

“Tuba mirum” or “Tuba dirum”: Mozart’s Requiem and the Trombone

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by Douglas Yeo

Written in the last months of his life, Mozart’s Requiem has achieved almost mythic status as one of classical music’s greatest works, despite the fact that he did not live to see it to completion. Today we take for granted the near universal praise of the Requiem, and any criticism is usually reserved for discussion about the perceived inadequacies of those who completed the work from Mozart’s sketches. Trombone players have special reason to be grateful to Mozart, since he has provided them with one of the orchestral repertoire’s finest trombone solos, one that stands alongside those found in Maurice Ravel’s *Bolero* and Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 3. Yet Mozart’s trombone solo in the *Tuba mirum* has been a subject of controversy since its first performances and has not always been held in high esteem.

Mozart’s manuscript for the *Tuba mirum* contains only the most basic of outlines, containing parts for the vocal soloists, solo trombone, and cellos/basses. He wrote no dynamic marking for the opening solo, and he offered only scant articulation markings to guide performers stylistically. Mozart’s trombone solo extends to the end of the

opening text that is sung by the bass soloist; the trombone’s music staff continues throughout the entire movement but those measures were never filled by the composer’s pen.

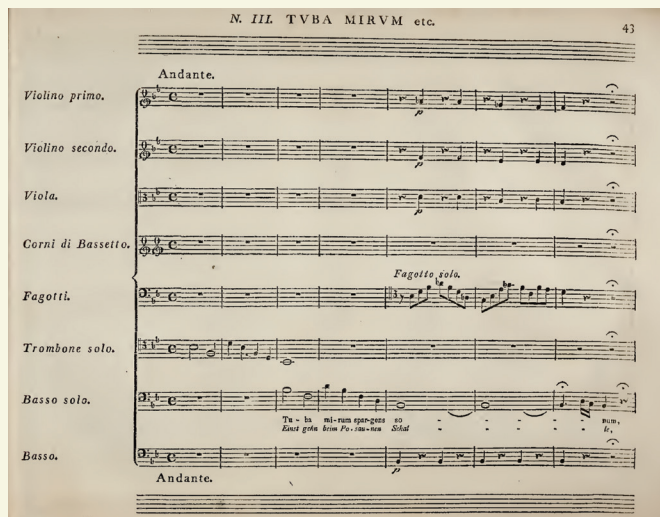
It is the trombone, rather than the trumpet, that introduces the sound of the Biblical “last trumpet,” a quite logical decision when one understands that the word “trombone” literally means “large trumpet.” Banish any thought that the Latin word “tuba” has



First page of the “Tuba mirum” from the manuscript of Mozart’s Requiem (1791), the upper, circled lines of music for violins and viola not being by Mozart

anything to do with today’s large brass instrument of that name. Unlike the trombone, the natural (valveless) trumpet of Mozart’s time was not capable of playing fully chromatically. Mozart, at age eleven, had written an exceptional trombone solo in his *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes* (*The Obligation of the First Commandment*), K.35, and was well acquainted with the instrument’s capabilities. After the *Tuba mirum*’s opening measures, the trombone writing changes character, and it accompanies the bass soloist with florid lines and arpeggios until the tenor soloist enters (*Mors stupebit*) with a minor-key version of the trombone’s opening motif. This is all well and good until one considers whether Mozart’s trombone writing actually reflects the character of the vocal text.

After the drama of the *Dies irae*, the *Tuba mirum* text continues with an evocative image of the dead rising from their graves to face the judgment of God. While Hector Berlioz (1843) famously complained that Mozart's single trombone was inadequate to the task— "Why just one trombone to sound the terrible blast that should echo round the world and raise the dead from the grave? Why keep the other two trombones silent when not three, not thirty, not three hundred would be enough?"—other commentators have objected to



First page of the "Tuba mirum" from the first edition of Mozart's Requiem (Breitkopf & Härtel, 1800), showing the trombone solo given to bassoon (courtesy Handel & Haydn Society and Boston Public Library)

the character of the solo. Many have echoed Alfred Einstein's assessment (1945) that "one cannot shake off the impression that the heavenly [trombone] player is exhibiting his prowess instead of announcing terribly the terrible moment of the Last Judgment." More recently, John Rosselli, in *The Life of Mozart* (1998), opines that the trombone solo "strains after majesty and fails." Perhaps the harshest cut came from Cecil Forsyth in his *Orchestration* (1914) where he wrote, sardonically, "Only the first three bars appear to have been written by one who understood the instrument. The rest might be better described as *Tuba dirum spargens sonum*." The text's reference to the

amazing ("*mirum*") sound of the last trumpet became, in Mozart's allegedly inept hands, simply "awful" ("*dirum*").

Yet missing from all of this harsh commentary is an understanding of not only the use of the trombone in late 18th-century Vienna, but also how composers at that time and place addressed the subject of death. It is true that many of Mozart's contemporaries, including Antonio Salieri, Michael Haydn, and Luigi Cherubini, treated the *Tuba mirum* in dramatic fashion with loud brass and timpani. But others, like Georg Reutter and Franz Joseph Aumann, wrote gentle trombone solos (and trombone duets) in the *Tuba mirum* movement of their Requiems. Why did some composers treat this text with dramatic effect while others, like Mozart, took a more gentle approach? We do well to note that in Vienna from the mid-18th century, the idea of "*eine schöne Leich*" ("a beautiful funeral") was very much in play. Hermann Abert, in his early biography of Mozart (1855), explains "that Mozart pictures the Lord not as a strict and implacable judge but as a lenient, albeit just and serious, God." Edward Young's poem "Night Thoughts" (1742), which was translated and widely distributed in Austria, also encouraged this view of "a good death." If one has led a life according to God's commands, what, then, is there to fear when the trumpet of God calls one to account?

If we accept that Mozart was fully aware of the implications of using the trombone to reflect a more gentle view of the judgment of God, today's musicians still need to address

other important issues of performance practice. While Mozart's manuscript clearly shows the meter of the *Tuba mirum* as cut time (2/2), the first published edition (1800) changed that to common time (4/4). This confusion led to a host of conductors leading the movement at an exceptionally slow tempo despite the Andante tempo marking. Many editions, starting with the first edition, gave some or all of the trombone solo over to a bassoon (see image on page 43), or even viola and cello, a concession to the lack of competent trombone players in many countries in the 19th century. But Mozart's trombone solo in the *Tuba mirum* is a superb example of late 18th-century Viennese writing for the instrument. Its character is consistent with Mozart's view of death, a view he shared with his father, Leopold, in a letter from 1787:

As death, when we come to consider it closely, is the true goal of our existence, I have formed during the last few years such close relations with this best and truest friend of mankind that his image is not only no longer terrifying to me, but it is indeed very soothing and consoling! And I thank my God for graciously granting me the opportunity...to learn that death is the key that unlocks the door to our happiness.

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