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The Musical Legacy of *Dies Irae*

Historical research has attributed the prayer and chant *Dies Irae* to Tommaso da Celano, a Franciscan monk of the 13th century. Tommaso, originally from the village of Celano (province of L'Aquila, Italy), was only a few years younger than Francesco d'Assisi and was given the charge of writing the saint's biography as well as its first revision. The chant became part of the Requiem mass and has since influenced many composers, who are probably responsible for letting it survive the liturgical changes that occurred over the years. 700 years later, we are more likely to hear the simple notes or words of the chant in daring musical pieces than in a religious setting.

For a rendition of the chant, refer to the movie *The Seventh Seal* by Ingmar Bergman. Death from the Plague is present everywhere and on everyone's mind when the funeral procession comes to the village, accompanied by the plainchant *Dies Irae*. The Day of Wrath, the last judgment when God will terrorize us for all our sins, must have been very close to people's minds when such epidemics struck. There seemed to be only one certainty: death.

The music of plainchant is generally easy to reproduce on any instrument, as it consists of simple notes to direct a human voice in prayer. The musical motif of *Dies Irae* consists

of five notes starting from C and ending with A (I believe that would make it an A minor scale). It can be played on a piano without ever moving the fingers from GABCD:

C B C A B G A A

C C D C B A G B C B A A

Adding the words may help the reader in understanding its rhythm:

Di-es I-rae Di-es Il -a

C B C A B G A A

Solvat Saeclum in fa-vil-la

C B C A B G A A

Tes-te Da--vid cum Sy--bil-la

C C-D C-B A-G B C-B A A

Being part of the Requiem mass, it is not surprising that *Dies Irae* is featured in all the major composers' repertoire: Mozart, Verdi, and Berlioz all rendered the words in orchestral grandeur (Fauré omitting them), but not the music itself. The great composers probably wanted more effect, or if they did incorporate the motif, it was lost in the myriads of notes played at the same time by hundreds of instruments. It has been shown that Stravinsky may have hidden it in his *Rite of Spring*, along with other folk songs, but never admitted it.

Franz Liszt's *Totentanz*, for piano and orchestra, consists of a set of variations on the *Dies Irae*. In his notes accompanying a 1991 recording, Bryce Morrison says:

“Liszt's *Totentanz*, in many ways the most remarkable of his seven works for the piano and orchestra, was inspired by the graphic horror of the fourteenth century fresco, *The Triumph of Death* (fig. 1) in the Campo Santo, Pisa.” (Morrison, 1991)

The coincidence is more than inspiring: not only was Liszt inspired by a medieval fresco, he used the medieval plainchant as the basis for the piece. The result is overwhelmingly reminiscent of the Day of Wrath that Tommaso wanted to tell us about.



Fig. 1: Francesco Traini, *The Triumph of Death*, 1350, fresco. Source

<http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/art/t/traini/triumphe.jpg>

It is more intriguing to discover *Dies Irae* inside the works of Rachmaninov, who was tormented with images of death all his life. He survived diphtheria from an epidemic in his childhood, but saw his sister die from it, which in a way is reminiscent of how people must have felt when the Plague took their loved ones in the Middle Ages. *Dies Irae* is

present in his first Symphony, apparently not a success, and in his very well-known *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. In his biography of Rachmaninov, J. Haylock notes “concealed references” in the *second two-piano suites*, “unmistakable references” in *Etudes-tableaux* Op. 39, and an “exorcistic outburst” in *Symphonic Dances* Op. 45 (Haylock, 1996). Understandably, *The Isle of the Dead*, composed after the painting of the same name (fig. 2), refers to *Dies Irae*, but as if he wanted to resist being obvious, the plainchant is hidden in its notes.



Fig. 2: Arnold Böcklin, *The Isle of the Dead*, 1880, oil on canvas, Kunstmuseum Basel. Source <http://cgfa.sunsite.dk>

It is interesting to follow the development of such references in a major piece like Liszt’s *Totentanz* or Rachmaninov’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. *Totentanz* is a set of variations on the *Dies Irae* theme, while Rachmaninov’s *Rhapsody* is actually a set of variations on Paganini’s *Caprice No. 24* for solo violin in which he has interspersed first a long variation on *Dies Irae*, and then suggestions of it, almost jazz-like improvisations, up to the end. Listening to the *Rhapsody* is like a game of cat and mouse where the

listener should catch the Day of Wrath as it races by and dances on the music of Paganini. The image of death must have been haunting Rachmaninov to the point where he had to play on the theme constantly.

It is possible that the theme, such simple notes, is played more often today than at any other time in the 700 years since its inception. The words have practically disappeared from the liturgy but survive in Mozart's and Verdi's Requiems. It would seem that music can act to preserve such treasures.

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