

EIGHT TRUMPETS

For Tuba Mirum

by Dr. Lily Kass

The “Tuba Mirum” movement of Verdi’s *Requiem* is a particularly exciting portion of the “Dies Irae” text for composers to set to music because it is about sound. It reads: “The trumpet, throwing its wondrous sound through the tombs of the earth will summon all before the throne.” The composer needs to demonstrate with music this “wondrous sound” that can only be imagined — this sound that fills all of space and summons all before God.

Take a second to imagine this sound yourself. Is it loud or soft? Long or short? Does it move quickly or slowly? Does it change or stay constant? There are lots of different ways you could imagine this sound, but one thing that seems certain is that there would have to be at least one trumpet, since that is the instrument the text talks about. Verdi took the text literally and used the sound of the trumpet as described in the text.

Verdi doesn’t just use one trumpet, though, and he doesn’t even stick to the four trumpets that play in the other parts of the *Requiem*. Verdi adds four more trumpets! These four extra trumpets are meant to be “far away and invisible.” In performance, this might mean that they are played from backstage or even from behind where the audience is sitting. The audience is meant to be surprised by these trumpets, and to be enveloped in sound. It creates the feeling that the whole world is filling with the sound of trumpets — much like the effect of surround sound in a movie theater. The resulting sound is like a combination of music and sound effect.

The trumpets start the “Tuba mirum” by themselves. First the four regular trumpets play and then they are echoed by the extra ones. They all play the same rhythm: a long note (held for three beats) followed by a short pause (half a beat) and then two short notes (each lasting only a quarter of a beat). This rhythm sounds like a traditional military horn call, and it repeats over and over again getting gradually louder and

slightly faster every time. Harmonies are also added, making what at first sounds like a few solo trumpets sound like more of a choir of trumpets. French horns and tubas join them, playing the same rhythmic motive. The bassoon also adds to the sound, only playing long notes, and the timpani begins to rumble along as well. After that group plays all together as loud as they can, the same pattern of long and short notes is repeated but with the long notes played more quickly.

The voices of the chorus enter into this chaos, with the bass voices leading the way. The whole chorus sings eventually, but the voices are always in danger of being drowned out. This gives the impression that there are forces in play that are beyond human control. Humans are swept up in them and don’t know what is going to happen.

This section of the *Requiem* ends suddenly. The whole choir sings together, with the tenors singing the word “throne” and everyone else singing the word “everyone.” So we have the image of everyone before the throne. The sopranos and tenors sing high notes on a short syllable, and the effect is very surprising: almost like a scream stopped in its tracks. The next section of the sequence creates a big contrast. There is a moment of silence, and when the orchestra comes back in, there is no brass whatsoever, only soft strings, and a solo bass begins to sing quietly.

“Tuba Mirum” in the Verdi *Requiem* is extremely short. It usually lasts only two minutes! But those two minutes are very powerful. The effect of the surround-sound trumpets combined with the insistent horn call rhythm gives us as listeners an immersive experience. We feel like we are there witnessing the events described in the text taking place around us. It is so loud and so repetitive and so chaotic that if it lasted any longer, we might feel overwhelmed. We are left impressed by the power of the trumpet’s call to judgment, but perhaps relieved that we are moving on.