

**Gabriel Fauré's Requiem** (In seven gentle movements)

by Gerald Kamens

**Introït et Kyrie (Lord, Have Mercy)**

This Friday summer night, the work starts slowly. The orchestra begins, playing alone for just one measure, before the large choir, behind the musicians, softly enters the drama, requesting, in Church Latin, eternal rest and lasting light for the soul of the departed one—possibly a deceased parent or other family member, or, maybe, some long-ago king or other potentate.

I sit alone, crouched down in an end chair, in the last row of that ancient cathedral, far back from the performers. I'm not supposed to be there. Just a worn down American, clandestinely absorbing that sublime music rising from these intense, earnest Swiss men and women, mostly young, but some middle-aged or even gray-haired. They're mostly dressed in jeans and chinos, for this is a rehearsal, called the dress rehearsal in the U.S., despite the casual clothes. The scores of singers and instrumentalists are preparing for the real performance—which will take place on Monday, since rehearsals, I discovered, are not allowed in the cathedral on Saturdays and Sundays. Alas, I can't be there on Monday, as, my work in Geneva done, I return to Washington, and my family, tomorrow.

This first movement ends with the choir calling to Christ several times, first urgently, then more quietly, until, finally, there is a very soft request for mercy.

**Offertoire (Offerings)**

The choir sings “may the lasting light shine for them” and “free the souls of the departed from eternal punishment and the deep lake.” Heavy stuff.

Nobody in the building seems to care that I snuck, through a side door, into this cathedral, John Calvin's long ago church home, behind the songsters and instrumentalists, who'd arrived outside in buses, cabs, and private cars. The only other non-performers visible to me are two gray-haired women meticulously sweeping the worn stone floor behind me. Down in front, a young baritone soloist is singing, beseeching God, all in Church Latin of course, to make departed souls transcend from death to life. His singing reminds me, also a baritone, of how and why I got to this place tonight.

The choir voices again pray that the departed souls may not fall into darkness.

### **Sanctus (Holy)**

The choir gives praise in the highest to the departed one.

I suppose I'm feeling a bit sorry for myself. I can't imagine anyone giving me much praise for my labors these last four weeks, at the old League of Nations building in Geneva, a looming many decades-old attempt to attain a world peace that never came. I'm concluding my month-long stay, where I've been helping the U.S. prepare for its participation in the forthcoming "Earth Summit," the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), laboring five days a week on position papers and talking points for use by our high-level delegation to Rio de Janeiro next June. The announced purpose of said conference is "to reconcile worldwide economic development with protection of the environment." It was a painstaking task for us laborers in the Geneva vineyards, endless word smithing, punctuated with several often-combative evening forums with other countries' delegations.

A dreamy harp is heard, then the organ, the sopranos and altos joining in, singing Holy.

## **Pie Jesu (Holy Jesus)**

Again the choir asks for “eternal rest.”

I go over again in my head how I got here tonight. One of my fellow worker bees said she’d read in a Geneva paper—her French was much better than mine, that there’d be a rehearsal the next night, at some church, of a choir singing *Fauré’s Requiem*.

In years past, I’d sung in that *Requiem*, along with several others, like Brahms’ and Mozart’s, in my church choir back in Arlington. I even knew what the Latin words meant in English. I also knew that baritones were sometimes in short supply in choral groups. So, with enormous chutzpah, I figured maybe I could ask this singing group, if I, a visiting American baritone, could join their rehearsal for one night.

Once I found the “church,” I discovered it was actually an immense ancient cathedral, *Cathédrale Saint-Pierre*. Next to its locked front door, was a sign in French announcing the Monday performance of *Fauré’s Requiem*. To be performed by the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, which I’d heard was one of the world’s leading international orchestras. Mortified, I decided I had to flee the place as quickly as possible. But, at the last minute, hearing faint strains of voices inside, I changed my mind, and decided to put on a cloak of invisibility, and try to creep undetected into the building

## **Agnus Dei (Lamb of God)**

“Light eternal shine for them”

I’m often a lazy singer in choirs and other choruses, particularly if I’m not too keen on the music, where I depend, I guess, on the mass of voices to pull me through, or my relatively good sight-reading abilities, or that I’ll be standing next to someone who, whatever their vocal qualities, knows the notes better than I do. Or counts the beat better. I imagine I

don't always feel the effort put into my singing in choruses, particularly in church choirs, is worth the rewards. Sounds selfish, I know. Mea culpa!

I study the bright attentive faces of the young men and women in the choir. Not looking at all lazy, they seem about the same age, which makes me suspect they're a chorus from a local university or music conservatory—often where professional orchestras, like this one, get their choruses. At the age of nineteen, I sang, with the Penn glee club, in the chorus of Beethoven's glorious Ninth Symphony, in German, with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and, later that year, again with that Orchestra, in the chorus of a concert version of *Carmen*. But my singing career was all downhill, prestige-wise, after that.

### **Libera Me (Free Me, God)**

The baritone soloist sings alone. "Free me, Lord, from eternal death on that terrible day when the heavens will move and the earth, when you come to judge the world with fire." The choir then sings "I am trembling," followed by the very loud "day of wrath."

Earlier this week, I took part in a heated debate with representatives of Zimbabwe, India, and a few other countries. Some nations wanted to have a world goal of eradicating poverty in the next twenty-five years. Speaking for the U.S., on instruction from my bosses, I said such a goal was impossible, and unwise to promise. Afterwards, the Indian Government delegate said to me in private that he knew that goal was impossible, but that the people of his country needed to hear it. To give them hope. Or something like that. The whole discussion depressed me.

The choir ends softly, singing, "May the light always shine." Finally, the soloist and the choir again repeat, "Free me God."

### **In Paradisum (In Paradise)**

The choir sings, in concluding the *Requiem*, "May angels lead you to paradise."

I wonder, not for the first time, about the meaning of paradise—paradise for the deceased individual for whom this Requiem was composed, for the singers, and the players in the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande that night, and for me. I come to no conclusion, for, as my church going mother-in-law once told my wife, nobody really knows what happens after you die.

As I listen to the soaring words, tears suddenly fill my eyes. I realize then how emotionally parched I've been feeling these last few days in Geneva. Is this why I ended up here tonight, to be liberated by this glorious music?

Finally, the choir sings, gently, about finding “eternal rest.” It is over.

Donning again my cloak of hopeful invisibility, I hasten down a side aisle to a rear door exit, getting there before the performers. Outside, hailing a nearby cab back to my hotel room, I finish packing for my departure tomorrow, fortified by a few glasses of cheap red wine.



**Gerald Kamens** has worked in a mental hospital, the White House, the U.S. Senate, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, but spent most of his government career in the U.S. Agency for International Development, focused successively on Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and global environmental issues. He later worked for an international conflict resolution organization. In retirement, he acted and sang for six years in musicals. Now, at age ninety, he continues to provide support for people grieving the loss of a loved one and writes short adult and children's fiction and personal essays, some of which have appeared in national publications. Other than that, he and his wife, parents of four grown children, most days meditate, and play Scrabble and pool. They live in Falls Church, Virginia.