

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Composer

(Le Roncole, Italy, 1813 — Milan, 1901)

REQUIEM MASS, IN MEMORY OF ALESSANDRO MANZONI

Composed: 1873-1874

Premiered: May 22, 1874 in Milan, conducted by the composer

Duration: ca. 84 minutes

Scoring: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, four bassoons, four horns, four orchestral trumpets and four additional off-stage trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

Overview

Verdi was, above all, a patriot. From his earliest years, he was an ardent supporter of the *Risorgimento* — the “resurgence” of ancient national pride — to free Italy from foreign domination and unify it under a single, native rule. Though he never personally manned the barricades, he became, through his music, one of the most illustrious embodiments of the Italian national spirit.

Almost all of Verdi’s early operas ran afoul of the censors because of the political implications of their plots. In 19th-century Europe, no one doubted that music and drama could inspire strong emotions and, perhaps, even action. The political arbiters were ever wary about allowing ideas of insurrection or royal fallibility to escape from the stage into the public consciousness. One such idea that did slip through their suspicious examination, however, was contained in Verdi’s *Nabucco* of 1842. The chorus of longing for their lost homeland sung in that opera by the Israelites captive in Babylon, *Va, pensiero, sull’ali dorate* (“*Fly, thoughts, on wings of gold*”), was quickly adopted by the *Risorgimento* as an anthem of struggle for Italy’s freedom. So great and enduring was the fame of this lovely music that it was sung by the crowds that lined the streets for Verdi’s funeral procession almost six decades later.

During the insurrections of 1848, the name VERDI became a rallying cry for the nationalists, and was scrawled across walls and carried on signs. Beside being a tribute to their beloved composer, the letters of his name were also an acrostic for “Vittorio *E*manuele, *R*e *d’*Italia,” the Duke of Savoy whom the nationalists were fighting to bring to power as “King of Italy.” When Cavour called the first parliamentary session of the newly united Italy in 1859, Verdi was elected as the representative from Busseto. Though reluctant to enter the political arena, he was sufficiently patriotic and cognizant of his standing with his countrymen to accept the nomination. With his love of country and constant efforts to promote Italian culture, Verdi viewed the death of Rossini in Paris on November 13, 1868 as a national tragedy. He wrote to the Countess Maffei, “A great name has disappeared from the world! His was the most vast and most popular reputation of our time and he was a glory of Italy.” Verdi felt that a musical memorial should be erected to Rossini — not as a religious expedient to usher his soul into heaven, or as an expression of personal grief (the two were never close friends), but rather as an act of patriotism. One of the great Italians was gone, and Verdi believed the nation should properly mourn his passing.

Verdi proposed the composition of a composite Requiem Mass for Rossini to which the leading Italian composers would contribute. (“No foreign hands!” he insisted.) The performance was to take place on the first anniversary of Rossini’s death. Following Verdi’s instructions, the composers were chosen by lot by the publisher Giulio Ricordi, and each was assigned a section of the work. The closing *Libera me* fell to Verdi. However, preparations for the Rossini Mass foundered on Verdi’s proposal that all those involved offer their services free of charge. The twelve other composers agreed to this, and the Mass was actually written, but the performers could not be secured. The project was cancelled, and the manuscripts were returned to their composers, whose reputations faded along with the prospects for the memorial Mass — Platania, Mabellini and Cagnoni, for example, are unknown today even in Italy. (The scores for this *Messa per Rossini* were discovered in Ricordi’s archives in 1970 by musicologist David Rosen during his research in preparing the complete edition of Verdi’s works. A performance of the work, its first ever, took place in Stuttgart on September 11, 1988 under the direction of Helmut Rilling; the New York Philharmonic gave the American premiere on October 12, 1989. A recording is available on the German label Hänssler Classic.) Verdi’s *Libera me* was filed away and forgotten, as were the plans for the Rossini Requiem.

In 1871, Alberto Mazzucato, a friend of Verdi and a composition teacher at the Milan Conservatory, discovered the *Libera me* manuscript in Ricordi’s vaults. He was enraptured with its beauty, and wrote to its creator urging him to complete the entire work. Verdi responded, “Your words nearly prompted me to compose the whole Mass at some later date.... Think what a disastrous result your praise could have had! But have no fear; this is only a temptation, which, like so many others, will pass.” He continued that to add yet another Requiem to the “many, many” that existed was “useless.” Soon, however, he was to find a use for such a work, and give in to the temptation to take up his *Libera me* once again.

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Alessandro Manzoni was one of the dominant figures of 19th-century Italy. His poems, plays and novels spoke directly to the Italian soul as it quested for freedom and national identity. His most famous work was the novel *I promessi sposi* (“*The Betrothed*”), which was considered not only the greatest Italian prose piece of the time, but also, as William Weaver noted, “a kind of stylebook for the country, which ... was linguistically chaotic.” Manzoni accomplished for Italy with this book what Luther’s translation of the Bible had done three centuries before for Germany — brought a standardized language to a country factionalized by innumerable dialects. Verdi venerated Manzoni. He often referred to him as “a saint” and his letters show boundless admiration for the great writer. Of *I promessi sposi* he said, “In my opinion he has written a book which is not only the greatest product of our times, but also one of the finest in all ages which has issued from the human mind. And, more than being just a book, it is a comfort to humanity as well.... My enthusiasm for this work is undiminished; nay, it has increased with my understanding of humanity; for this book is true, as true as ‘truth’ itself.” After the two first met in 1868, Verdi wrote, “What can I tell you of Manzoni? How express the new, inexplicable, happy feeling which the sacred presence of this man aroused in me? I would have knelt before him if men worshipped men.”

Manzoni died at the age of 87 on May 22, 1873. Verdi was stricken with grief. A few days after

receiving the news he wrote, “With him ends the most pure, the most sacred, the highest of our glories. I have read many of the newspapers, and not one of them speaks of him as he should be spoken of. Many words, but none of them profoundly felt.” Verdi could not bring himself to attend the funeral. While thousands of mourning Milanese poured into the streets of the city to witness Manzoni’s funeral procession, Verdi stayed at his home, Sant’ Agata, too distraught to leave until he found the strength to make a private visit to the graveside on June 3rd. As he had been five years earlier with the passing of Rossini, Verdi was again inspired to commemorate the death of a great Italian with a memorial Mass. He sent his proposal to compose a Requiem in honor of Manzoni to the mayor of Milan, and it was eagerly accepted. When the mayor expressed his appreciation, Verdi replied, “You owe me no thanks for my offer to write a Requiem Mass for the anniversary of Manzoni’s death. It is an impulse, or I might better say, a need of my heart which impels me to honor, as far as I can, this Great Man whom I so respected as a writer, and have revered as a man, a model of virtue and of patriotism.”

Verdi scheduled the Requiem’s premiere for the first anniversary of Manzoni’s death, and began the score immediately. Remembering his earlier experience with the Rossini Requiem, however, he decided this time to control the entire project himself — composition, preparations and performance. He revived the *Libera me* for inclusion in the Manzoni Requiem, but newly composed the rest. As the work proceeded, he arranged for performers, printing and publicity, and even made acoustical tests to determine the most suitable of Milan’s churches for the premiere. The work was finished on April 10, 1874, and the first performance six weeks later in San Marco Cathedral was a complete success.

While he had undertaken the Requiem as an act of homage and patriotism, Verdi managed the venture as he did his operas — in a professional, commercial manner. Long before the success of the premiere, he planned three subsequent performances at La Scala in anticipation of the desire to hear the new work. (He knew his audience. Amid the thunderous applause at the end of the first La Scala performance, he was presented with an elegant silver crown on a velvet cushion.) The Requiem was in such demand throughout Italy that Verdi instructed Ricordi to invoke the law, if necessary, to prevent unauthorized performances, such as those which took place in Ferrara with a brass band as accompaniment, and in Bologna, with only four pianos.

Verdi carefully organized the tour that took the Requiem to the capitals of Europe following its initial Milan performances. He conducted seven performances at the Opéra-Comique in Paris in 1874, and eight more the following year, when he was made a Commander of the Legion of Honor. The London premiere was such a special event that the impresario there engaged a chorus of 1,200 to sing in the Albert Hall. The audiences in Vienna packed the auditorium for four performances, undaunted by stifling temperatures caused by a fierce June heat wave. Verdi, like Rossini and Manzoni, had become an Italian hero.

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Much ink has been spilled over Verdi’s mixing church and theater in the Requiem. The work’s popularity was undoubtedly a contributing factor in the issuance of Pope Pius X’s 1903 encyclical *Motu proprio*, which forbade for Church use all works which departed from the Gregorian-Palestrina ethic of detached emotional expression. In truth, Verdi never intended the Requiem as a liturgical work, and, except for the gesture of the premiere, always produced it in a

concert hall or an opera house.

The Requiem is not a religious testament — it is a work of humanism and patriotism. Verdi had long since left the Church, and was an agnostic in his beliefs, as William Weaver pointed out in the *Verdi Companion*. “Verdi himself was not a practicing Catholic,” Weaver wrote. “He would drive his wife to church but not accompany her inside. Like most *Risorgimento* figures he was an anticleric in that he opposed the organization of the Church, its financial and political power, and its priesthood. Of the love of God or even the existence of God he was, in his wife’s words, ‘a very doubtful believer,’ and his Requiem reflects this. There is no sunny amen, no vision of a kind God or promise of divine intercession — only dwindling power and continued uncertainty. Such apparently was Verdi’s belief even in youth, and at the time of the Requiem it also reflected the increasing uncertainty felt by many as the doctrines of Darwin and the new sciences began to shake traditional beliefs. Thus the ancient text received a new, modern interpretation by an artist being true to himself and his time.”

Verdi’s Requiem is no more religious than are the great Masses of Beethoven, Brahms, Berlioz and Britten. Like them, it used the traditional texts as the foundation for a grand, public statement for a particular occasion or to express its creator’s philosophy. Verdi could not have responded to the text in any but his characteristic, theatrical style. Donald Tovey observed, “The ideals of church music realized by Palestrina 300 years before him were never more absent from the European consciousness than in 1873, and nowhere more forgotten or tardily recovered than in Italy. To expect Verdi to produce anything like ecclesiastical music would be humanly absurd. It ill becomes us to dogmatize as to the limits of divine patience; but we may be very sure that Verdi’s Requiem stands before the throne at no disadvantage from its theatrical style.... The language of the theatre was Verdi’s only musical idiom.” To which may be added the words of the composer’s wife, Giuseppina: “A man like Verdi must write like Verdi, that is, according to his own feeling and interpretation of the text. The religious spirit and the way in which it is given expression must bear the stamp of its period and its author’s personality.”

Verdi poured the same drama and passion into the Requiem that mark his greatest operas. He seized with particular gusto those verses which allowed graphic musical settings. (For this reason, he chose to make the *Dies irae* the centerpiece of the entire work.) The beautiful, sometimes almost sensuous, writing for the soloists, the brilliant and original orchestral scoring and the resounding and widely varied choral styles are inseparable from his experience as a theater composer. The Requiem is not music for quiet, meditative contemplation. It is music to stir the spirit and move the heart.

What To Listen For

Verdi’s Requiem is in seven large movements, based on the text. Throughout, the ancient words are illuminated and enriched by the composer’s broad strokes and subtle touches, which are best perceived by following the text as the piece unfolds around them.

Tovey thought that the opening *Requiem aeternam* (“*Eternal rest*”) was “the most moving passage in all Verdi’s works.” The initial gesture, in the cellos, comes as if from a great distance and establishes the grave solemnity of the movement. The chorus intones a sweet, pathetic

invocation for departed souls which leads directly into the *Kyrie eleison* (“*Lord have mercy*”), a broad, flowing prayer for divine compassion.

The *Dies irae* is perhaps the most graphic and dramatic of all liturgical texts. It paints the awe-inspiring “*Day of Wrath*” when the world will stand in judgment. Verdi rose to the challenge of these words with music “full of things terrifying and at the same time moving and pathetic,” wrote the critic Filippo Filippi following the premiere. This movement, which occupies fully one-third of the Requiem’s length, is divided into nearly a dozen successive scenes, which cover a range of musical moods and technical devices far beyond the scope of these notes to discuss. Just a few examples in the opening pages must suffice: the shattering hammerblows and the tumultuous terror of the beginning; the approaching summons of the trump’s last call (*Tuba mirum* — “*Trumpet wondrous*”); the breathless fear of the bass soloist standing aghast at the resurrection of dead souls (*Mors stupebit* — “*Death stupefying*”). Such evocatively expressive depictions abound in the *Dies irae*. It is one of the 19th-century’s most magnificent musical panoramas.

The *Offertorio* (*Domine Jesu Christe* — “*Lord Jesus Christ*”) which follows comes like a halcyon spring breeze after the winter’s blast. Its gently swaying rhythm and huge melodic arches bear to celestial reaches the supplicant’s entreaty for the deliverance of the departed from the pains of hell. Its contrasting center section (*Quam olim* — *Hostias* — *Quam olim* repeated) is followed by a brief return of the gentle opening music, giving the movement a symmetrical structure.

The *Sanctus* (“*Holy, Holy, Holy*”) begins with a joyous shout. Verdi then launches a bracing fugue on two subjects for divided chorus, which is followed by an antiphonal setting (i.e., choruses in alternation) of the *Hosanna*. Embedded in the propulsive rhythmic vibrancy and elaborate textures of this movement is more than a hint of pedantry, as if Verdi were showing his critics that he was no “mere” opera composer, incapable of writing counterpoint. He knew his craft — thoroughly — and here he put some of its most learned techniques on display. In the same spirit, one afternoon shortly before he began the Requiem, he had some free time, and dashed off a string quartet just to prove that he was no stranger to the Germanic styles of composition.

Agnus Dei (“*Lamb of God*”), the shortest movement of the Requiem, is also the simplest. Plain in texture and introspective in expression, it is dominated by the voices with only the most sparse orchestral accompaniment. The *Lux aeterna* (“*Light eternal*”) is memorable for some of the most ethereal, translucent orchestral scoring in all of Verdi’s works.

The concluding *Libera me* (“*Deliver me*”) is the remnant of the earlier Requiem for Rossini. In the Manzoni Requiem, the movement consists of several sections: an introductory verse for soprano soloist that rises from a freely chanted beginning; a recall of the tempestuous *Dies irae* movement; a reminiscence of the opening *Requiem aeternam* in a breathtakingly beautiful setting for unaccompanied chorus and soprano; and a fugue which concludes with the quiet, resigned chanting that opened the movement. It is now thought that the fugue and the opening chant were the only music originally written for the earlier Mass, and that the *Dies irae* and *Requiem aeternam* reminiscences were inserted when the work was newly composed for the Manzoni

commemoration.

The Verdi Requiem is one of music's greatest masterpieces, providing artistic, emotional and spiritual sustenance whenever it is performed. No amount of discussion or analysis could exhaust its content, and yet any comments on it seem almost unnecessary — the Requiem speaks eloquently for itself and its composer. Perhaps it is most prudent to agree with Johannes Brahms, a curmudgeonly soul disinclined to compliments, who honored his Italian colleague when he said, simply, "Verdi's Requiem is a work of genius."

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