Commemorating death in European artistic music

Abstract:

The commemoration of death via music needs to be discussed in two dimensions: the first one refers to (1) musical stage works such as operas and ballets where extra – musical, i.e. textual and visual factors play important role and (2) instrumental music in which death can be portrayed by means of musical tools. The strategies of presenting death in musical stage works I would like to analyze with respect to the most common pairs of tropes where death is coupled with love, honour, and sin. Death and love seems the most common topic of various operas and ballets stemming its popularity from the first Baroque operas depicting the story of Orfeo and Eurydice. The inseparable link of Thanatos and Eros in operas was often connected with murders (Verdi's Rigoletto), killings and suicides (Puccini's Tosca). Death and honour in musical stage works are often used while portraying historical events. Death symbolizes the ultimate solution and as such is reserved for the very end of the work (Erkel's Huynadi Laszlo). Death and evil is connected in musical stage works again with depiction of murders, suicides but also quite often is linked with redemption of sins (Verdi's Traviata). The allegoric versus eristic attempts to capture the moment of death in musical works will be also discussed. In the conclusion of the first section I would like to ponder on musical tools used by composers of different times in order to depict death musically, ranging from the extremely loud dynamics and tutti of the orchestra, alternatively the use of certain (harbingering death) instruments – to leaving the moment of death completely silent (Copland's Billy the Kid). The second section of my paper will be dedicated to instrumental music composed for commemorating the death. Funeral music will be presented in respect to the tradition of the funeral mass – Requiem and additionally the idea of depicting death by means of notes will be presented. In the so called doctrine of musical figures the term prosopopoeia was used to denote rhetorical personification of the deceased, e.g. in funerary oratories. Composers were often asked (also by their own pupils) to compose, for example, funeral motets. Some composers wrote their own funeral music during their life. The paper will be richly illustrated with examples form European artistic music form the period 18th – 20th century.

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