

Writing a Requiem for the Innocents

By Joseph Estorninho

I wouldn't be surprised if most people think writing a Requiem is a morbid task. After all, its associations with the dead cannot be denied. Why then, do so many composers take on the task? What is it that inspires or motivates a composer to write a Mass for the dead?

My inspiration came quite unexpectedly in January 2001. While traveling to the final rehearsal of my Epiphany Mass, I began singing to myself. It was the initial theme of the "Lacrimosa" (Tears). "This is great!" I thought, so I kept singing the bars and hurried to rehearsal, where I sketched them out on paper.

The next day, as I improvised at the piano, another idea struck me, and by day's end I had created the "Pie Jesu" (Sweet Jesus).

With these two pieces before me, it looked like I was supposed to write a Requiem. I wondered whether it was divinely inspired, praying for a sign if it was. However, when I actually thought one was given to me, I didn't see it as such. Instead, I stopped writing and began questioning my

motives. There were enough Requiems already, I thought, and with this assertion the gift of inspiration was withheld. My demons of self-doubt needed conquering before it could return.

Seeking answers

In the meantime, I sought confirmation, speaking with several friends. I needed someone to tell me that I wasn't wasting my time. Most importantly, I decided that I needed a specific reason to write the Requiem.

Late May, after much consideration, the answer came to me in the form of a question as I prayed before the Blessed Sacrament. It was simple: "Why not write a Requiem for the unborn dead?" From the vast collection of Requiems, it seemed there wasn't a single one to mourn children lost to the savagery of abortion. At last, I had a reason to write it—I was ecstatic!

I further wanted the music to help post-abortive mothers reconcile with God and be healed. I also realized that some very close

friends had suffered miscarriages. Their sense of loss, their grief, can never be fully understood by those who haven't suffered it. I realized that I was called to write a work mourning the loss of all Holy Innocents, and with that purpose, I completed the sketches in just two weeks.

Performance schedule

With the sketches completed, I thought my mountain was conquered. The question of a performance, however, proved that I had merely scaled a molehill only to stare at a veritable Everest. Caroline, now my wife, was great help. She downloaded reams of information on orchestras and choirs. She wrote and sent out hundreds of letters while I telephoned people to look at the Requiem. All that effort led to only one response. When I finally met the conductor and showed him the score, he informed me that there was no opening in the next two seasons, but possibly could book a performance in three years. It was hardly the answer I longed for.



Composer Joseph Estorninho rehearses the Requiem with the choir and orchestra.

All things considered, I nearly gave up on ever hearing the Requiem performed. Then, Anna-Marie Foley, a colleague of mine who supported the Requiem, called to say that the Bishops' Conference was planning a series of events to mourn the thirty-fifth anniversary of the British Abortion Act. She asked whether I'd like to

perform the Requiem as part of those events. I accepted immediately, even though I lacked both a choir and orchestra. But not to worry. Anna-Marie said that if I could put together a choir, she'd introduce me to a Christian orchestra willing to perform the piece.

A final consideration went to my best supporter. She is my dear

Perfecting the form

Like the soul, music is immaterial and perhaps that makes it the most spiritual art. Music moves the heart, mind, body and soul—indeed music moves the whole person. Like no other art form, music stirs us for good or for ill. Joseph Estorninho's *Requiem for the Innocents* refreshes the soul with peace.

Mr. Estorninho studied music at Melbourne University in Australia. He was acquainted with the best-known Requiems by Mozart, Verdi and Faure in addition to having studied Stravinsky's *Requiem Canticles*. Before completing sketches for the Requiem, Estorninho studied the form of Requiem more closely: he went to a record shop and bought its entire stock of Requiems, ordering more.

Estorninho found himself drawn towards the Requiems of Mozart and Faure, preferring Mozart's formality and Faure's simplicity—two elements Estorninho wanted in his Requiem. This preference stemmed, in part, from his studies under Felix Werder, a student of the second Viennese school. For those who haven't studied music, the first Viennese school produced composers like Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, et al, while the second Viennese school produced early twentieth century composers from the 1930s and 1940s like Schoenberg and Webern. Under his mentor Werder, Estorninho learned the joys and beauty of the formal approach.

mother, who, on account of living in Melbourne, had missed all of my London concerts and wanted to hear just one. Her humble request was that I have the premiere recorded. Naturally, that would benefit the performers too.

Exactly 35 years after the passage of the British Abortion Act on October 27, 2002, the *Requiem for the Innocents* premiered at St. Patrick's Church, London. The performance date was providential, but the orchestra's rehearsal had been limited to just 45 minutes. Therefore I expected nothing

to come from the initial recording.

Before I knew it, however, that recording found a wider audience. Anna played the *Innocents'* premier for Lady Salisbury, the founder of an organization called Celebration of Life, which is committed to protecting the sanctity of all human life from conception until natural death. She has been an ardent promoter of the *Requiem* ever since. In turn, she sponsored a second performance at the Methodist Central Hall in London (June 2003), where I met conduc-

tor John Harmar-Smith. With Smith's help and Lady Salisbury's support, we rerecorded *Requiem for the Innocents* at St. Alban the Martyr Church in London on Valentine's weekend 2004. Finally, three and a half years after I first sang those bars of "Lacrimosa," we launched the CD. I only hope it delights the Holy Spirit Who inspired me and I hope it brings all listeners to Him.

Joseph Estorninho is a composer who resides in London, England. His production, *Requiem for the Innocents*, is available for order online at StPauls.org.uk.

Pro-life Book Review *by Judie Brown*

St. Gianna Molla: Wife, Mother and Doctor

By Pietro Molla and Elio Guerriero

Patron saint of mothers, Patron saint of families. Indeed, both of these titles are more than appropriate for St.

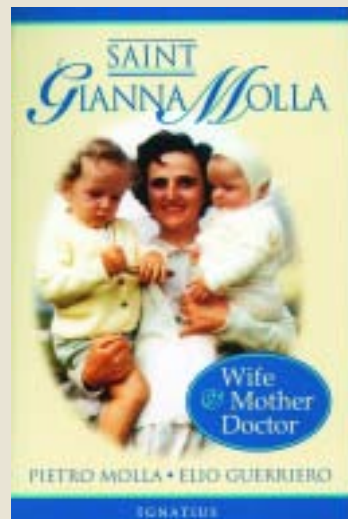
Gianna who, having the will to follow Christ and His Church, made a decision that many find difficult to stomach, let alone call pro-life. St. Gianna chose a path that eventually led to her death and the preservation of her preborn daughter. To those who cannot comprehend such self-sacrifice, I invite you to get acquainted with her in this book.

Pietro, her husband, relates in this insightful biography: "Hers is certainly a heroic testimony of maternal love. Her choice of love was extremely difficult for a mother who loved her three other children intensely and loved life itself... It was a choice that could be understood and properly valued only in the light of Gianna's firm convictions, her conscience as a mother, her unshaken trust in providence. Gianna was firmly convinced that the baby she was carrying was someone to love, to respect, and not an object about

which she might exercise her own preference."

Gianna Beretta Molla died shortly after the birth of her fourth child because she chose to forego cancer treatments that could have jeopardized her baby. Upon her death, the pain was nearly unbearable. Her husband

states, "When the mystery of pain came down on me and my children after Gianna's death and I felt myself crumble, I clung to Jesus crucified, to the certainty that Gianna lived with God in paradise." This book is filled, from the first page to the last, with inspiration, hope and the tearful journey of people who lived for Christ with all their being. Pietro reflects on St. Gianna's virtues, faith and commitment to do only that which would please Jesus Christ, noting that she was faithful unto death. In her own words, St. Gianna Molla was surely "full of the joy that comes from Jesus... He will be the strength that helps us." *St. Gianna Beretta Molla, pray for us.*



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