

PROGRAM NOTE by ERIC BROMBERGER

**Requiem Mass**

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Born October 9 or 10, 1813, Roncole

Died January 27, 1901, Milan

No one would have expected the aging opera composer Giuseppe Verdi to write a *Requiem Mass*, and it came about only because of the death of two quite different men. The first was Rossini, who died in Paris in November 1868. Rossini and Verdi may have written different kinds of operas, but Verdi felt only veneration for his older colleague, describing him as “a real man, a fine artist who left his stamp on a whole epoch.” Verdi proposed that he and a group of colleagues write a joint setting of the mass in Rossini’s memory, and he promptly composed a setting of the *Libera Me* as his own contribution. That project, however, collapsed as a result of bickering among the participants and sponsors, and the disillusioned Verdi put his manuscript on the shelf.

Then in May 1873 Alessandro Manzoni died at the age of 88. Poet, playwright, and novelist, Manzoni was the greatest Italian writer of the nineteenth century. Manzoni was a devout Catholic who believed in the workings of divine providence in daily life, a view expressed in his most famous work, *I promessi sposi*, a morality novel about the struggle of the peasants Renzo and Lucia to marry in seventeenth-century Lombardy. Verdi loved *I promessi sposi*, writing to a friend: “You know well how greatly and in what way I honor him. 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 emanated from the human brain. And, besides being a book, it is a comfort to humanity as well.” When Manzoni died, the shattered Verdi—by this time famous himself—wrote to his publisher: “I am moved to the depths by the passing of this great man who belonged to us. I shall not go to Milan tomorrow; I could not bear to be present at the funeral. I shall come later to find the grave, alone and unseen. I may have a proposal to make to you as to how his memory should be honored.”

That proposal, of course, was that Verdi would compose a *Requiem Mass* in honor of Manzoni. He pulled out the *Libera Me* movement written four years earlier in memory of Rossini and quickly composed the rest of the setting, completing the manuscript while on a visit to Paris. Verdi led the triumphant first performance in the Church of San Marco in Milan on

May 22, 1874, one year to the day after Manzoni's death, and then conducted performances in London, Paris, Vienna, and Cologne.

There is an irony to the fact that this overpowering setting of so important a Catholic text should have been composed by Verdi. Though Manzoni had been a devout Catholic, Verdi was not. In fact, he was not a believer at all, and he hated the church and its priests, associating them with privilege, hypocrisy, and oppression. Yet Verdi appears to have had an essentially religious character: he believed in the Christian ideals so important to Manzoni even if he could not accept the dogma behind them, and it was not a contradiction for Verdi to set a text of the church he deeply disliked.

There had never been a setting of the requiem mass for the dead like Verdi's. A century and a half earlier, the civic authorities in Leipzig had instructed their new music director Johann Sebastian Bach that he should "so arrange the music that it . . . does not make an operatic impression but rather incite the listeners to devotion." Verdi would have ignored that command because for him there was no contradiction between "an operatic impression" and inciting "listeners to devotion." When the conductor Hans von Bülow described the *Requiem* as Verdi's "latest opera in church vestments," he was not far off the mark. In this setting, Verdi used the musical language that had made his operas so effective: gripping and memorable melodies, solo and ensemble writing, a large chorus often employed in dramatic ways, and a virtuoso orchestra. Bach's employers in Leipzig would have been appalled by the Verdi *Requiem*, but today we regard it as perhaps the greatest of all settings of this solemn text.

If Verdi conceived of the requiem text as essentially dramatic, it is no surprise that he should make the most dramatic of its sections, the *Dies Irae*, the central episode of his setting: his vision of the Day of Wrath stretches out to nearly forty minutes, or about half the entire length of the *Requiem*. The opening *Kyrie* virtually whispers its prayer for eternal rest, but the *Dies Irae* explodes with some of the most violent music ever composed (its doom-laden drum-cracks result from Verdi's instruction to stretch the skin of the bass drum as tightly as possible): here truly is music for the end of the earth and the day of judgment. The ten individual sections that make up the *Dies Irae* are too richly varied to describe in detail, but mention should be made of the bass' numb introduction of death at *Mors stupebit*, the mezzo's declamatory *Liber scriptus*, the swagger of the trombones at *Rex tremendae majestatis*, and the

tenor's soaring *Ingemisco*, with its important oboe solo.

The remaining movements, all sharply contrasted, pass more quickly. The *Offertorio* features the four soloists, while the brief *Sanctus* is a blazing fugue for double chorus. The *Agnus Dei* with its spare and imaginative scoring has the two women soloists in octaves, while the *Lux Aeterna* is again for the soloists in various combinations. The concluding *Libera me* is the movement Verdi had composed for the projected setting in memory of Rossini, and listeners will discover that this “final” movement contains many ideas that Verdi would develop when he set the complete Requiem text. It opens with the soprano's urgent prayer, and Verdi then re-invokes the furies of the *Dies Irae* and also the subdued plea of the opening *Requiem* before the movement erupts in a tremendous fugue on the words *Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna*: “Deliver me, Lord, from eternal death.” Here is the “operatic” Verdi at his grandest and most dramatic, and at the close of the fugue the soprano soloist draws down tensions to the conclusion, where she and the chorus almost whisper the final prayer for deliverance: *Libera me*.

## VERDI

### Messa da Requiem

Requiem & Kyrie

Dies Irae

*Dies irae*

*Tuba Mirum*

*Mors stupebit*

*Liber scriptus*

*Quid sum miser*

*Rex tremendae majestatis*

*Recordare*

*Ingemisco*

*Confutatis*

*Lacrymosa*

Offertorio

*Domine Jesu Christe*

*Hostias*

Sanctus

Agnus Dei

Lux Aeterna

Libera me

*Libera me, Domine*

*Dies irae*

*Libera me, Domine*