

Mozart's Requiem: The Legends, The Myths, & The Facts

December 5, 1791. It's just after midnight. Mozart lay dying in his bed, frantically trying to finish a requiem commissioned by a ghostly figure in funeral attire--a requiem he now realizes is for himself. Salieri—Mozart's nemesis, who may have poisoned him— anxiously takes dictation, pressing Mozart to finish the requiem, which he will steal and dedicate to Mozart once he has died. Mozart has come to the Lacrimosa. "Full of tears shall be that day on which the ashes shall arise; the guilty man to be judged." Sensing death coming for him, Mozart takes his quill one last time to compose the most astonishing music.

Opening moments of the Lacrimosa:

<https://youtu.be/4wVuUXt8ADo?t=1323> (Listen through 22:57)

[Note: 'These links are 'live' and may be time-coded to jump to specific spots in the video. If links are not working, update your Adobe Reader software.]

The low strings are a weak, beating heart. The violins weep. The chorus ascends to one last, desperate cry, an agonized plea for life ... and with that, Mozart dies, his manuscripts spread around him on the bed and the unfinished Lacrimosa in his hand, with his final signature in the corner.

An astonishing story, and surely the most poignant moment in the history of music ... if only a single word of it were true!

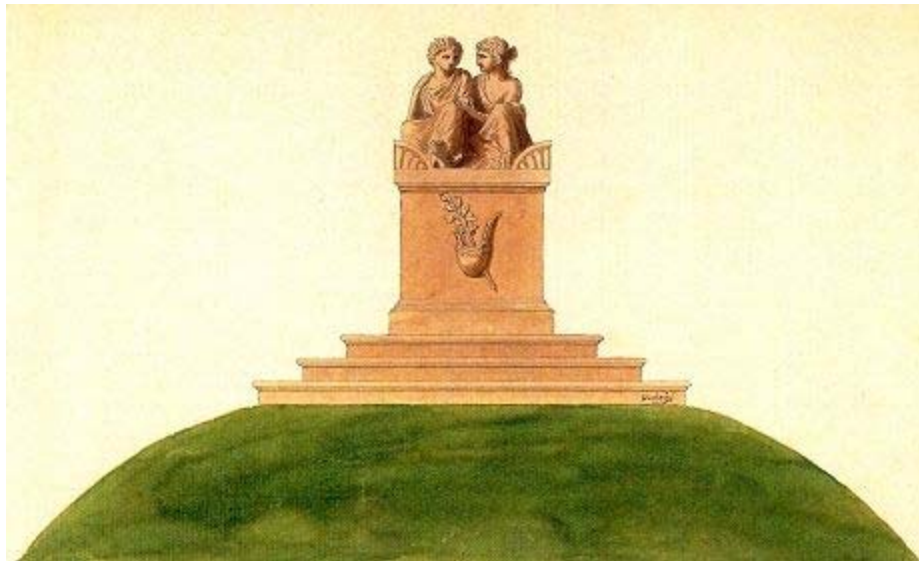
This is the problem of Mozart's Requiem. In the absence of facts surrounding his death and the mysterious completion of the Requiem, the void of information was filled with conjecture, childish Romantic notions, misdirection and outright lies. As always, history is far more fascinating than fiction.

The real story of the Requiem is a true epic, with two tragic deaths, a nefarious scheme to steal the finished work, a labor of love to protect Mozart's reputation and complete his last composition, and a massive cover-up that was one of the most amazing con jobs in all of history.

Part I: From Death, Life

The true story of the Requiem begins not with Mozart, nor in the Mozart household in Vienna, but fifty miles southwest in Schloss Stuppach, with the last breath of Countess Anna von Walsegg, who died at the tender age of twenty-one on February 14, 1791. Her husband, Franz, Count von Walsegg, seven years her senior, was devastated. He would never remarry, and he set out to memorialize his lost love for all time. Walsegg was a music and art lover who had become somewhat infamous

for commissioning works from leading composers, copying them in his own hand and claiming them as his own. The musicians he hired to perform in his home were well aware of Walsegg's deception, and it had become more of an inside joke than rank plagiarism. Walsegg chose two tributes to his late wife: From sculptor Johann Martin Fischer, he commissioned a monument in marble and granite for 3,000 florins. From Mozart, he commissioned the Requiem for a modest fee of 50 ducats. Because he intended to pass the Requiem off as his own, he sent the commission through an intermediary. It reached Mozart some time in the Summer of 1791, probably carried by a clerk employed by Walsegg's lawyer in Vienna. A great deal is made of the anonymous messenger appearing to Mozart in mourning attire, but the so-called "Grey Messenger" would hardly have been an unusual sight in Vienna in 1791, where disease was rampant and the average life expectancy was only thirty-six years.



Drawing of the Fischer memorial for Anna von Walsegg.

Meanwhile, Mozart's life was taking a new direction. Popular myth has persisted that Mozart was not interested in being a court composer or, by extension, a church composer, but Mozart never stopped seeking the kind of steady employment that would put his family on solid financial footing. The Mozarts were badly in debt, with little or no savings. Growing desperate, Mozart decided upon a new angle to gain a post as a church composer—something of an unpaid internship. At his own request, he was appointed adjunct Capellmeister at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, to assist the aged and ailing Leopold Hofmann, with the expectation that he succeed Hofmann after his retirement or death. To that end, Mozart was already composing liturgical music, including his ever-popular Ave Verum Corpus.

Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*:
<https://youtu.be/NK8-Zg-8JYM>

The irony of Vienna's best composer taking an unpaid position in the hope of finding a little financial security says more about Vienna than Mozart. Prague, meanwhile, had far greater admiration for Mozart's music. In July of 1791, the Bohemian Estates commissioned Mozart to compose a coronation opera, *La clemenza di Tito* (*The Clemency of Titus*).

La clemenza di Tito, "Del Piu Sublime Soglio:"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpVXNC30Qq0>

About this same time—we don't know exactly when—the anonymous messenger approached Mozart with the commission for the Requiem. Mozart accepted, receiving 25 ducats in advance, with the other 25 due upon completion. *Titus*, a much larger project, was his main focus, so the Requiem would have to wait. By the end of August, Mozart was leaving for Prague and the premier performances of *Titus* when the messenger approached him again, this time in funeral attire, asking about the Requiem. Mozart promised the messenger that the Requiem would be his top priority once he returned.

Prague would not live up to Mozart's hopes. *Titus* was a modest flop; Mozart was heartbroken. Even worse, he was falling ill. The early symptoms were vague, but Mozart had a terrible feeling about the mysterious illness.

Returning to Vienna in mid-September, Mozart was ready to work on the Requiem, but it would not receive his full attention. He had one last hope of an independent success that would *perhaps* get Vienna to finally recognize his talents—his final opera, *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*). As soon as he arrived, he was needed in rehearsals, with the premier performance on September 30, 1791. It was a huge gamble. Unable to win a royal commission, Mozart had decided to compose his grand comic opera for the light opera house, the Friaus-Theater auf der Wieden in Vienna. Success at the box office could mean big financial gains.

The music of *The Magic Flute* is magnificent, intoxicating. The opera was a triumph. Within days, the streets of Vienna were filled with its most popular melodies.

Die Zauberflöte, No. 19 "Soll ich dich, Theurer:"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZ4ijxaApB0>

As performances of *The Magic Flute* continued, it was clear that Mozart's condition was worsening. He was able to complete a cantata for the Freemasons and

conduct its premiere on November 17, while making good progress on the Requiem, but three days later, on November 20, 1791, Mozart took to his bed with the mysterious illness that would eventually kill him.

With all of his remaining strength, Mozart struggled to finish the Requiem. December 4th brought a ray of hope: Mozart was able to sing through several movements of the Requiem with some of his students, colleagues, and his wife, Constanza. Exhausted, he returned to bed, only to slip away shortly after midnight on December 5, 1791.

Part II: An Unfinished Masterpiece

The myth still persists that Mozart composed the Requiem through the eighth measure of the *Lacrimosa* before he died. The truth is more complicated. Mozart left, in a sense, both *more and less* of the Requiem complete. Like most composers, Mozart did not compose every note of a piece as he went. Instead, he started with the structure of the piece and the melodic flow, returning later to work out the details of texture and orchestration.

The centerpiece of the Requiem is the chorus, followed by the four vocal soloists. Mozart started with the text of the Requiem mass, composing the choral and solo parts first. As he went, he might add a bass line and figured bass to show the harmony, and perhaps a few ideas for the first violins or other melodic instruments. Of all the movements of the Requiem, only the first was 100% complete.

And here is perhaps the greatest irony: The only movement that Mozart completed by himself is actually borrowed! Most of the music comes from the opening chorus of Handel's Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline, composed in 1737, which Mozart was studying for his work at St. Stephen's Cathedral. Realizing that a funeral anthem for a British Queen might never be heard in Vienna, Mozart transposed Handel's music from G Minor to D Minor, but left large portions of it intact. Compare:

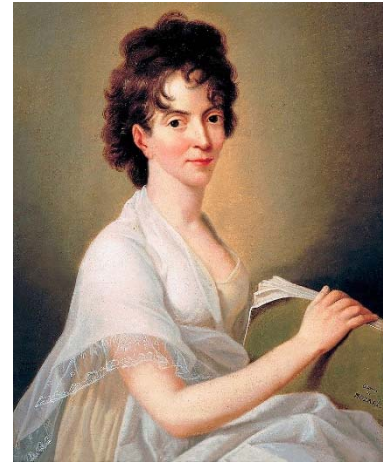
Handel: Funeral Anthem for Queen Caroline, first chorus:
https://youtu.be/ctI4RqytF_Y?t=135 (listen through 8:31)

Mozart: Requiem, I. Requiem aeternam:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wVuUXt8ADo> (listen through 4:53)

Note that the melody is the same, just slightly rewritten to accommodate the Requiem text. Mozart's accompaniment is fuller and he adds to the vocal counterpoint, and the voices have to be reordered to accommodate the transposition,

but this unmistakably Handel's music. Both end on a half cadence, which doesn't sound final and leads directly to the next movement.

The rest of the Requiem movements were all unfinished. The piece would disappear into obscurity unless something was done. Constanze and her children desperately needed the money from Count Walsegg's commission. Mozart's untimely death and mysterious illness had Vienna steeped in rumor, which only intensified with the news that Mozart had been working on a Requiem when he died. Constanze had to protect her husband's legacy and provide for her children, so there was only one way forward: The Requiem had to be completed!



Constanze Mozart

Constanze must have realized the danger. She would have to enlist another composer to finish the Requiem and, somehow, the whole affair would have to be kept in absolute secrecy. Of all the composers in Vienna, there were only a handful that she might be able to trust—Mozart's students. They would understand Mozart's style and would have an interest in protecting his legacy.

Constanze turned immediately to Franz Jacob Freystädtler, who was teaching piano in Vienna and whom she considered Mozart's most experienced pupil. As an added benefit, Freystädtler's music notation looked very much like Mozart's.

Place yourself in Freystädtler's position for a moment: You have been given the final work of your teacher, who has your highest respect, and you have been asked to complete it. All of Vienna is talking about the unfinished Requiem. At best, you can only hope to do justice to your mentor's work anonymously. At worst, your music might be recognized as a fraud and you could be swept up in a terrific scandal, possibly ruining your career.

Freystädtler proceeded with caution. He copied Mozart's entire score exactly as it was before adding anything. With the introduction of the Requiem completed by Mozart, Freystädtler started with the second movement—the Kyrie. And with that, he decided to play it safe, turning to the fugue of the Kyrie and doing the simple work that Mozart would surely have done—doubling the voices in the strings and woodwinds. Freystädtler's additions support the voices, but add almost nothing new.

II. Kyrie:

<https://youtu.be/4wVuUXt8ADo?t=295> (listen through 7:18)

Freystädtler must have been spooked by the project, because he abandoned it without explanation.

Perhaps observing seniority, Constanze turned next to Joseph Eybler, another of Mozart's pupils who was searching desperately for work as a church composer. Eybler received the manuscript on December 21, 1791, and applied himself more diligently than Freystädtler. He orchestrated five sections of the Sequence—the Dies irae, Tuba mirum, Rex tremendae, Recordare, and Confutatis—writing directly on Mozart's autograph score. He then gave up, again without explanation.

Eybler followed Freystädtler's lead, using the strings, winds and trombones primarily to support the voices, but also added important parts for the trumpets and timpani. Eybler's orchestration uses the winds to support the voices, the trumpets and timpani to punctuate, and realizes Mozart's ideas for the strings, turning the Dies Irae into a true Day of Reckoning. Note the pounding 8th-note line in the low strings while the violins are twice as fast, as though they are being chased by the low strings. Eybler's excellent use of the trumpets and timpani sounds almost like the jaws of the low strings snapping at the violins, while the violins gather more intensity every time the chorus ends a phrase as though they are running even more urgently.

III. Dies Irae:

<https://youtu.be/4wVuUXt8ADo?t=439> (listen through 9:19)

Eybler's abandoning the Requiem was a great irony: In 1833, while conducting a performance of the Requiem, he suffered a stroke which ended his career.

The next phase in the Requiem's completion is the most mysterious. Although the evidence is exceedingly thin, it appears the autograph score went next to Abbé Maximilian Stadler, an associate of Mozart since the early 1780s who played a key role in sorting through Mozart's estate. Stadler was a well-respected pianist and composer, and even had a hand in finishing some of Mozart's other unfinished works.

Stadler orchestrated the Domine Jesus and Hostias, but his efforts wouldn't survive intact. The final version of the score would be changed, and when the Requiem controversy exploded, Stadler was absolutely quiet about his role.

So, at least three composers had had the autograph score in their possession. All three made additions, with Eybler making the greatest contribution, but the Requiem was far from finished. None of them had the courage to finish the movements that Mozart left incomplete, and there were still entire sections of the Requiem that Mozart hadn't touched at all.

With her options running out, Constanze turned to Franz Xaver Süssmayer, who had been Mozart's assistant in the last months of his life. Süssmayer had assisted with copying and composing *The Magic Flute* and *Titus*. He would have the daunting task of collating all of the work of Freystädtler, Eybler and Stadler, finishing the Lacrimosa, re-orchestrating the Domine Jesu and Hostias, and composing the Sanctus and Agnus Dei on his own. At best, Süssmayer had what he described as “fragments”

and “scraps of paper” as a starting point. And Süßmayer would have to compose all of this music well enough that the world would never suspect it wasn’t Mozart’s!

Perhaps the score had finally arrived in the right hands. Süßmayer was part of the reading of the unfinished Requiem on December 4, 1791, just before Mozart died. He had experienced the piece in Mozart’s presence. Although we have no proof, it is also possible that Mozart shared some of his ideas for the rest of piece with his friend before returning to his sick bed.

There is, however, a problem: None of the so-called “fragments” or “scraps of paper” survived, nor did any of Süßmayer’s early sketches. Süßmayer would later claim that the Sanctus and Agnus Dei were “wholly composed by” him, but a close look at the score shows choral writing nearly as perfect as Mozart’s autograph score, and orchestral writing as flawed as the work of Freystädler, Eybler and Stadler.

Despite the flaws, the music is still glorious. In the Lacrimosa, Süßmayer was wise to extend Mozart’s ideas through the entire movement, with the voices in a simple chorale and the orchestra in the same hypnotic accompaniment throughout:

VIII: Lacrimosa:

<https://youtu.be/4wVuUXt8ADo?t=1322> (listen through 25:15)

The Sanctus is the movement that drew the most suspicion. Despite the glorious opening in D Major, note the simple interjection by the violins and violas after the chorus sings “sanctus”—hardly the elegance we would expect from Mozart.

XI: Sanctus:

<https://youtu.be/4wVuUXt8ADo?t=1962> (listen through 33:10)

The allegro section that follows is the Osanna, also in D Major, and it is nearly flawless.

XI: Sanctus (Osanna section in D Major):

<https://youtu.be/4wVuUXt8ADo?t=2015> (listen through 34:08)

And here, Süßmayer makes his most obvious error. The Benedictus follows in B-flat major, but when it is time to repeat the Osanna, Süßmayer did not modulate back to D Major, so we hear the Osanna in B-flat Major, which makes the Sanctus the one movement of the entire Requiem that doesn’t return to its home key at the end.

XII: Benedictus (Osanna section in B-flat):

<https://youtu.be/4wVuUXt8ADo?t=2302> (listen through 38:50)

After a brief but beautiful *Agnus Dei*, it seems Süßmayer had had enough. For the *Lux Æterna* and *Cum Sanctis*, he found that he could reuse Mozart's first two movements with minimal changes. This was a surprisingly brilliant move. Beginning and ending with the same music gave the Requiem a cohesion that was ahead of its time.

It was February, 1792, more than two months after Mozart's death. Finally, the Requiem was complete!

Part III: The Cover-Up

The final chapter in the story of the Requiem is the greatest cover-up in the history of music.

Two copies of the finished Requiem were made for Constanze. She kept one and sent the other to Count Walsegg so she could collect the remainder of the commission fee. Within a few weeks, she sold another copy to King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia. Constanze also had parts copied for a memorial service in Mozart's honor. On January 2, 1793, the completed Requiem was heard for the first time in Jahn-Saal in Vienna in Mozart's honor, benefitting his widow and children.

On December 14, 1793, Count Walsegg conducted the Requiem in honor of his late wife at the church of the Cisterian monastery (the Neuklosterkirche) in Weiner Neustadt. He used a copy of the score in his own hand, crediting himself as the composer.

Additional copies of the Requiem spread quickly. As more listeners heard it, the controversy exploded. In journals and newspapers across Europe, the debate over the authenticity of the Requiem became heated and contentious. Amid all the fuss, it is astonishing that none of the four composers who had a hand in its completion received any credit. With completely loyalty to Constanze and to Mozart's legacy, none of them spoke out. In their eyes, the Requiem was completely and totally Mozart's.

For seven years, controversy surrounded the conspirators. In 1799, when Leipzig publisher Breitkopf & Härtel opened negotiations with Constanze for the first publication of the Requiem, it was finally time for some of the mystery to be revealed. With Constanze's permission, Süßmayer wrote to Breitkopf & Härtel on February 8, 1800, admitting to having a hand in completing the Requiem. The roles of Freystädtler, Eybler and Stadler were kept secret.

Süßmayer's admission would not be enough to quell the debate. Mozart's fame had risen to occult highs. Fans, critics and scholars couldn't help but comb through Constanze's story again and again, picking at every flaw. The publishers, as well, wanted to make the case for the authenticity of their product. To continue receiving royalties, Constanze would have to endure a series of meetings with

publishers and their lawyers, long letters, and endless accusations, but she managed to take most of her secrets to her grave in 1842.

Count Walsegg, who had commissioned the Requiem for his beloved Anna and bought complete rights to it, was gracious enough to allow the piece to be attributed to Mozart and for it to be published for Constanze's benefit. Of the two memorials he chose for Anna—the Requiem and the marble and granite monument—ironically only the Requiem has survived. The monument was destroyed by vandals.

Today, the Requiem is central to the concert repertoire. Loved by audiences and musicians alike, the Requiem remains both a masterpiece and a mystery.

Recommended recording:

The Vienna Philharmonic with Georg Solti conducting on the London/Decca label:

<https://www.arkivmusic.com/products/mozart-requiem-solti-auger-bartoli-cole-pape-65363>

With about 100 recordings of the Requiem available at any time, there are plenty of good recordings, but this performance with the Vienna Philharmonic and Georg Solti is something special. They understand that Mozart had one foot in the Romantic before his life ended, and provide a warmer, more dramatic reading. Each movement takes on a very different character and the Dies Irae is outright shocking.

The live concert of this performance can be viewed on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wVuUXt8ADo>

Questions for online discussion:

- Given all the hype generated for Mozart (and the Requiem) by the film *Amadeus*, is Mozart getting more attention than he should in the repertoire and in concert halls today?
- Is the film still worthy even though it isn't historically accurate?
- Is it proper to attribute the Requiem to Mozart with one movement borrowed from Handel and at least four other composers completing the work?
- Should we think any less of Mozart that he would refashion a movement of Handel and call it his own?
- Can you name other pieces that have a troubled origin like the Requiem?
- If Mozart had one foot in the Romantic before he died, what other examples of this do we see in his music?