotic love and death, allowing the souls of Tristan and Isolde to rise to a metaphysical plane (Millington 1992: 300). In the final music drama, *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods) of Wagner's epic tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelungs*, he imagined the end not only of heroes, but of the whole world in a cataclysm. This is the *Ragnarok* of Norse mythology, in which nearly all humans and gods alike are destroyed by an obsessive love of power. But, not unlike Noah's flood in the Bible, the Norse *Ragnarok* is a purging destruction which allows a purified world to regenerate eventually from the ruins of the old, so death becomes part of a longer-term creative process of renewal (Ellis Davidson 1964: 38). The whole *Ring* cycle of music dramas, which takes four successive and long evenings to perform, can be regarded as a meditation on love and death, including the inevitable social and political ramifications of these central forces in human nature. While the surface story of Wagner's *Ring* has been retold in popular form, through JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books and the subsequent movie trilogy by Peter Jackson, Wagner's original music dramas still are considered remarkable in their psychological depth and perspicacity achieved through the free development of the *Leitmotiv* technique (Millington 2017). The real nature of the characters in the *Ring* cycle remains open to debate. It is possible to view them in a number of ways, ranging from their being genuinely representative human beings, through Jungian archetypes, to manifestations of a single mind (Magee 1968: 30). Regardless of the debate, the core themes motivating the characters and the entire narrative are power, love and death.

Fear is the fourth category of musical response to death. Reasons for fearing death vary from one composer to another. However, common elements found amongst composers investigated were loss of personal identity, permanent departure from family and friends, and anxiety about the unknown afterlife. Composer approaches to the afterlife are largely culturally determined, and are shaped by inherited religious eschatologies. In Hector Berlioz's (1803–69) scenario for the programmatic work *Symphonie fantastique* (Fantastic symphony), the hero falls into a drug induced reverie; he imagines he has murdered his beloved, to be subsequently led to his own execution by guillotine. In the climactic movement, 'March to the scaffold', an explicit musical depiction of the hero's head being lopped off and dropping into a receiving basket generates cheers from the guillotine mob. The symphony concludes with a hellish vision of the execution aftermath in 'Dream of the night of the sabbath', in which previous musical themes become distorted and bound into a satanic orgy of horror. As the symphony ends, all the hero's opium-fuelled fears of death and hell are realised. According to Berlioz, a number of listeners in the audience were appalled by the violence of his symphony – and his vision of fear and death therein (Berlioz 1970: 368).

Franz Liszt, a contemporary and friend of Berlioz, in admiration of the originality and vision of *Symphonie fantastique* transcribed it for piano to enable greater public accessibility. Liszt also repeatedly explored themes related to death in his own compositions, including the idea of the dance of death, overtly so in his *Totentanz* for

piano and orchestra. The mediaeval topos of the dance of death inspired other composers, from as far back as the sixteenth century, but it is through Liszt's music, and later compositions, such as Camille Saint-Saëns' (1835–1921) *Danse macabre*, that it is largely known. The prospect of death leading an irresistible dance into the beyond also permeated the symphonic repertoire, notably in Gustav Mahler's (1860–1911) Symphony no. 4, second movement. Death is imagined in this movement as a character playing the fiddle, enticing listeners away from life. The violin for this solo role of death has to be specially prepared to produce a higher pitch than the normal violin, resulting in a thinner, slightly strained and excessively bright, unnatural sound. Mahler imagined the solo fiddler as Freund Hein (Friend Henry), a personification of death found in German folk art (de la Grange 1995: 759). Although, the composer's widow, Alma Mahler, reported in her memoirs that Mahler had been influenced by Böcklin's *Self Portrait with Death Playing the Fiddle* (Floros 1985: 122).

Two great admirers and musical successors of Mahler, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75), and Benjamin Britten (1913–76), while stylistically divergent and different culturally, continued to include encounters with death in their works. Shostakovich's Piano Trio no. 2, fourth movement, is a dance of death in memory of his recently deceased close friend Ivan Sollertinsky, who had died at the age of just forty-one years (MacDonald 1990: 172). Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* (composed to Montagu Slater's libretto adapted from George Crabbe's 1810 poem 'The Borough'), is acknowledged as a masterpiece of psychological insight and musical strength. It is permeated by death and the emotions of fear, suspicion and guilt generated by it (Kennedy 1981: 169).

An alternative reaction to fear of death may be the gradual transcendence of fear, and accommodation of the inevitability of death. This is the narrative and emotional process that forms the framework for a pair of works by New Zealand composer David Farquhar (1928–2007). In 1958, around the time of his marriage, he completed a song cycle, *In Despite of Death*. The second of the songs in the cycle sets a text by the fifteenth century Scottish writer William Dunbar in which the recurring refrain is *Timor mortis conturbat me* (The fear of death disturbs me). The knowledge that death can strike anyone at any time, without warning, creates anxiety and fear. But Farquhar selected texts for subsequent songs in his cycle that follow a trajectory beyond fear. After the death of his wife in 2001, and nearing the end of his own life, the composer reworked the song-cycle *In Despite of Death* into a purely instrumental version to become his Symphony no. 3. He subtitled the symphony *Remembered Songs*, saying that, 'The symphony follows the emotional shape of the song-cycle, moving from struggle and resistance towards acceptance' (Farquhar 2002: 3).

Feelings of sadness and loss, the fifth category of responses, frequently have been felt by bereaved composers and there are numerous examples of composition that convey both personal, intimate loss, and loss for public ceremonial occasions. A particularly moving expression of individual sadness is found in the *Stabat Mater* by Giovanni Pergolesi (1710–36), in which he sets the traditional hymn texts (Taruskin 2005: 134) of the imagined lamentations of Mary at the crucifixion of her son, Jesus Christ. Pergolesi, who was in his mid-twenties at the time, wrote the setting for *Stabat Mater* during his own terminal illness (Hucke and Monson 2017). His personal response to death has remarkable poignancy, despite its occasionally operatic character due to

Pergolesi's early adoption of the then increasingly fashionable 'expressive sensibility' approach to word setting (Hucke 1980: 398).

The text begins:

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| <i>Stabat mater dolorosa</i> | The grieving mother stands |
| <i>juxta Crucem lacrimosa</i> | weeping at the cross |
| <i>dum pendebat Filius.</i> | close to her son at last. |
| | |
| <i>Cuius animam gementem</i> | Through her weeping soul |
| <i>contristatum et dolentum</i> | sorrowful and lamenting |
| <i>pertransivit gladius</i> | Passed a sword. |

Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*) is a restrained example of late Romantic composition. It is all the more affecting because of this restraint, eschewing as it does both Mahler's usually spectacular orchestration and dissonant harmonies (Mitchell 1999: 226). Mahler wrote the song cycle out of his imagination, to his wife's dismay:

I found this incomprehensible ... What I cannot understand is bewailing the deaths of children, who were in the best of health and spirits, hardly an hour after having kissed and fondled them. I exclaimed at the time: "For heaven's sake, don't tempt Providence!" (1968: 70)

A few years after its completion, one of the composer's children did indeed die, providing a chilling coda to the music. It is likely Mahler was initially moved to write the work through his having experienced the high infant and childhood mortality rate surrounding him during his own early years, with the attendant feeling of irreplaceable loss and sadness, especially when two of his siblings died in childhood (de la Grange 1995: 829). Mahler addressed the loss brought about by death in other works as well. Symphonies one and five both include funeral marches, while the final two symphonies, numbers nine and ten, have a strong quality of struggle, resignation and final acceptance. The composer was writing against time by this point, aware that a terminal heart condition meant his life was to be curtailed early. In his symphonic song-cycle *Das Lied von der Erde* (*Song of the Earth*), the texts convey an emotional progression in the face of life's transitoriness. Through six songs, a contesting against the nature of things with sadness, grief, and loneliness eventually gives way to the final song, *Der Abschied* (*Farewell*) – acceptance (Mitchell 1985: 357).

Other composers have produced a range of different responses to the powerful feelings of loss that death can bring to those left behind, although in many cases the goal is the same – acceptance of what is inevitable. The Czech violinist and composer Josef Suk (1874–1935) wrote his large scale *Asrael Symphony* in reaction to the deaths of his father-in-law, fellow composer Antonín Dvorak, and his wife Otilie, Dvorak's daughter. Asrael is the angel of death in some Middle Eastern religious traditions, and generally thought of as a guardian rather than as a threatening figure, although sometimes Asrael is portrayed as one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. In Suk's *Asrael Symphony*, the five movements follow a narrative sequence: the first movement has themes representing destiny and death respectively, the second movement is a funeral march, the third is a dance of death but also includes nostalgic recollections of

earlier themes, the fourth movement is an affectionate musical portrait of Otilie, and the final movement suggests an acceptance of the reality of death but tempered by hope of a transcendent afterlife, perhaps watched over by Asrael (Tyrell 2017).

Converse to composers' private expressions of grief and loss are the works commissioned for elaborate public ceremonial funerals and memorials, such as Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Funébre et Triomphale* first performed in 1840. The work was commissioned by the French government as part of the ceremonial reinterment of the remains of soldiers who had fallen in the 1830 revolution. Their remains were being transferred to a new memorial built on the site of the Bastille, and Berlioz responded by scoring a spectacular, grand symphony featuring 200 wind instruments. The two hundred performers accompanied the marching procession to the new burial site (Macdonald 1969: 55).

Many requiems, such as Henry Purcell's (1659–95) *Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary*, and Paul Hindemith's (1895–1963) *Music of Mourning* on the death of King George V of England in January 1936, respond to a specific dignitary's official funeral service. Other works approach mourning the loss of a great personage in a less defined manner, such as Ludwig van Beethoven's (1770–1827) Piano Sonata no. 12. The sonata's third movement, '*Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un eroe*' (Funeral march on the death of a hero) is a slow, majestic funeral march. It is suggestive of a ceremonial occasion, although the 'hero' has never been identified. It is not even certain that Beethoven had a specific hero in mind – perhaps he was inspired simply by the idea of a hero's death (Lockwood 2003: 134). The grand funeral march that features in Beethoven's Symphony no. 3 *Eroica* (Heroic) is associated with Napoleon Bonaparte, even though the music pre-dates Napoleon's death by 17 years. Despite Beethoven's anger at Napoleon declaring himself emperor, he nonetheless in many ways personifies Beethoven's imagined hero, and he mourned Napoleon's passing. With these works, Beethoven contributed to a growing tradition of including a funeral march in non-occasional music for non-specified mourning contexts (Solomon 1998: 71). Frederic Chopin included a funeral march in his Piano Sonata no. 2; it was performed at his own funeral (Marek and Gordon-Smith 1979: 233).

Requiems traditionally follow more or less closely the texts and liturgical practice set by the Catholic church (Karp, Fitch and Smallman 2017). Numerous composers have produced musical settings of the requiem texts, resulting in powerful works that live on with great appeal in the secular concert repertoire. Requiem music by Wolfgang Mozart (1756–91), Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901), Johannes Brahms (1833–97), Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924), and Antonin Dvorak (1841–1904) is frequently performed for contemporary concert audiences. More austere requiems by earlier composers, such as Johannes Ockeghem (1410–97) and Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548–1611), also continue to be performed and appreciated. More recently the requiem has been developed in less traditional directions, with settings such as Frederick Delius's (1862–1934) *Requiem*, originally titled 'a pagan requiem', which sets texts of a pantheistic nature. It is not certain who wrote the texts for this work, but the generally anti-religious influence of Nietzsche has been detected in the words Delius chose (Jefferson 1972: 74-5). Another alternative to the traditionally Christian requiem has been the use of carefully selected texts drawn from a variety of religions. This approach influenced

John Foulds' (1880–1939) *A World Requiem*. In this case, the words are drawn from the Latin Mass, the Bible, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Hindi poetry, and Foulds' own writing (MacDonald 2017). Conversely, Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) created his musically radical *Requiem Canticles* upon an adapted traditional text base. The musical language in this work by Stravinsky has been said to sum up the composer's whole lifetime of diverse musical creativity within a mature philosophical outlook, wherein opposites – loud and soft, vertical and horizontal, regular and irregular, binary and ternary, polyphony and monody, the temporal and the eternal – coexist and find musical resolution beyond the powers of analysis (Boucourechliev 1987: 301-4). More recently, in 2004 Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe (1929–2014) was moved to integrate his lifelong love of the Latin text and Gregorian chant of the Plainsong Mass for the Dead with the underlying philosophical concerns of these ancient traditions, especially 'eternal rest and with light that is all enlightening, both of primary concern to all human beings' (Sculthorpe 2004). Sculthorpe added geographically specific elements to the music in the form of didgeridoo and drumming, while the composer's programme notes also revealed his distress at the ongoing warfare impacting on everyone, including children, in such places as Iraq at the time of composition.

An individualistic musical response to death that cannot easily be assigned to any one of the six main categories discussed above is Viktor Ullmann's (1898–1944) opera, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder Die Tod-Verweigerung* (The emperor of Atlantis or the Disobedience of death). Ullmann composed the opera while he was imprisoned in Theresienstadt, the Nazi concentration camp. He worked on it with the many other artist, writer and musician inmates to create and develop this satirical opera to the point of rehearsal. Ullmann managed to excoriate the insanity and evil of the Nazi regime by utilising mythical and symbolical figures – the satirical character of Death becomes so angry with the Emperor of Atlantis that he, Death, goes on strike, declaring that there will be no more deaths, and with this the Emperor is forced suddenly to relinquish his authority. Death is portrayed as having great power in human affairs, more than even the greatest tyrant. Needless to say, once the camp authorities became aware of the opera's story line, they banned its planned performance. However, the manuscript survived and the opera was eventually premiered in Amsterdam in 1975 (Macdonald 1976: 42-3). Ullmann was transferred to the Auschwitz death camp where he was gassed in 1944, but his work rose beyond the grasp of his tormentors to leave a remarkable musical testimony of defiance and humanity.

Composers' responses to death are so numerous that only a small number could be selected for mention in this paper. The range of creative musical responses to death in Western art music over the past five hundred years includes, but also extends beyond, the dualism of personal or public mourning and expressions of loss on the one hand and religious affirmation of an afterlife on the other. That diversity of response seems to derive from a combination of social and personal circumstances. Changing intellectual currents also appear to have played a major role, including various theologies, mythologies, and more recently psychology and scientific rationalism. Linking all these responses, and despite their differences of chronology, place and attitude, is the fact that so many of the musical works inspired by contemplating death achieve artistic significance and have entered the secular concert repertoire, thereby maintaining some

reflection of the souls of the composers through time and beyond each composer's own mortality.

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