

Remembrance

36. Requiem aeternam, Op. 102

Peter Cornelius

(1824-1874)

arr. William Melton

Cornelius, Peter

(born 24 December 1824 in Mainz; died 26 October 1874 in Mainz)

Cornelius, the son of actors and nephew of the painter Peter von Cornelius, was initially attracted to the dramatic stage. He then applied himself to music, working with Heinrich Esser beginning in 1841 and at his father's death moving to Berlin to stay with his uncle. There the young man was introduced to the likes of the Brothers Grimm and Felix Mendelssohn, and studied with the renowned theorist Siegfried Wilhelm Dehn (who also taught Glinka and Anton Rubinstein). Afterwards he gravitated to Franz Liszt in Weimar, where he served as a skilful propagandist for the New German School. In 1858 Liszt conducted the premiere of Cornelius' first opera, *Der Barbier von Bagdad*, and three years later Cornelius was at Wagner's side in Vienna. He moved to Munich in 1865, the year of the Weimar debut of his second opera, *El Cid*. Cornelius was one of a number of gifted teachers that Wagner installed at the Royal School of Music, but before ten years of Munich residence had passed Cornelius met an early death from liver damage (diabetes), leaving a wife of seven years, four children, and the unfinished opera *Gunlöd*.

Though less known outside of Germany, Cornelius' place in his homeland remains unique. His talents were myriad—the composer was also a gifted poet, translator, critic and essayist who maintained relationships with some of the greatest musicians of his century, including Berlioz, Robert and Clara Schumann, Bülow, Raff, Joachim and Brahms as well as Liszt and Wagner. His key position at the centre of German cultural life generated a small library of documentation. No less than six biographies were written within

the half-century after his death, including multi-volume treatments by his son Carl Maria Cornelius and Max Hasse, and complete editions of both his musical and literary works.

The *Requiem aeternam* for four unaccompanied male voices, Op. 102, was written during a stay in Soest in Westphalia in October 1852. Cornelius had travelled to Weimar earlier that year in order to show Franz Liszt his compositions. He wrote his brother Carl about Liszt's response: 'His considered opinion and counsel was that I should throw myself into writing sacred music with a will'. Liszt was deeply concerned with the revitalisation of Catholic church music, and thought he had found a likely co-worker in Cornelius (though born a Lutheran, the latter had developed a close personal bond with the Catholic liturgy). But as noted by scholar Elmar Seidel, Cornelius' 'masses and motets did not bring him the hoped for recognition in Catholic circles'. He ceased composing sacred music in 1855, turning to opera and Lieder, though he planned a return to the religious genre, writing his brother on Easter Monday 1871 of a desire 'to produce one or more works that glow with the dawn of a new day'. He died with the wish unfulfilled, and the *Requiem aeternam* went unpublished until Max Hasse's edition of the complete musical works (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1905). Hans Engel described Cornelius as 'a pure, idealistic *Mensch*, who gained the sympathy of all who knew him', and the composer's profound understanding of human grief is palpable in the recurring, sighing accents of the Requiem's supplication 'dona eis' ('grant them', from the phrase 'Lord, grant them eternal rest'; bars 4-5, 13-14, 36-37, and 44-45). The manuscript of the work is presently housed in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna (Signatur S. m. 4764).

Text by William Melton