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Gabriel Fauré's Religious Attitudes in his *Requiem in D minor*, Op. 48

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ABSTRACT

Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem in D minor*, Op. 48, one of the most captivating liturgical musical works that have been composed for the Masses of Requiem, broke the prototypes hitherto adopted for the creation of this music genre. Fauré embodied a vision of death different from his predecessors and contemporary composers through an engaging and appealing musical style, a consequence of his religious attitudes. The motivations behind this evolving composition yet remain unclear; however, the luster reflected in its well-chosen liturgical texts, complemented and embellished by its musical forms and melodies, allows us to penetrate the reasons why Fauré wrote this "lullaby of death", as he described.

Keywords: Gabriel Fauré, Requiem, musical aesthetics, sacred music, liturgical music.

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1. Introduction

Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem in D minor*, Op. 48, his most emblematic work in the contemporary popular imagination, was originally composed for church use. Despite the work carries traces of Louis Niedermeyer's tutelage, it suggests a less conventional approach to the liturgical music of his time. Caught in between the expectations of the religious environment and a new spiritual approach to art such as Symbolism, Fauré's *Requiem* constitutes a scene of contested, paradoxical, and especially opaque meaning. This article examines the personal investment of Fauré in his *Requiem* and the formal traits that define it as simple, refined, serene, sincere, and religious. The author focuses on the particularities of Fauré's *Requiem* and studies why he undertook this composition and what motivated him to have it performed and published. Although it would be impossible without knowing what sources inspired the work or what he took out of it as aesthetic affect, the *Requiem* can figure as a memorial to his faith, his religious attitudes, and his nostalgia for eternal peace.

Responding to the *Requiem* as an unorthodox and innovative work of sacred music, authors have marshaled it as evidence of its composer's arguable attitude about religion. Megan Elizabeth Sarno argued that Fauré's *Requiem* was "in line with the poetics of Symbolism, as it grappled with decay, memory, and a spiritual but not orthodox *au delà*" (2016, p. iii). Based on Susan Richardson's study in 1989, which described Fauré's composition as an aesthetic affirmation of "independent

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ideology” (cited in Caballero, 2001, p. 180), Carlo Caballero stated that Fauré experienced a gradual decline in Catholic feeling and sentiment throughout his life and veered toward atheism (2001). On the other hand, Philippe Fauré-Fremiet (1967), Michel Faure (1985), J. Barrie Jones (1989), Jean-Michel Nectoux (1991; 2004), and Jessica Duchen (2000) thought Fauré’s *Requiem* was the expression of a believer’s heart.

Building on the most relevant literature on Fauré, the present research argues that Fauré’s *Requiem* does not only mirror his aesthetic vision but also his thoughts about the Catholic faith. The structural and textual originality of the liturgical work is not due to his contempt for the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, but because he felt the need to express himself in a different way to underline his faith in God’s mercy. Hence, the author explores the artistic and religious intention brought about by the *Requiem*. In seeking answers, this article employs three modes of inquiry inspired by Ernst Hans Gombrich’s three-fold method for visual analysis. First, it shows the setting of Fauré’s *Requiem*. Second, it investigates why Fauré composed the work. Third, it examines how he structured this sacred music to provide evidence of his religious belief.

2. Gabriel Fauré

It was on Monday, 23 January 1893, when Camille Saint-Saëns’s article on Fauré was published in *L’Éclair*, journal of Paris, right a day after Fauré’s *Requiem in D minor*, Op. 48, was performed under its composer’s conduct at the Church of Saint Mary Madeleine in Paris on the occasion of the centenary of the *dies natalis* of Louis XVI of France (Nectoux, 2004, pp. 131-132; Steinberg, 2005, p. 132). For the first time this “admirable and extremely original” liturgical musical piece was played in its entirety (Nectoux, 2004, p. 131; Steinberg, 2005, p. 132).

Fauré, born on May 12th, 1845 in Pamiers in France, discovered his musical vocation during his childhood while living in Montgauzy (Duchen, 2000, p. 14). In 1854, helped by a scholarship from the bishop of his home diocese, Fauré boarded at the School of Classical and Religious Music in Paris to study to become a church musician and choirmaster. There he received a solid formation from Niedermeyer on church music, plainsong, Renaissance polyphony, and composition, and, later on, the contemporary music from Saint-Saën (Nectoux, 2004, pp. 4-10).

Fauré had an attractive personality and exquisite taste. He was charm, sociable, gentle, tender, sincere, and often with a “self-deprecating sense of humor” (Duchen, 2000, p. 7). Nonetheless, based on his musical compositions and the writings of authors, such as Fauré-Fremiet (1967), Nectoux (1991), and Duchen (2000), Fauré seemed to hold a paradoxical personality: genuine, engaging, communicative but emotionally reserved, depressive, self-sufficient, and resistant to any musical influence which was not consonant with his artistic view. He tended to be succinct in personal matters and did not express grief easily in writing. Despite Fauré was laconic in what referred to his art, thanks to his writing, we still can glimpse that the sincerity seemed to be his main aesthetic attitude. In 1903, he wrote: “Time and again, it is impossible to define the point you have reached or the one you think you are going to. And how many times have I asked myself what music is for? What is it? What am I expressing? What feelings? What ideas? How can I express something which I myself cannot analyse” (Nectoux, 1991, p. 500)!

Great artistic works often seem to appear surrounded by mysteries or unfathomable realities. However, it doesn’t mean that we should talk over them with an esoteric or arcane language. Ernst Hans Gombrich states that what artworks express are intelligible and normally suggest the audience ask oneself three questions when interpreting them (2003, pp. 13-20). These three questions are the what, why, and how, which were also made by Fauré to himself as earlier mentioned (Nectoux, 1991, p. 500) although he made those questions from the creator’s perspective. In the next sections, we will explore what was the setting of Fauré’s *Requiem*, why did he compose this liturgical music, and how did he structure it. We hope following these three inquiry-spotlights might help us go deeper into Fauré’s uncommon *Requiem*.

3. What was the setting of Fauré’s *Requiem*?

Musical settings of the propers of the Requiem Mass are normally called Requiem, and the term has been subsequently applied to other musical compositions related to death and mourning, even when they are non-liturgical, like the case of Johannes Brahms’ *A German Requiem*, to *Words of the Holy*

Scriptures, Op. 45. The genre of Requiem has inspired many musical compositions, most of which were originally meant to be performed in liturgical service. Over time, its dramatic character enclosed in the sequence *Dies irae* began to attain relevance (Chase, 2003; Henry, 1908). Composers like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Hector Berlioz, Giuseppe Verdi, and Antonín Dvořák extended its musical setting, emphasizing the terrifying tone of the Latin text to cause strong emotional reactions in the listener, and consequently made their works more like concert pieces than liturgical works. However, Fauré preferred a different conception of Requiem.

Fauré's *Requiem* was gradually composed at different stages of his life. Its gestation was a long one, from the earliest sketches of 1887 to the first published version of 1990-91. Between 1887 and 1888, Fauré composed what he called a *little Requiem* in five movements: no. 1, *Introit et Kyrie*; no. 2, *Sanctus*; no. 3, *Pie Iesu*; no. 4 *Agnus Dei et Lux aeterna*; and no. 5 *In Paradisum*, without including the *Offertorium* and the old *Libera me* which he originally composed in 1877. This *little Requiem* was performed for the first time on 16 January 1888 under Fauré's direction at the Church of Madeleine for the "first-class" funeral of its parishioner Joseph-Michel Le Soufaché, a well-known Paris architect of the nineteenth century (Nectoux, 1991, p. 116). In 1889 Fauré added the *Hostias* portion of the *Offertorium*; between 1890 and 1893, he expanded this movement again and brought in this time his old *Libera me*. In 1899-1900, at the request of his editor and publisher, Julien Hamelle, Fauré reworked the *Requiem* for full orchestra (Nectoux, 1991, p. 119). The final version is composed of seven movements as we know today: no. 1, *Introit et Kyrie*; no. 2, *Offertorium*; no. 3, *Sanctus*; no. 4, *Pie Iesu*; no. 5, *Agnus Dei et Lux aeterna*; no. 6, *Libera me*; and no. 7, *In Paradisum* (Nectoux, 1991, p. 121).

The final version finished in 1900 could be considered as the "symphonic" version (Nectoux, 1991, pp. 118-120), which is practicable for performance in large concert halls. According to the French musicologist Nectoux, this musical piece always sounds better in a specifically liturgical setting, since "the material and its orchestration both seem to have been destined for a highly reverberant acoustic like that of the Madeleine in which they can expand without sounding confused" (1991, p. 118). The fact is that a century after its first performance in Paris, Fauré's *Requiem* remains the most often played in churches and for its specific liturgical purpose (Nectoux, 1991, p. 119), a reality that proves that its musical setting is completely applicable to both concert performance and ritualistic function. In general, its vocal composition shows the discreet influence of Gregorian chant (Nectoux, 1991, p. 121). The influence of the Renaissance polyphony is also perceived, especially in the *Agnus Dei* and the *Offertorium* whose *Amen* in B minor has a poignant and serene radiance, "worthy of Josquin [des Prez] at his best", as Nectoux affirms (1991, p. 122).

4. Why did Fauré compose the *Requiem*?

Most of Fauré's biographers note that he composed the *Requiem* between his father's death on 25 July 1885 and that of his mother on 31 December 1887 and, hence, argue that probably this composition was addressed to them. However, a letter from Maurice Emmanuel provides us valuable information, which apparently contradicts the estimation of those writers. In March 1910, Emmanuel wrote to Fauré asking several questions to prepare a set of program notes for a performance of Fauré's *Requiem*. When asked about his motivation for composing it, Fauré replied: "My Requiem ... wasn't written for anything ... [but] for pleasure, if I may call it that" (Nectoux, 1991, p. 116)! Did Fauré write this touching music for nothing and nobody? Probably not. Arguably, there is the possibility to translate his expression of "for pleasure" into "for my personal wish" or "out of my own will and heart", a creative heart willing to show the sincerest artistic and religious sentiments of the composer. His younger son, Philippe Fauré-Fremiet, wrote that his father was experienced in religious music and the Roman liturgy, and he had many reasons to write for the Roman Catholic Church (Fauré-Fremiet, 1967, p. 64). In any case, the addressee of this musical work remains unclear. What we could affirm up to now, based on the found shreds of evidence, is that nobody commissioned the composition of *Requiem* from Fauré. Even though its first version was performed for the first time in 1888 in Le Soufaché's funeral Mass, this fact doesn't necessarily mean that Fauré was commissioned to compose this liturgical work (Nectoux, 1991, p. 116).

Regarding the form and content of Fauré's *Requiem*, they show an unusual musical setting. Gombrich defined that the artistic style is like a mask "which hides as much as it reveals" (Gombrich,

1991, p. 32). If we apply this definition to the peculiar musical language used in Fauré's *Requiem*, we might ask ourselves questions like such: Why did Fauré compose this *Requiem*? Why did he make such a unique musical arrangement? What did Fauré wish to mirror in this artwork? What did he pretend to hide? Fauré's thought about the *Missa pro defunctis* was not neutral. Nectoux noted that Fauré's view about how to treat this liturgical setting not only came from the composer in him but also, more profoundly, from his feeling as a man (Nectoux, 1991, pp. 112-120). Fauré was sincere in his artistic expressions. Most of his musical works reflect his personal circumstances, his subtle thought, nostalgia, and longing. In his *Requiem*, Fauré endeavored to communicate this idea: *Pie lesu, quia pius es*, which is indeed the *leitmotiv* of this musical work (Fauré-Fremiet, 1967, p. 68). His emphasis on divine mercy led him to manifest the tranquil face of death, barely different from the dramatical vision of Mozart, Berlioz, or Verdi. In 1902 he revealed to Louis Aguetant: "That's how I see death: as a joyful deliverance, an aspiration towards a happiness beyond the grave, rather than as a painful experience" (Nectoux, 1991, p. 116).

Fauré's *Requiem* conveys a different accent and shows an *avant-garde* arrangement, both in tune with his religious attitudes, full of the light of hope and serenity. No long shadow is cast over the ground, though its composition seemed to derive from the profound sorrow of losing his mother and could also be an unspoken reflection on the death itself, as his younger son observed (Fauré-Fremiet, 1967, p. 70). Fauré himself said of his work of *Requiem*, "Everything I managed to entertain by way of religious illusion I put into my *Requiem*, which moreover is dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest" (Steinberg, 2005, p. 132). Consequently, the whole piece sings the divine mercy of God and the eternal rest in His tenderness. In a letter to his son Philippe, Fauré wrote: "The art of imagination consists in trying to formulate all one's desire for the best, everything that goes beyond reality [...]. For me art, and music above all, consists in lifting us as far as possible above what is" (Nectoux, 1991, p. 500). Fauré, who was very sensible to his musical language and highly diligent in seeking its perfection to achieve the maximum emotional and intellectual effect of each score, did not consider "the best, everything that goes beyond reality", a mathematical perfection but what he truly yearned for: a place of compassion and hope, as his *Requiem* expresses (Fauré-Fremiet, 1967, p. 65; Nectoux, 1991, p. 500).

As earlier mentioned, Fauré composed the *Requiem* during those years of shadow, shaped by travails of life, by the anguish of grief, like a *nocturne*, a *dark night of soul*, in the sense of Saint John of the Cross (Fauré-Fremiet, 1967, pp. 139-140). For instance, in 1877 after being appointed choirmaster at the Church of Madeleine in Paris, his engagement with Marianne Viardot broke off, which caused his great sorrow and led him to suffer depression for decades. Such a painful situation was reinforced by the death of his parents between 1885 and 1888, as well as by a distressed life rhythm that he had no other choice than to undergo to sustain his family economically. His wife, Marie Fremiet, and his two sons, Emmanuel and Philippe, needed that hard-earned income to live. 1877 was also the year when he wrote a *Libera me* for baritone and organ. This song, orchestrated, was incorporated into his *Requiem* almost thirteen years later and is thus the earliest music in the composition. The senses of calm, serenity, clarity, tenderness, and sincerity predominate in the song of *Libera me*. Such feelings are also experienced in the other movements of the *Requiem*. Fauré explained why he chose a placid musical expression for this liturgical work:

It has been said that my Requiem does not express the fear of death and someone has called it a lullaby of death. But it is thus that I see death: as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above, rather than as a painful experience. The music of Gounod has been criticized for its over-inclination towards human tenderness. But his nature predisposed him to feel this way: religious emotion took this form inside him. Is it not necessary to accept the artist's nature? As to my Requiem, perhaps I have also instinctively sought to escape from what is thought right and proper, after all the years of accompanying burial services on the organ! I know it all by heart. I wanted to write something different! (Orledge, 1979, p. 151)

These words stated by Fauré display his religious sentiments and vision of death. Fauré-Fremiet wrote that his father showed no fear of death because he had invincible confidence in the divine mercy despite his depressive circumstance (1967, pp. 64-70). Several writers accuse Fauré of his heterodoxy and his attitude of enmity toward the Roman Catholic Church (Phillips, 2000, pp. 288-295), only because he altered the structure and liturgical texts of the *Requiem* Mass and expressed certain critics on Pope

Pius X's *Tra le sollecitudini*, issued *motu proprio* (Pope Pius X, 1903)². As Nectoux observed, "his omission of the *Dies irae* has been explained as a function of the gentle aesthetic propounded by the work as a whole, which, as it were, forbade the inclusion of the famous sequence describing the anger of the God of Abraham and Jacob. This is a somewhat simplistic view" (1991, pp. 123). Fauré certainly made some changes in the liturgical text adopted by the Church before the Second Vatican Council. Nevertheless, he did not modify the essential meaning of the text in none of the aspects or deny the Catholic teaching on the last things. He also set to music the *Pie Iesu*, the most tranquil part of the sequence *Dies Irae*, and emphasize it by making it an independent movement (Figure 1). In this way, the pivotal idea of "*Pie Iesu, quia pius es*" is highlighted in the composition.

The Proper of Tridentine Requiem Mass	Fauré's <i>Requiem in D minor, Op. 48</i>
(1) <i>Introit: Requiem aeternam</i>	(1) <i>Introit et Kyrie</i>
(2) <i>Kyrie eleison</i>	
(3) <i>Graduale: Requiem aeternam</i>	
(4) <i>Tracto: Absolve Domine</i>	
(5) <i>Sequentia: Dies irae</i>	
(6) <i>Offertorium: Domine Iesu</i>	(2) <i>Offertorium: Domine Iesu</i>
(7) <i>Sanctus</i>	(3) <i>Sanctus</i>
(8) <i>Benedictus</i>	
	(4) <i>Pie Iesu</i>
(9) <i>Agnus Dei</i>	(5) <i>Agnus Dei et Lux aeterna</i>
(10) <i>Communio: Lux aeterna</i>	
	(6) <i>Libera me</i>
	(7) <i>In Paradisum</i>

Figure 1. The Proper of Tridentine Requiem Mass vs. Fauré's *Requiem in D minor, Op. 48*.

The sequence *Dies Irae* was at that moment a kind of summary of the Tridentine Requiem Mass. Ever since Jean-Baptiste Lully's motet *Dies irae* in 1683, "composers have treated it as a set piece in a grand manner, demanding mass effects", says Nectoux (1991, p. 124). It is not true to state that Fauré refused to incorporate the introductory *Dies irae, dies illa* to his *Requiem*; on the contrary, he did deal with this passage in the movement of *Libera me* "with a totally convincing sweep and grandeur", using Nectoux's expression (1991, pp. 123-124). However, Fauré's music conveys his lack of interest in grandiose or complicate orchestration, in showing off his virtuosity and his well-learned knowledge in liturgical music. His musical intention might be to communicate his serene vision of death, "like a lullaby", because that is how he felt death, "as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above, rather than as a painful experience" (Orledge 1979, p. 151).

5. How did Fauré structure the *Requiem*?

Without losing his lucidity, Fauré elegantly reconciled in his *Requiem* contrastive elements, such as anguish and peacefulness, modality and tonality, gentleness and force within this intimate and alluring religious masterpiece. Now, how can this reconciliation be possible? How did Fauré transmit the tender and merciful love of God through his musical arrangement?

Figure 1 shows that the seven movements of Fauré's *Requiem* include the *Libera me* and *In Paradisum* from the Rite of Burial. As Nectoux observes (1991, p. 124), the function of these two movements can still be considered liturgical. Firstly, the *Libera me* is the prayer for absolution, which immediately follows the Requiem Mass. Secondly, the *In Paradisum* is the logical continuation of the

² Pope Pius X promulgated this *motus proprio* about the sacred music on 22 November 1903. At that time "operatic and theatrical Church-music" was dominant in Italy. In this document the superiority of Gregorian chant and the Classic Polyphony was reaffirmed. However, the Pope by no means denied the contribution of modern music to the Church, as he clearly stated in the point 5 of the document (Pope Pius X, 1903). In my opinion, Fauré's criticism of this pontifical document might originate from his misunderstanding on the Pope's advice.

Libera me although it is said outside the church and before the body is laid in the grave. The chorus sound in the movement of *In Paradisum* can arguably be considered the musical expression of the “joyful deliverance” and the “aspiration towards a happiness beyond the grave” (Nectoux 1991, 116).

Figure 2 displays that the hinge of Fauré’s *Requiem* could be its fourth movement *Pie Iesu*. Two groups, each composed of three movements, were arranged around the movement of *Pie Iesu*. Besides, each group was analogically composed of a chorus-and-baritone movement flanked by two chorus-only movements. With such a thoughtful arrangement, the idea of the mercy of God is even more accentuated. The *Introit et Kyrie* and *Agnus Dei* are the first corresponding movements since they share a common verse. The opening of the *Introit*, “*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine*”, is repeated exactly at the end of the *Agnus Dei* in the same key of D minor. No other movements have this verse. The same melodic idea lies behind the brief “*Dies irae*” in the movement of *Libera me*. The *Offertorium* and *Libera me* are the next analogous movements both including solo baritone. The baritone soloist won’t be heard in other movements of the *Requiem*. The *Sanctus* and *In Paradisum* are the last akin movements, which consist of a floating melody line, sung by a single voice part at a time. Both share a similar mood and texture, which is not heard anywhere else in the *Requiem*. Their similarity is found as well in using solo string instruments: a solo violin is featured in the *Sanctus*, and a solo viola in *In Paradisum*.

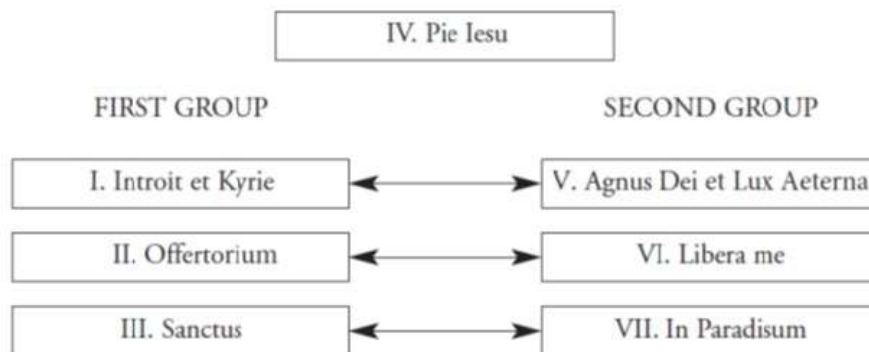


Figure 2. The scheme of Fauré’s *Requiem in D minor*, Op. 48

As mentioned earlier, Fauré received criticism from many writers regarding his choice of text in setting his *Requiem*, particularly the omission of the most apocalyptic passages such as *Dies irae* (Phillip, 2000, pp. 288-295). However, strictly speaking, Fauré did not overlook that sequence. What he did was to integrate the introductory verses of the sequence “*Dies irae, dies illa*” into the movement of *Libera me* and to convert the last verses of the same sequence, “*Pie Iesu Domine, dona eis requiem*”, into the fourth movement *Pie Iesu*. In fact, regarding the musical setting of this movement as an independent one, Fauré was not a pioneer: he had many precedents to follow. What is unique in his version is that he added the verse “*sempiternam requiem*”, taken from the *Agnus Dei*, to conclude the prayer. Besides, between the *Introit et Kyrie* and the *Agnus Dei* there is a common passage: “*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis*”, which marks, respectively, the beginning and the end of the texts from the proper of *Requiem Mass*, followed by the ones taken from the Rite of Burial. The *Agnus Dei* movement is not a mere *Agnus Dei* but includes the communion antiphon *Lux aeterna* (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Fauré took advantage of the fact that the opening two lines of the *Introit* – “*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine / et lux perpetua luceat eis*” – recur verbatim in the communion antiphon, allowing him to reprise the musical passage from the *Introit et Kyrie*. Besides, to make the passage of *Lux aeterna* not signify the end of his *Requiem*, he omitted here the last verses “*Cum sanctis tuis in aeternum / quia pius es*”.

Now, if we contemplate Fauré’s *Requiem* from the perspective of content, we might identify that the cross-point, the alpha, and omega of Fauré’s *Requiem* lies in the fifth movement *Agnus Dei et Lux aeterna*. It is the alpha because its music and the texts recall the movement of *Introit & Kyrie*. It is the omega because the prayer “*requiem aeternam*”, which is portrayed through the whole work, comes to conclude this imploring *Requiem*. The tonal and modal climax, and the central message of this music work: “*quia pius es*”, which is also found in this movement. It is in this context that Fauré, employing

contrast, again and again, lifted darkness to reveal a transcendently bright, peaceful, and consoling vision of death and faith.

6. Conclusion

All these nuances in the arrangement of Fauré's *Requiem* show how its composer mirrored his personal religious attitude in this work, composed to make an emotional and intellectual impact on its audience. As we have tried to reiterate alongside the article, Fauré intentionally guided the listeners of his *Requiem* to this key idea: "*Pie lesu, quia pius es*". He died on 4th November 1924, with his wife, his two sons, and his doctor by his bedside. These were Fauré's last words: "I did what I could ... now let God be my judge! ..." (Nextoux, 1991, p. 468; Fauré-Fremiet, 1967, p. 130). He was buried in the Passy Cemetery in Paris, after a full state funeral held at the Church of Madeleine. His *Requiem* was then sung.

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