

## Death Becomes Them Two Magisterial Works Give Voice to the Unknown

by [Victoria Looseleaf](#)

"For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come." Ah, there's nothing like a little Shakespeare for solace, in this case a passage from a titanic soliloquy of Hamlet as a way to ponder our existence. And, like that tragic figure who is, through the entire play, an instrument rather than an agent, so is music the conduit helping us grasp life's plan, "when," as Shakespeare put it, "we have shuffled off this mortal coil."

Death, the universe's great equalizer, the final mystery that has concerned artists from time immemorial, is tonight addressed in all its enigmatic splendors. Though separated by more than a century, two profound pieces of music are knotted together on an aural continuum, beginning with their sharing of exquisitely dark, opening D-minor sonorities.

In Don Davis's *Río de Sangre Suite*, the Emmy-winning composer acclaimed for his riveting *Matrix* film scores has created a shadowy world made luminous through music. Populated by iconic figures, from doomed lovers to an lagoon-villain, this powerful one-hour work (excerpts from an in-progress opera), is a commission from the Chorale and a fitting parable for both our time and city, one boasting its first Hispanic mayor since 1872.

Kate Gale's sparkling poetic libretto tells of a fictional Latin American country in the throes of catastrophic events — an earthquake, cholera, coups, corruption — where time is ambiguous. Performed in Spanish (translated by Alicia Partnoy), and scored for full orchestra, 120 singers and five soloists, *Río* is earthy but laced with heavenly tonalities (harp and celesta), and soaring melodies that strike at the heart like an emotional blowtorch. Unfolding with a three-minute wash of bass and celli rumblings, the

prescient eighth-note runs smack of archetypal doom. Soon topped with yearning violins, this gloomy prelude is associated with Guajardo, dramatic tenor and right-hand man of bass-baritone Delacruz, the country's new leader. Unlike Wagner, though, whose ascending and descending neo-buzz-saw string motifs represent a slew of *Ring* denizens, Davis, who cites the Bayreuth boy as an influence (what contemporary opera composer doesn't?), has created this suite based more on musical considerations than dramatic ones.

Each character does, however, bring a specific scenario to the sonic table, as the composer draws from a stylistic arsenal that includes atonalities, fierce rhythms and inventive contrapuntalism. The choir, a neo-Greek chorus echoing characters' feelings and thoughts, giving voice to the unvoiceable, imparting knowledge to the unknowing, first enters mantra-like: "Pure of mind, pure of spirit, pure of mind, pure of spirit." These chantings morph into an anti-Hallmark card love duet between coloratura soprano Blanca, Delacruz's daughter, and her idealist lyric tenor boyfriend Igneo (hints of Beyoncé and Jay-Z). In "Me acuerdo bien," imagery of playful youth contrasts with the bitter truth that is today — a "country in shambles," where Blanca's brother, Miguel, goes missing and soon dies. The lovers, amped up on trilling notes of dreams and secrets, offer this vow: "I will hold your heart in my hands." Rising strings are fervid declarations of desire: "And when we have a house together, we'll plant roses" (recalling Leonard Bernstein's anthem of hope, "Make Our Garden Grow" from *Candide*). Immediately plunging into grief mode, the chorus bemoans Miguel's death, echoing the sorrows his mother, dramatic soprano Antonia, renders palpable in, "Se está muriendo." Urgently recalling her son, climaxing with high Cs, she then condemns Delacruz in passion-wrenched pianissimos. Sorrow writ large, dulcet tones briefly assuage, before *Río* wends its way to the deceitful Guajardo. Planting seeds of paranoia, he encourages Delacruz to imprison Igneo, his vocalese

erupting into a brief orchestral interlude. The choir, in take-no-prisoners forte, intones a Latin requiem for Miguel.

Pumped up from emotional helium, Part Two opens with Blanca's soul-tossed aria, "Papa, dónde estás?" A dream of her wedding dress becoming a shroud, this elegy shimmers with saudade, the raw yearnings of Portuguese blues known as fado, currently personified by marcel-haired Mariza. Antonia responds, singing of clouds and ghostly visions; Blanca, of "a great wind," the words repeated by full-throated chorus. But violence mushrooms: Igneo is assassinated; Blanca is kidnapped then killed; Guajardo colludes with Antonia, ultimately overthrowing Delacruz. Amid this yowling soundscape of unrelenting hurt and destruction — psychological, physical — with a rudderless society careening madly from power-mongering politicians, *Río* seethes in its heart-pounding, propulsive finale, the 'riot' chorus. Like Jackson Pollack drip paintings, chaotic and disseminating energy, this musical bullet is backdrop to the human, the metaphorical, the constantly flowing Rio de Sangre, river of blood, before the people, as they inevitably must, rise again perpetuating the cycle anew.

**Though decidedly French to the core — and a religious skeptic, to boot — Gabriel Fauré** (1845-1924) would appear to have little in common with Davis, whose feverish musical vision paints death viscerally, indeed, violently. With Fauré's Requiem, which opens with those similar, rooted-to-the-earth D-minor chords but ends up in a magnificent literal and spiritual paradise, the tuneful treatment approaches death transcendently. Fauré, in fact, intended his Requiem to be intimate, peaceful — adoring. He said he saw death as "a welcome deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness beyond the grave, rather than a painful experience." And so it is. In a mere thirty-seven minutes, Fauré makes real a rapturous place, one minus the booming terrors of judgment heard in the "*Dies irae*" portions of Verdi's and Berlioz's requiems.

A babe magnet, Fauré, nicknamed 'The Cat,' became choirmaster at the Madeleine in Paris in 1877. This low-paying gig at a church known for its tricked out aristocratic crowd (who ostensibly needed it more for state funerals and diplomatic receptions than worship), no doubt contributed to Fauré's jaundiced view of organized religion. Nonetheless, a decade later he began composing the Requiem, a task that would encompass three years and see the death of both parents. Changing portions of the texts in his setting, Fauré centers the sonorous work around the intimate "Pie Jesu," written for soprano solo with two groups of three movements on either side. Augmenting the standard chorus with a small orchestra of violas, cello, basses, harp, timpani and organ — the strings often doubling the organ — the "Sanctus" also soothes with a sumptuous violin solo. Most striking, however, is that Fauré, in omitting the "Dies irae" and "Benedictus" texts, added two prayers, the "Libera me" and the final movement, "In Paradisum," which both belong to the Office of the Dead. The former, a prayer for absolution, features a mesmerizing baritone solo and was originally written as a stand-alone work in 1877. This infectious tune is supplied by Fauré with its very own 'back-beat' of pizzicato basses, which seems to inspire the chorus to chime in with its own unison version of the solo line.

Finally, the filigreed floaty quality of "In Paradisum," while not flamboyant or filmic, achieves a purity and directness of expression that launches the listener into a new world, a better place, one where we can, if only for precious few moments, leave the earth and, yes, wrap ourselves in death's dream — peace, harmony and an achingly beautiful light.