

I first heard Mozart's Requiem in the movie *Amadeus*; the incredible scene in which Mozart dictates the "Confutatis" to Salieri probably influenced my understanding of orchestration more than anything I ever learned in school (though I still get miffed by Salieri's dramatic harmonic confusion, asking Mozart if the strings should play a G#...I mean the harmonic minor scale was not exactly revolutionary at that time!) But I didn't really get inside the piece until I sang it with John Drotleff, both in the West Shore Chorale and the Lakewood High School Symphonic Mixed Choir, way back in '93 or '94. That's when I learned the mastery of the opening double fugue, the aching of the "Lacrymosa," the intricacy of the structure, and all the arcane history and mythos of Mozart's death while writing the piece and the many subsequent competing completions by other composers. That even the parts that were not fully composed by Mozart were still so dazzlingly beautiful seemed to suggest that Mozart actually transcended death in writing the piece; that his spirit and genius somehow possessed his students from beyond the grave. In subsequent years with John and the Chorale, I studied and sang other Requiems – Brahms, Fauré, Duruflé – and it quickly became my favorite choral genre, a form that seemed to draw the most sublime and supernatural work out of the composers that took it on. So when John and the Chorale offered me this commission, I jumped at the chance. To write a piece in response to Mozart's masterpiece, to tackle the requiem form myself – what an exquisite challenge! And then I sat with the traditional requiem text...and had a revelation. This text did not speak to me *at all*.

I was raised going to a Latvian Lutheran church; we only went on major holidays, or for the annual church bazaar, and for me the services were excruciating, as they were all in Latvian – a language I only know "please" and "thank you" in (and "*svieks!*"). My parents, children of the 60s, were not religious people; my dad had an early falling out with his strict Catholic upbringing, and my mom has "spiritual" beliefs but deep misgivings about organized religion in general. So Christian values were never instilled in me in a serious way; though I find the stories, rituals, and artistic traditions quite beautiful, they haven't had much influence on my own spiritual cosmology. Some Eastern philosophy courses in college and 10 years living in the post-hippie spiritual cocktail of San Francisco slowly shaped in me a spirituality that is more Taoist than anything, with good doses of Buddhism, Alan Watts, and Ken Wilber leading me to "believe" in a universal omnisoul, the idea that all living things are part of a vast single consciousness, and that death is just a transfer of consciousness from one form to another – an idea which I find trippy and fun and useful, but ultimately just as speculative and metaphorical as anything else. Which is all just to say that I don't feel the weight and fear of death or obsession with judgement and mercy that the Christian requiem mass conveys. There is something in the humanity that sings underneath those beliefs – the human desires for understanding and forgiveness – that I find quite profoundly moving, and I love the divine beauty that brings out in great artists; but it was clear that if I was going to write something about death that actually meant something for me, some other texts would need to be used. At some point someone suggested Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" – another text which I love artistically but does not resonate with me spiritually – and this further galvanized my desire to find a text that expressed my more non-Western beliefs. I began researching other traditions and texts around death, and eventually (after some far-reaching journeys from the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* to Joan Didion) found my way to a wonderful collection compiled by Yoel Hoffman, *Japanese Death Poems*.

The complete history of East Asian death poems is too intricate and involved to be adequately conveyed here; essentially they are short pieces written by poets and monks on their death beds, a summation of the poet's life and a final departing gift to the world. The form grew out of various Buddhist traditions, specifically Zen Buddhism in Japan, Chan Buddhism in China, and Seon Buddhism in Korea. Buddhism teaches that existence has three main characteristics: impermanence, suffering, and non-self; thus death is an inevitable release from the suffering of samsara and its accompanying illusion of selfhood. The beauty of the death poem tradition is that it conveys these ideas not directly with academic, philosophical, or new age-y spiritual jargon, but metaphorically, with simple phrases depicting images of nature. In Japan these death poems took on the form of haiku, with its sparse structure and strict rules; traditional haiku not only employs a 5-7-5 syllabic pattern (which is actually a bit of a Western simplification, as the Japanese language is counted not in syllables but "morae," phonetic sounds; long vowels or ending consonants may count as two morae), but also utilizes a seasonal setting (haiku can be classified as spring, summer, autumn, or winter poetry based on the images they employ), and *kiru* ("cutting"), a sudden turn or shift between two images. (And of course all of these rules are broken all the time...far more often than my Western grade school teachers would allow!)

Ultimately I came to devise a text that uses touches of the Latin requiem mass (including some musical quotes of the Mozart, Brahms, and Fauré Requiems) and some original writing (including some bits inspired by the Thomas poem, and a nonsense section inspired by another of Mozart's great final works, *The Magic Flute*), but is mostly made up of these Japanese death poems, freely combining and rephrasing the texts of 19 different poets, writing between 1647 and 1914 (a full list of the poets can be found below). What I most love about these poems is their playfulness; casting death not in a tragic light, but in an absurd one, as all the self-importance and drama of human life is reduced to this simple, mundane and inevitable moment of departure. A melting snowman, a willow branch in a vase, clucking tongues – these images speak whimsically to the futility of all of our attempts at understanding the divine unknown. And yet there is gravitas and profundity in these texts as well, as these poets reckon with the smallness of their life and the sadness their parting will impart.

It's the final poem (by Koha, written in 1897) that gets me the most: "I cast the brush aside / From here on the moon and I / Speak face to face." We spend our lifetimes trying to understand the unknowable and convey the unspeakable, through religion, family, history, technology, music, poetry, theater, story, art and love...but in the end we cast all these brushes aside, and face the unknown directly.

*Dewdrops (a requiem)*, was written for John Drotleff and the West Shore Chorale, on the occasion of their 50th anniversary.

The text is a free combination of original text, the Latin requiem mass, and the death poems of several Japanese poets: Bokusui (1914), Bufu (1792), Fusen (1777), Gozan (1789), Hanri (1835), Issa (1827), Kigen (1736), Kin'u (1817), Kisei (1764), Kizan (1851), Koha (1897), Kusamaru (1836), Masahide (1723), Retsuzan (1826), Senryu (1827), Shigenobu (1832),