

## **JUDGE SMITH**

(b. July 1<sup>st</sup> 1948 in Whitehaven, Cumbria - England)

### **Requiem Mass**

First performance, July 12<sup>th</sup> 2025 at Holy Sepulchre Church, Holborn Viaduct - London

Alastair Brookshaw, tenor

members of London Orchestra da Camera

James Pursey and Jon Bishop, guitars

Daffyd Lewis, bass

Chris Maitland, drums

Hertfordshire Chorus

David Temple, conductor

Chris Judge Smith (known simply as Judge Smith for the past five odd decades) was a founding member of the British underground band Van der Graaf Generator together with Peter Hammill in 1967. It was in fact he who provided the band with a name. His tenure with the group, however, was relatively short. In 1969 he formed Heebalob, whose line-up included Van der Graaf's future saxophonist David Jackson.

Without any formal training in music, Judge Smith has forged a unique musical path combined with his earnest research of the spiritual aspects of human existence. This interest has often permeated his musical work. As a performer he began playing drums and percussion for Van der Graaf Generator. Otherwise, he is best known as a singer of his own music. He plays the euphonium in some early demo recordings, but it is not quite clear where and how he learned to play the instrument. There is also an early picture of him playing the trumpet. His uncle was a trumpet player.

In the 1970s and 80s he wrote a number of stage musicals in cooperation with Maxwell Hutchinson and Lene Lovich as well as a chamber opera. In 1974 he directed a short film called "The Brass Band", which received several prizes. Smith has also written librettos for classical composers Michael Brand and Joseph Horowitz as well as for Peter Hammill's opera "The Fall of the House of Usher" based on the E. A. Poe short story. In 2007 he wrote the text for David Jackson's large-scale children's musical "Twinkle". Some of his songs were featured in the highly successful comedy program "Not the Nine O'Clock News".

In 1991 he was persuaded to release a number of vintage demo recordings of several of his old songs in the long-since unavailable album "Democracy". His proper recording career, however, began with the 1993 song album "Dome of Discovery". Since then, he has produced fourteen more full-length albums, two DVDs (one of them live) and a two-song EP. The albums include songs, music for massage and healing therapy, experimental music, spoken word with music and the Requiem Mass. They each undertake a wholly different approach to recording and music making, while retaining an unmistakable musical voice. Among Smith's recordings his four "songstories" deserve special mention. His experiences with music theatre and opera left Smith dissatisfied and he began searching for an alternative way to create a form of musical narration that fit his needs. The result was the aforementioned Songstory, a new genre of Smith's invention. The narrative is undertaken by the singers, who sing to the listener rather than to each other, recalling the practices of ancient Greek theatre. In order to fit the prose-like text, the music is generally through-composed, eschewing the usual mores of popular song. Smith writes:

"The Songstory is essentially told or sung by one voice, who 'speaks to the camera'. There can be other voices, but they also address the listener directly. Dialogue is avoided wherever possible. The text is unrhymed and not metrical; but an exception is made for songs that are performed, as songs, as part of the story (for example, a record might be heard playing on the radio, or characters in the story might perform a folk song, and so on)."

<https://www.judge-smith.com/wp/songstory/>

To this day Judge Smith has written and recorded four vastly different songstories: the two-and-a-half hours long “Curly’s Airships” about the 1930 R.101 airship disaster, the 35 minutes-long “The Climber” for men’s choir, the 70 minute-long “Orfeus”, based on the Orpheus myth and the twenty minute-long “The Overstayer” for two singers, organ and saxophones.

Judge Smith is also the author of a book on spirituality called “The Universe is Made of Voices” (its title taken from the text of “The Climber”). The book is an exposition of the considerable research he has conducted on the subject since his youth.

Judge Smith is a unique voice in the world of popular music. With a truly remarkable melodic gift and a knack for harmonic progressions that are as unusual as they are logical and memorable, he could have become a major name in music but his reluctance to compromise and his desire to always renew himself and to change his approach has made him difficult to pigeonhole and market to a large audience. He does, however, enjoy a considerable world-wide cult audience. At first this came as a byproduct of his association with Van der Graaf Generator and Peter Hammill, for which he remains grateful. In later years the same fan base has come to realize that Judge Smith is far more than a mere footnote to the VdGG story and he is recognized as a musical force to be reckoned with.

Judge Smith’s **Requiem Mass** has a convoluted history. It had to go through many trials and a very long period of hibernation before it would see the light of day. Back in the middle 1970s, Judge had just left Scientology, disenchanted by the organization after a few years in it. All the same, he had gained a sense that there was more to life than the physical here and now. He was also developing an interest in large-scale compositions. In the second half of the 1970s and the beginning of the 80s he would explore this avenue with his chamber opera “The Book of Hours”, the three Hutchinson/Smith musicals for which he wrote the librettos and “Mata Hari”, written with Lene Lovich and les Chappell. The Songstory, as an approach to musical storytelling, still lay faraway in the future. In the meantime, Judge found that the text for the Mass of the Dead gave him the possibility of writing a long, dramatic piece. In his estimation, the text of the Dies Irae was “pure Rock’n’roll”. Furthermore, it was all in Latin, which gave it an extra layer of mystique. He soon settled for the ensemble that would accompany the large SATB choir and male soloist: a four-piece Rock band, a brass octet and an orchestral percussionist. There was one problem, though: Judge was an untrained musician, unable to play either guitar or keyboard. He could hear the music in great detail in his head but lacked the means to write it down or the technology to make even the most basic demos of his ideas. As all Rock musicians in that predicament at the time, he sought the assistance of a classically trained musician. He had become friends with Michael Brand, a composer and arranger working, at the time, mostly in wind and brass music. He owned a publishing company with his father Geoffrey Brand. Smith and Brand Jr. made a deal: Brand’s company would publish Judge’s music; in place of advance royalties, Michael Brand offered to transcribe Smith’s Requiem. A long process began whereby Judge would meet Brand, armed with a three-stringed guitar tuned to a triad. Judge would slide his finger up and down the fretboard to show the chords. Otherwise, he would sing all the melodies and other important moving parts to Brand and tap the rhythms on his thighs. After several sessions a pencil score materialized. The completion date in the score’s final page reads “November 1975”.

That was that as far as the composition was concerned. One of Judge’s many short-term bands, The Imperial Storm Band, recorded a demo of the Dies Irae movement in 1977 and played it live several times. At one point Judge was offered a performance of the Requiem, provided he dedicated it to a recently deceased political activist. Judge declined, as he did not want his work to be associated with any faction, political or otherwise. At another time, one particular character took steps toward arranging the work’s premiere. However, said character was shortly after sent to jail. Then, in the early 1980s Andrew Lloyd Webber’s own Requiem appeared, its Pie Jesu segment becoming a global hit. This made any interest in Judge’s Requiem unlikely and marked what appeared to be the end of the road for it.

I had been aware of Chris Judge Smith as an associate of Van der Graaf Generator and Peter Hammill since my mid-teens. Hammill had recorded several of Smith’s songs. My first encounter with Judge

Smith as an independent creative force came in the year 2000 through the publication of his first Songstory “Curly’s Airships”. I met him briefly in May 2005 backstage after the VdGG reunion concert at the Royal Festival Hall. Two years later David Jackson put us in contact in connection with the Songstory “The Climber” (mph 4459). In late 2008 I asked Judge to send me the score of his Requiem Mass, having seen it listed on his website under “Large Scale Works, as yet unperformed”. I soon transcribed it to a music notation program. In May 2009, in connection with the first performance and recording of “The Climber”, we spent two weeks together in Bergen going over the score of the Requiem. Aside from the Dies Irae, Judge had never heard any of it and, although the MIDI “performances” afforded by the digital program were robotic and unmusical, it was an emotional experience for the composer. We worked on the score until both of us were satisfied that it would provide the basis for a faithful performance. I produced a set of parts based on the final score. After this, the material lay dormant a further five and a half years until Judge finally gathered the necessary funds to get the piece recorded. The CD was released in 2016 after which nine more years were to pass before the work’s world premiere in London in July 2025, nearly 50 years after its completion. Michael Brand was present as was I and many other people from several countries and several of Judge Smith’s illustrious associates.

Judge Smith’s **Requiem Mass** closely follows the sequence of the Mass of the Dead. Like other composers, Smith excluded certain sections of the text while preserving its liturgical essence. **Requiem Mass** is structured in nine movements of which the fourth, Dies Irae, is the longest, most dramatic and complex. The work is brimming with memorable melodies and has a remarkably upbeat feel to it, even in the more serious or tender sections. As in all of his work, Judge keeps, throughout, a strong hold on the dramaturgy of the music as well as on its emotional impact. He achieves variety and tension by shifting tonal centres and changing tempos, allowing each section of the music to shine in the context of the work’s unfolding.

“Introit” begins ominously with a pounding timpani soon joined by the Rock band, preparing a series of ascending phrases from the choir. A sudden increase of tempo signals the imminent arrival of the cheerful and exultant middle section, in which the soloist and chorus share the ‘Te decet hymnus Deus’ text. It occupies most of the movement, creating a state of euphoria before briefly returning to the taciturn music of the beginning.

The brief “Kyrie” is built on descending figures, as a direct contrast to the rising motifs of the “Introit”. It sustains itself on nervous energy, provided by the short interjections of the trumpets. The Gregorian Dies Irae melody makes an appearance toward the end, played by the four trombones in unison.

“Tract” is one of Judge Smith’s loveliest creations. It is built on a 16-bar-long descending bass line repeated four times, in the manner of a cantus firmus. The gentle arpeggiations of the guitar set the calm and introspective mood of the movement, while the vocal soloist and choir pray for the salvation of the faithful departed. The instrumentation becomes denser for each verse, while maintaining the contemplative, devotional character of the music.

“Dies Irae” is the work’s centrepiece. It is a complex tapestry of striking motifs that are set alongside one another in a mosaic-like construction. These include:

- The opening trumpet fanfares
- The shuffle-like rhythm of the Rock band (mm. 8-11)
- The ponderous melody of the choir (mm. 51-59 and following)
- The 5/4 choral interjection (mm. 89-92)
- The antiphonal duple-metre 8-bar motif shared by the trumpets (mm. 102-109)
- The rhythmically symmetrical trombone fanfare (mm. 135-138)
- The new antiphonal trumpet figure (mm. 138-146)

The last-mentioned plays together with an electric guitar and bass ostinato

The movement has a semblance of sonata form. It is a masterful composition, both where it concerns the coherent use of the material within a balanced form and its dramatic, emotional impact. It manages to accommodate an electric guitar solo, a vocal solo (the “tuba mirum” section) - where the notes of the melody deliciously clash against the harmonies - and an Orff-like coda of exhilarating power.

“Offertory” is a characteristic Judge Smith instrumental chimera that works perfectly against all odds: the soloist and male choir sing gravely in the style of a Russian Orthodox chorus while the band provides a Bo Diddley-like accompaniment.

“Sanctus” begins with an elfin, cheerful melody with shifting time signatures on the solo acoustic guitar, soon joined by the trumpets. This is set off by a short, earnest fanfare from the Rock band. This conversational style spills over to the main “Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth” section. It is now a three-way dialogue between the soloist, the choir and the orchestra. The opening music eventually returns, with the drums now providing a steady pulse underneath the metrical vagaries of the melody. The extended, closing “Hosanna in Excelsis” sequence has a dignified and resolute character. It incorporates the vocal soloist (“benedictus qui venit in nomine domini”), a short guitar solo and a memorable brass hook (mm. 88-91).

“Agnus Dei” opens with a slow march rhythm played by the drums. The solo vocal melody that follows displays a stately, mildly exalted charm. In the repeated “sempiternam” the notes of the melody again delightfully clash against the basic harmonies. In the second verse the choir takes over the “sempiternam” mantra while the soloist soars above the music. This final section has an air of celebration not far removed from the middle section of the Introit, albeit in a more collected manner.

“Communion” returns to the somewhat somber atmosphere of the work’s beginning, reiterating the Introit’s opening material and bringing back the earlier mentioned symmetrical fanfares from the Dies Irae in a slower tempo and a more subdued dynamic. The brief movement ends, somewhat unsettlingly in 5/4 metre, with the members of the choir clapping on the third beat of every bar.

The final “Amen” concludes the work with purpose. While the rhythmic insistence of the ubiquitous guitar and bass ostinato gives the music a sense of relentless forward motion, the obstinately minor mode and the somewhat stern but sweeping melody remind us that, for all the positivity that emanates from this Requiem Mass we are, after all, dealing with the absence of the sadly departed.

Judge Smith's Requiem Mass is an outstanding work in many respects. While adhering, mostly, to Rock aesthetics, it defers to the liturgical structure of the Mass of the Dead. The harmonic vocabulary is, with very few exceptions, limited to major and minor harmonies. With this in mind, it is remarkable how Smith achieves tension and variety, mostly by juxtaposing tonal centres and by setting the harmonies against each other in ways that are poetic and seldom predictable. He does, however, not shy away from joyful repetition once a solid idea has been established. The use of unaccompanied melody and block harmonies (i.e. without a third) is another aspect of the tonal palette in a work where the melodic invention is delightful throughout. As mentioned above, subtle tension occurs when the notes of the melodies clash against the harmonies. A close analysis of the composition reveals a tightly organized array of keys that give it a sturdy inner cohesion. The opening note of the work (B natural) acts as the Dominant of the final chord (E minor), thus creating a phenomenological arch that encompasses the work from beginning to end. Even in the context of Judge Smith’s consistently admirable output, the Requiem Mass stands out as one of his finest achievements also sitting remarkably well alongside the canon. This is an opinion shared by Michael Brand, the work's original "midwife" and David Temple, who conducted the work's recording and world premiere.

### **About the edition**

The original score of Judge Smith’s Requiem Mass has some dynamic and articulation indications. Informed by the work’s premiere performance, the present edition has done away with most of them. The nature of the orchestration – which includes amplified instruments (the Rock band) and acoustic

ones (brass octet and percussion) as well as a choir – will dictate the balancing of sound in public performance. The Rock musicians are left to interpret their parts in accordance to the genre's mores. Where it concerns the brass and choir, the approach to dynamic notation is similar to Baroque music: when nothing is written it is assumed that it is to be played or sung "forte". This does not necessarily mean "loud" but, rather, a natural, open and unforced sound. In certain places "dolce" or "poco forte" have been used as a general direction of intent. Otherwise, the musicians and conductor are encouraged to interpret the music in a lively and honest manner.

Ricardo Odriozola, October 25th 2025