

# ETERNAL REST

The launch of a CD in November recalls atrocities that shook the world. British-Norwegian composer Andrew Smith talks to the Editor about his Requiem.

PHOTOS MORTEN LINDBERG



**I** was in Oslo when the bomb went off at the government buildings. I'd cycled home past the site just 20 minutes before, and then heard the blast. Later that afternoon came the reports of the shooting at Utøya, and it became evident that it was the same perpetrator who was responsible.

Andrew Smith is recalling the horrific events of 22 July 2011, when right-wing extremist Anders Breivik orchestrated a car bomb explosion in Norway's capital city, followed by the massacre of young people attending a Worker's Youth League summer camp on an island in Lake Tyri. A combination of 77 lives were lost, leaving the nation traumatised.

How people respond to grief varies. For artists, it is not uncommon to engage in an expressive outpouring through their particular medium, which in turn can be a 'proxy' expression for audiences. And so it proved for Andrew Smith. He had already been commissioned by the Nidaros Cathedral Girls' Choir in Trondheim to compose a Requiem; this

would now take on a more profound significance, not least because Smith had from the outset determined that the work would be dedicated to all innocent child victims of violence everywhere. In addition, some of the Nidaros girls knew people who had been killed, providing a direct and personal link between events and the new composition.

Smith considered supplementing selected movements of the Latin Requiem with Norwegian texts, but decided against: 'I didn't want a political message to get in the way of the musical experience, so the choice of Latin was partly to distance the music from the tragedy.' He had already replaced some of the Requiem sections with biblical excerpts about atrocities towards children – Rachel screaming at the abduction of her children by the Babylonians, and Herod's brutal infanticide after the birth of Jesus – so felt there was no need to be more specific: 'The actual texts themselves all echo the theme of loss and the anguish of parents losing their children to acts of meaningless violence.' ▶

▲ Nidaros Cathedral Girls' Choir, conducted by Anita Brevik, commissioned the Requiem. By the time it was completed, it had taken on a new and poignant significance



## NORWEGIAN REQUIEM



▲▲ Trygve Seim (saxophones) and Ståle Storløkken (organ) provide an improvised 'Greek chorus' commentary

▲ Conductor Anita Brevik with Requiem composer Andrew Smith

◀ Bearing in mind the commissioners, the 45-minute Requiem is scored for upper voices, bringing a freshness which poignantly underscores the youthful innocence that is lost. The original accompaniment was for organ and jazz trumpeter Arve Henriksen – 'a brilliant improviser' – though on the recording, due to illness, the trumpet is replaced by a keening saxophone, bending and leaning on notes and adding discord and complexity to the simple vocal parts. The change of instrument presents no difficulty, however, for the part is entirely improvised, creating commentaries on the words, acoustics and audience response in the manner of a Greek chorus. 'This means,' says Smith, 'that every performance is fresh and different. It also means that it's not linked to any one particular instrument, it can be done by any solo instrument,

so the performance can be adapted to the resources and space available. And the girls also pick up on the cues from the instrumentalists too.' The organ part is fully notated, but the organist may also improvise with the other instrument.

Smith is relaxed about giving up total control over the final result: 'A score is simply a schematic idea for the music in my mind, and I'm very open to directors taking a piece here or there and adapting it to their needs, making it their own. And I could never presume to write for an improviser like [saxophonist] Trygve Seim, to do justice to his technique and abilities. I decided to let him shape his part based on what he heard.'

The predominant tone of the Requiem is one of meditation, Smith's intention being to give space for thought and reflection. It does, however, contain various emotions that are an intrinsic part of grief. Deep anguish is to be found in *Vox in Rama*: 'Rachel's scream at the abduction of her children has an organ introduction with saxophone that builds up to the top A that the first sopranos come in on. Then I've given grating harmonies to text from the Office for the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary combined with the *Plorans ploravit* – 'She weepeth sore in the night.' Another equally important aspect of grief – sadly often suppressed in British culture – is anger. Smith cites as an example the end of the *Sanctus*, in which he has opened up the 'a' vowel in the final *Hosanna* for a big organ and saxophone improvisation over a *fortissimo* long-held choral chord: 'It's like one big, violent, angry scream – it's a fist at the meaninglessness of the atrocities.' Last, Smith refers to the Roman Catholic rite, which sees the Requiem as the deceased's passing on to new life in heaven, providing a form of consolation for those who mourn.

For choir directors who would like to perform the work with their choir, Smith suggests that, although the music itself is not difficult, it would be advantageous to bring in the improviser as early as possible, to create space for mutual collaboration: 'It takes more time to go through the process of developing a common result, but I think it's mutually beneficial in the end if the choir get to collaborate with the improviser early on in the process. I'd be quite happy for movements to be done separately too – it doesn't have to be done as an entire work.' ■

*Andrew Smith's Requiem, with the Nidaros Cathedral Girls' Choir, Ståle Storløkken (organ), Trygve Seim (saxophones), conducted by Anita Brevik, will be released on the 2L label [2L-150] in November; the score will be published by Norsk Musikforlag, available direct from [www.musikkforlagene.no](http://www.musikkforlagene.no).*