

Halley's Comment

Paul Halley's letter to the audience in the program notes for the King's at the Cathedral Series: "For All The Saints" concert featuring 'The Requiem' by Gabriel Faure.

The Chapel Choir of the University of King's College with Ensemble Regale

Cathedral of All Saints, Halifax, Nova Scotia - November 7, 2009 - 7:30 p.m.

Dear Friends,

You have probably encountered the saying that whereas our forebears in Victorian times were obsessed with death and terrified of sex, today we find ourselves obsessed with sex and terrified of death. Whether you agree with this observation or not, there is no getting away from the inevitability of death (or taxes, according to Ben Franklin). We all have to deal with it. Over the centuries the Church has confronted this problem head on and so the texts that the choir sings this evening reflect the perspective of philosophers and theologians, poets and priests, who through the ages have contemplated the mystery of life after death. As far back as the 2nd century BC, in the text sung this evening as set by William Byrd, the author of the book of Wisdom proclaims, "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die, but they are in peace." They are at rest. *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine – rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord.*

Rest seems to make most of us almost as uneasy as death. We live in a restless world and it is possible that our restlessness is a kind of yearning, a longing, for home. St. Francis, who embraced earthly suffering with alarming equanimity, writes, "And even you, most gentle death, waiting to hush our final breath, you lead back home the child of God". His predecessor, Peter Abelard, who led what might generously be called a complicated life, speaks of that home as the heavenly Jerusalem. "Now, in the meanwhile, with hearts raised on high, we for that country must yearn and must sigh, seeking Jerusalem, dear native land." So here I think can be found the theme for tonight's concert. We, yearning for home and rest are in communion with them, the saints who now rejoice in the glorious kingdom. And so we celebrate, not just the lives of those who have gone before, but our communion with all the saints, the meeting of heaven and earth. This cannot be meaningfully done in a funeral parlour, and Hallowe'en parties strike one as inadequate. A Cathedral such as this seems a more likely venue for such communion and possible glimpses of paradise. And then there's the music.

I can't imagine a more successful blending of yearning, rest and rejoicing than Fauré's setting of the Requiem. The condition of Fauré's Christian faith was and still is very much in question. But who would spend time in theological debate with such a composer when one could hear this sublime creation of his. Fauré remarked, "my Requiem is dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest." Enough said with words. Thank God, he let the music say the rest.

Thank you for coming to this evening's performance. Your presence and participation are greatly appreciated. I hope you will join in singing the hymns with good courage and experience with countless others that blest communion, that fellowship divine. Alleluia.

Yours,

Paul Halley