

Messa da Requiem

Giuseppe Verdi
1813-1901

One of the great spiritual leaders of the Italian Risorgimento (the movement for the unification of Italy in the nineteenth century) was the novelist, poet and dramatist Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873). Manzoni's best-known work, the historical novel *I promessi sposi* (The Betrothed) ranks with Dante and Petrarch on the list of required reading for every Italian student. Written in the modern Tuscan dialect, it paved the way for Tuscan to become the official language of unified Italy. Verdi, an ardent nationalist, revered Manzoni – so much so that he passed up his first opportunity to meet him out of shyness. When the two men did finally meet, Verdi reacted to the event as if he had come into the presence of a saint, writing later: “I would have knelt before him if it were possible to worship mortal men.”

Although Verdi had been unable to attend Manzoni's funeral in 1873, he made a pilgrimage to the great man's grave a few days later, and immediately offered to write a Requiem Mass in Manzoni's memory to be premiered in Milan on the first anniversary of his death.

But not all the *Requiem* was new. On Rossini's death in 1868, Verdi had suggested that Italy's foremost composers collaborate on a Requiem Mass, each composer contributing a section, to be performed on the first anniversary of the composer's death. The project came to naught, but Verdi had already composed the “*Libera me*,” which ended up – with significant revisions – six years later as the closing section of the *Requiem* honoring Manzoni.

Verdi's monumental work belongs to a special category of religious music in which the dramatic far outweighs the liturgical considerations and includes the requiem masses of Mozart and Berlioz, as well as the ordinary Masses of Beethoven, Cherubini and even to some degree J. S. Bach. Verdi's entire musical vocabulary was operatic; even his String Quartet abounds with musical allusions to his later operas, *Don Carlos* and *La forza del destino*. It comes as no surprise, then, that until Vatican II (1962-1965), this and other orchestrated dramatic settings of the liturgy were banned in Church and strictly relegated to the concert hall.

Known to be openly anti-religious and believed by many to be an atheist, Verdi set the Requiem Mass in a manner that raised eyebrows even among his contemporaries. But it is clear that with his impeccable dramatist's instincts, the composer saw the Requiem as an intense drama of the soul. There are three kinds of music in the *Requiem*: the music of fear and damnation; the music of ritual; and the music of contrition. This last is the domain of the quartet of soloists, who both separately and in ensemble, send up their prayers as gloriously beautiful – even sensuous – melodies. However evocative the texts may be, they are still timeless formulas: it is the music that constitutes the language in which the individual soul communes with God. The chorus takes the role of congregation, and something like a Greek chorus, reflecting and intensifying the soloists' drama. Verdi was at the height of his powers and had spent a lifetime setting to music the most intense human passions. It is the culmination of this experience that drives his *Requiem*.

Although the Catholic Mass for the dead begins with a prayer for the peaceful repose of the deceased, it centers around the sequence “*Dies irae*” (Day of wrath), a long strophic poem describing the terrors of the Day of Judgment – not much of a comfort to the bereaved either on their own behalf or that of the departed. Although the opening verse of the sequence,

“*Dies irae, dies illa...*” occurs only once, Verdi has the chorus state it no less than four times, interrupting the normal flow of the liturgy, its terrifying message virtually taking over the entire work.

The Mass opens with the introit, *Requiem aeternam*, an almost murmured plea for eternal rest followed by a passionate Kyrie by the four soloists, but the following *Dies irae* pretty much cancels the initial comforting strains. Verdi already had a couple of models for a fire-and-brimstone *Dies irae*, but nothing in either Mozart or Berlioz quite compares with the pounding fortissimo orchestral introduction, the chorus’s eerie wail on the word “*irae*” and later the whispered terror in the repeated words “*dies irae*” as the section ends.

Attributed to Thomas of Celano (c.1250), the sequence “*Dies irae*” was a late addition to the Catholic liturgy but quickly became the centerpiece of the Mass for the Dead. The sequence is a long strophic poem with a pronounced trochaic pulse. Like previous composers, Verdi breaks up the poem into smaller units, each of which focuses on a different aspect the Day of Judgment and the soul’s terror as it awaits eternal redemption or damnation. Mozart divided it into six parts, Verdi into nine. It is worth taking the trouble to read the text while listening to the music in order to experience first-hand the mastery with which Verdi treats every word. Consider, for example, the “*Tuba mirum*” which begins with a volley of trumpet calls followed by the almost cacophonous chorus representing the souls as they rise from their graves. Then silence. Now the bass, in a musical stammer, haltingly begins “*Mors stupebit et natura*” (Death and nature stand transfixed).

The Offertory, *Domine Deus*, belongs to the quartet of soloists and is also divided into separate numbers for each phrase of text. For Verdi, this is the section of the Requiem devoted to the private prayer, perhaps because it is the section of the mass during which the Host is raised and the congregation takes communion.

Not surprisingly, Verdi’s setting of the “*Sanctus*” is the most upbeat section of the Mass as the angels, unaffected by mortal concerns and fears, sing the traditional praise of God. Verdi divides the chorus in two and sets it as a double fugue (a fugue with two subjects) as if for two choirs of angels calling to each other across the heavens. Whereas it had been a centuries-old custom to set the “*Benedictus qui venit*” (Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord) as a separate, often gentle and lilting, movement, Verdi incorporates the text into the fugue.

The “*Libera me Domine de morte eterna*” (Free me, O Lord, from eternal death), while superficially similar to the liturgical service with celebrant and choir, is arguably the most operatic section of the *Requiem*. Unlike the “*Dies irae*,” the text is short, but Verdi sets it as a long operatic *scena* for soprano and chorus. The soprano soloist begins by intoning the words, but concludes with a passionate cry. The a cappella chorus repeats the appeal in the style of a monastic choir. The soprano continues, “*Tremens factus sum ego,*” (I tremble before God,) but the chorus offers her no comfort and responds to her terror with a reprise of the “*Dies irae*.” She then repeats the very opening of the Mass, “*Requiem eterna*,” accompanied again only by the now subdued chorus. Her repeat of the “*Libera me*,” is now taken up by the chorus in a climactic fugue, her anguished plea soaring over the chorus’s driving rhythm. At last, she whispers a final intonation of her prayer – a device Verdi had just used in *Aida* as the princess Amneris prays for peace over the tomb of Radames.

Immediately after the memorial to Manzoni, the *Messa da Requiem* went on tour in Europe's major cities, where it had an enthusiastic reception. By the time of Verdi's own death, he had inspired the same reverence among Italians as he had felt for Manzoni. Although preparations had been made for an immense ceremony, the composer's will stipulated that there be no mass or eulogies. A silent crowd accompanied his cortege.

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