

# *Mass for the Dead*

Chamber Opera in Two Acts

Music and Libretto by Alice Shields

For 3 singers, optional Chorus,  
fixed audio media,  
and 4 optional live instruments

Duration: 65 minutes

American Composers Edition (BMI)  
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## CAST

**The Ghost** ..... Baritone

**Virgin** ..... Soprano

**Medium** ..... Mezzo-Soprano or Countertenor  
(or with recorded mezzo-soprano  
and a dancer enacting the role on stage)

**Chorus** (SSAATTBB) on recording, and/or live  
(if performed without live Chorus, dancers may be used  
to perform the actions of the Chorus)

**Narrator** (on recording) Alice Shields

## OPTIONAL INSTRUMENTS

Any or all of the following instruments may be played as indicated in the score:

- Cello
- Bassoon/Contrabassoon
- Organ/Amplified Harpsichord or Electronic Keyboard
- Percussion (1 player):
  - Vibraphone, bowed
  - 5 Crystal Glasses tuned Eb F G A B
  - Bell Tree
  - Glass Wind Chimes

## PERFORMANCE OPTIONS

Mass for the Dead can be performed in several different versions: with live instruments or without live instruments; with live chorus or without live chorus; with live Medium or with recorded Medium. Please contact Alice Shields for suitable combinations.

## **Equipment for Electronic Music Playback**

1. CD or hard disc or other fixed audio playback format
2. Professional-quality flat-response loudspeakers
3. Professional body-microphones for the singers for slight mixing of the live singer's voice with the recorded music.
4. Mixer for combining the singer's pickup mics with the recorded music.
4. A musician to read the score while running the audio equipment.

## **Description of Recorded Sound Track**

The recorded sound track runs without stop throughout the entire opera, from beginning to end.

The recorded sound track can include the Medium's recorded voice.

The recorded sound track includes recorded Chorus, which may be optionally supplemented by live Chorus.

The recorded sound track also includes recorded "instruments," which may be optionally supplemented by live instruments.

The total duration of the opera (and the recorded sound track) is 65 minutes.

## Sources for MASS FOR THE DEAD

In August, 1987, I had an experience with an eighteenth-century ghost at an old farmhouse in the Rhode Island countryside owned by the composer Vladimir Ussachevsky and his wife Elizabeth Kray. The plot of Mass for the Dead centers around this ghost and the desire of people like me to help him.

In Mass for the Dead, a medium tries to free the ghost by evoking the power of female spirits, from the Greek Artemis, Demeter and Hekate, to the Christian Mary. Eventually, the medium succeeds, and the many-faced goddess leads the ghost into the world beyond.

Throughout the opera, many of the melodies and words are from the Gregorian chants of the Requiem Mass. I based the Virgin's three arias on a medieval melody (in Catalan) from the Spanish mystery play The Death and Assumption of the Virgin (ca.1250 A.D). The melody and words of the ghost's aria are based on the baritone's aria from Monteverdi's Orfeo. I used ancient Greek for the language of the recorded Voice; some I wrote myself, and some I assembled from the writings of early Greek authors, especially Sappho, Archilochos and Aeschylus, taking a phrase here, a noun there, and combining them crudely together, creating ruins of language similar to the ruins of temples and religions. The words of the Communion scene (Scene 13) I took from the English of the King James Bible.

Mass for the Dead is meant to provide some peacefulness and solace for the audience and myself, as well as for John Kramer (d.1780), the ghost for whom I wrote it.

--- Alice Shields

## Plot Summary

Darkness. In garbled Greek and English, a voice on tape talks about a journey and vague sufferings. In the dark, someone is lighting a candelabra.

The lights rise. A séance is taking place: a group of people are chanting to try to help a ghost go from this world --which he is still haunting,-- into another reality. To this end, throughout the evening they sing the words of the Requiem Mass.

As they chant, the Medium goes into an altered state. She appears in another reality, where the Ghost is visible. He sings in incoherent emotion; the Medium silently listens. Then the Medium prays. In response to her prayer the Virgin appears, first as the goddess Artemis represented by a young girl; next as the goddess Demeter in the form of a voluptuous woman, and finally as the ancient goddess Hekate like an old woman, who then dies.

The women from the séance bathe the old woman's body and wash her hair, preparing her for burial. They carry her body to a pit which the men have dug in the center of the stage, and bury the old woman there. In revenge for their loss, the Chorus push the Medium into the grave-pit as well.

From deep in the pit, the Medium prays for the Goddess to come back to life. Her prayer is effective: out of a long dark tunnel, the Virgin appears in bright splendor. The Medium brings the Virgin and the Ghost together as bride and bridegroom, and as a wedding ceremony, serves communion to them. The Virgin then leads the Ghost to an empty doorway: they step through the doorway and vanish. A field of lilies is seen through the open doorway. Then all goes dark.

The lights rise. A séance is taking place: the group of people quietly chant their satisfaction at the Ghost's transformation into eternal life.

Darkness. In garbled Greek and English, a voice on tape talks about a journey, and vague sufferings. In the impending darkness, someone is snuffing out the candles in the candelabra one by one, ending with the last notes of the electronic music.

# MASS FOR THE DEAD

*Name of Scene: Performers:*

PROLOGUE	<i>Recorded Voice</i>	
SCENE 1 Séance	<i>Medium, Chorus</i>	7
SCENE 2 The Moonlight	<i>Ghost</i>	13
SCENE 3 Artemis	<i>Recorded Voice, Virgin</i>	16
SCENE 4 Moonlight	<i>Ghost, Medium</i>	22
SCENE 5 Demeter	<i>Recorded Voice, Virgin</i>	28
SCENE 6 The Moonlight	<i>Ghost, Medium</i>	32
SCENE 7 Hekate	<i>Recorded Voice, Virgin</i>	36
SCENE 8 Domine Jesu	<i>Medium, Chorus</i>	42
SCENE 9 Round Dance	<i>Chorus</i>	51
SCENE 10 Agnus Dei	<i>Medium</i>	54
SCENE 11 Veni Creator Spiritus	<i>Chorus</i>	58
SCENE 12 Invocation (Dance)	<i>Recording</i>	68
SCENE 13 Pulchra Es	<i>Chorus; Medium, Ghost</i>	69
SCENE 14 Possente Spirto	<i>Ghost, Virgin, Medium</i>	80
SCENE 15 Pulchra Es	<i>Chorus; Virgin</i>	98
SCENE 16 Séance	<i>Medium, Chorus</i>	107
EPILOGUE	<i>Recorded Voice</i>	110

**MASS FOR THE DEAD**  
**Prologue - Recorded Voice**

Scene 1: Seance

SCORE

*In dim light, the Medium and the Chorus sit around a seance-table, their hands outspread on the surface of the table. They sing a prayer for the dead.*

Alice Shields

$\text{♩} = 86$  *p* *slower:*

Medium  
 Re - qui - em,  
 Peace

Sopranos & Altos  
 ae - ter - - - - nam.  
 e - - - - ter - - - - - nal

Tenors & Basses  
 ae - ter - - - - nam  
 e - - - - ter - - - - - nal

Organ/  
 Tape  
*p*

5 *still slower:*

Medium  
 Do - na - e - - - - is Domi - ne.  
 Give us, O Lord,

S & A  
 et - - - - lux - per -  
 and may per - pe -

T & B  
 et - - - - lux - per -  
 and may per - pe -

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Scene 1 page 2

9

S & A

T & B

-pe - tu - a lu - ce - at e - - - is.\_\_\_\_  
 -tu - al light - shine al - way shine u - pon - you.\_\_\_\_

-pe - tu - a lu - ce - at e - - - is.\_\_\_\_  
 -tu - al light - shine al - - - ways u - pon - you.\_\_\_\_

16 *mp*

Medium

S & A

T & B

Organ/  
Tape

Te - de - cet hym - nus De - us in Si - on, et ti - bi re - de - tur vo - tum in Je - ru - sa - lem:  
 Let - us - sing a hymn O God to thee in Sion, and a vow to thee be made - in Je - ru - sa - lem:

Ex - Hear  
 Ex - Hear

*mp*

18

Medium

S & A

T & B

-au - di o - ra - ti - o - nem me - am:\_\_\_\_  
 my - pra - - - yer:\_\_\_\_

-au - di o - ra - ti - o - nem me - am:\_\_\_\_  
 my - pra - - - yer:\_\_\_\_

ad te om - nis ca - ro ve - ni - et.  
 to you all - flesh - shall - come.



Tempo Primo: Scene 1 page 3

♩ = 86

20

Medium

*p* Re - quiem.  
Peace.

S & A

*p* Re - quiem,  
Peace,

*p* Ae - - - ter - - - nam.  
*p* e - - - ter - - - nal.

T & B

*p* Re - quiem,  
Peace,

*p* Ae - - - ter - - - nam.  
*p* e - - - ter - - - nal.

Organ/  
Tape

24

Medium

Do - na - e - is, Do mi - ne,  
Give to us, O God.

S & A

*p* et lux per-pe -  
and light per-pe -

T & B

*p* et lux per-pe -  
and light per-pe -

Organ/  
Tape

*p* *mp*

28

S & A

-tu - a lu - ce - at e - - - - is.  
-tu - al shine up - on you.

T & B

-tu - a lu - ce - at e - - - - is.  
-tu - al shine up - on you.

Scene 1 page 4

35 *mp*

Medium  
 Te — de — cet — hymnus De — us in Si — on,  
 Let us sing a hymn to you O God in Si — on,

S & A  
 et ti — bi re — de — tur vo — tum  
 and a vow to thee be made

T & B  
 et ti — bi re — de — tur vo — tum  
 et ti — bi re — de — tur vo — tum

Organ/  
 Tape

*mp* *mp*

39 *mp*

Medium  
 Ex — au — di o — ra — ti — o — nem me — am,  
 Hear my pra-yer:

S & A  
 in Je — ru — sa — lem,  
 in Je — ru — sa — lem,

T & B  
 in Je — ru — sa — lem,  
 in Je — ru — sa — lem,

44 *mp* *p* slower:

Medium  
 ad te om-nis ca - ro ve - ni - et. Re - quiem,  
 to you all flesh shall come. Peace,

S & A  
 Re - quiem,  
 Peace,

T & B  
 Re - quiem,  
 Peace,

Organ/  
 Tape

*mp* *p*