

PROGRAM NOTES

Giuseppe Verdi

Born October 9, 1813, Le Roncole, near Busseto, Italy.

Died January 27, 1901, Milan, Italy.

Requiem Mass

Verdi completed his Requiem Mass in April 1874 and conducted the first performance on May 22, 1874, at the church of San Marco in Milan. The work is scored for solo quartet, mixed chorus, and an orchestra consisting of three flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, four bassoons, four horns, four trumpets (with four additional trumpets offstage), three trombones and tuba (replacing the obsolete ophicleide), timpani, bass drum, and strings. At these concerts, Riccardo Muti uses the new critical edition from *The Works of Giuseppe Verdi* edited by David Rosen and published jointly by The University of Chicago Press and Casa Ricordi (Philip Gossett, general editor). Performance time is approximately one hour and twenty-three minutes.

Verdi was a man of great spirituality. But, after his childhood--when he walked three miles to church every Sunday morning, sometimes barefoot, to his job as organist--he wasn't a churchgoer. Later, when he was famous and wealthy, he would drive his wife Giuseppina to church, but wouldn't go in with her. He was never an atheist--simply, as Giuseppina put it, "a very doubtful believer." Like Brahms's *A German Requiem* completed five years earlier, Verdi's Requiem Mass is a deeply religious work written by a great skeptic.

When Hans von Bülow, whose acrid opinions on music have outlived his importance as a conductor, stole a look at the requiem score just days before the Milan premiere, he offered his famous snap judgment, "Verdi's latest opera, though in ecclesiastical robes," and decided to skip the concert. When he finally heard it, at a mediocre parish performance eighteen years later, he was moved to tears. Bülow wrote to Verdi to apologize, and Verdi replied, with typical generosity, that Bülow might have been right the first time. By then, after a fifty-year career in the public eye, Verdi had grown accustomed to critical disdain, especially from the followers of Richard Wagner. And he knew that Bülow, who once switched his allegiance from Wagner to Brahms, wasn't the last listener who would change his mind about this music as well.

Verdi's Requiem Mass has often provoked dissension. Brahms and Wagner, who shared little aside from their dislike for each other's music, took predictably opposing views. "Only a genius could have written such a work," Brahms wrote, angered by Bülow's original verdict. Wagner attended a performance in Vienna in 1875 without comment; "It would be best to say nothing," his wife Cosima explained, with customary tact. The prevailing Viennese response was enthusiastic--"into the torrid zone," according to Verdi's wife Giuseppina, but performances had been sparsely attended six months earlier in London, and Verdi skipped town in a foul mood. The Italian public, who revered Verdi as people today idolize movie stars and sports figures, couldn't get enough of his newest work; Verdi's publisher finally had to crack down on unauthorized arrangements. Early in the twentieth century, Bernard Shaw, who had always admired Verdi's music, suggested that none of Verdi's operas would prove as enduring as the requiem.

Before the requiem, Verdi was known exclusively for his operas. The early success of *Nabucco* in 1842 made his name; the melody of its grand "Va, pensiero" chorus swept the nation. In the early 1850s, a great midcareer trio of operas--*Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*--made Verdi the most popular composer in all Europe. After that, with a series of increasingly inventive stage works--including *Simon Boccanegra*, *A Masked Ball*, *The Force of Destiny*, *Don Carlo*, and *Aida*--Verdi continued to stretch his talents in new directions, testing the expressive possibilities of Italian opera. After the great success of *Aida* in 1871, Verdi seemed set on retirement; he spent his days growing wheat and corn, raising chickens, and puttering in the garden at Sant'Agata, his farmhouse south of Milan.

By then, however, part of a requiem mass was already written. The story begins in 1868, with the death of Rossini in Paris. Verdi suggested that the city of Bologna, where Rossini grew up and first tasted success, honor him with a composite requiem, commissioning separate movements from Italy's leading composers. The idea was approved, the various movements assigned--diplomatically, Verdi was given the final *Libera me*--and the mass completed. But a performance never took place. (There were disputes, as there often are, over scheduling and money.)

At the time of Rossini's death, Verdi called him "one of the glories of Italy," asking, "When the other one who still lives is no more, what will we have left?" The other one was Alessandro Manzoni, a celebrated poet and the author of the landmark nineteenth-century novel, *I promessi sposi* (The betrothed); and when he died, on May 22, 1873, Verdi returned to the idea of a requiem.

Verdi first read *I promessi sposi* at sixteen; it remained his favorite novel throughout his life. Manzoni was a great national hero in Italy, a distinction poets in our time--except, perhaps, for Václav Havel--can scarcely imagine. To Verdi, Manzoni was a personal hero; he was both a great artist and a great humanitarian--a leader, like Verdi, in the Risorgimento, the movement for Italian independence and unification. Knowing that Manzoni treasured his privacy as much as he himself, Verdi never attempted a meeting. Even after his wife was introduced to Manzoni through a mutual friend, Verdi was satisfied with the autographed photograph she brought home, inscribed "to Giuseppe Verdi, a glory of Italy, from a decrepit Lombard writer." Verdi hung the picture in his bedroom and sent Manzoni his photo, writing across the bottom, "I esteem and admire you as much as one can esteem and admire anyone on this earth, both as man and a true honor of our country so continually troubled. You are a saint, Don Alessandro!" The two men didn't meet until the spring of 1868, when Verdi visited Milan for the first time in twenty years. Verdi reported to the Countess Maffei, who arranged the meeting, "I would have knelt before him if it were possible to adore mortal men."

Verdi didn't attend Manzoni's funeral, preferring instead to visit the grave "alone and unseen." He proposed that "after further reflection and after taking stock of my strength," he might "suggest a way of honoring his memory." In fact, the very night of his visit to Manzoni's grave, he wrote to Giulio Ricordi, head of the publishing house, of his intention to compose a requiem mass to be performed on the first anniversary of Manzoni's death. (He offered to conduct himself and to assume the costs of copying the parts.)

Shortly before the premiere of *Aida* in Cairo in 1871, when the critic and composer Alberto Mazzucato reminded Verdi of the *Libera me* he had written for the Rossini Requiem, he dismissed the idea of setting the entire text: "There are so many, many, many requiem masses; there's no point in adding one more." But now, clearly, there was, and Verdi moved quickly. On June 25, Verdi and Giuseppina left for Paris, where he began work on the requiem. He continued writing at Sant'Agata in the fall and in Genoa that winter. On February 28, he wrote to Camille du Locle, his librettist for *Don Carlo*, "I feel as if I've become a solid citizen and am no longer the public's clown who, with a big bass drum, shouts 'Come, come, step right up.'" The deadline, May 22, the first anniversary of Manzoni's death, swiftly approached. Verdi handpicked his four soloists, including Teresa Stolz and Maria Waldmann, the original *Aida* and *Amneris* at La Scala in 1872. The work was finished on April 10; rehearsals began early in May.

Reading Manzoni's obituary notices, Verdi noticed that "not one speaks the way it should. Many words, but none of them deeply felt." Verdi was a man of few words and genuine expression. The requiem he composed to honor two men for whom he had the greatest admiration is a work of the most highly concentrated emotion. Seldom had he traversed the range of human feeling in so few pages. Music so direct and powerful was unexpected, and therefore disquieting, in a somber religious work; Bülow was only the first to refer, patronizingly, to the theatricality of a work designed for the church.

The very beginning of this requiem might be mistaken for a moment from a Verdi opera--a dark cloister, a procession of mourners, a few strands of melody to set the scene. But the movement quickly grows and blossoms in ways unknown to the opera house; the chorus makes a fugue of "Te decet hymnus," and then the music opens heavenward as the soloists enter one by one. It's music of an almost unimaginable sweep and grandeur and would be out of place even in opera, except in a grand finale.

The *Dies irae*, the largest of the seven pieces in this requiem, has ten small sections, each one a vivid scene. In writing opera, Verdi had quickly learned to seek the *parola scenica*--the key word in each passage that would unlock his imagination. The "Dies irae" explodes with its sheer force and rage--the *ffff* thunderbolts of the bass drum are particularly

alarming; Verdi increases the drama by adding offstage trumpets in the "Tuba mirum."

We next hear from various individuals, each a commentator, an observer, or an eyewitness--what is known today as human interest. At the end of the bass's "Mors stupebit," sung quietly and full of terror, his voice catches repeatedly on the word "death." "Liber scriptus," a powerful aria for mezzo-soprano, was written for the London premiere in 1875 to replace a choral fugue that marred Verdi's sense of pace and drama, particularly since a brief outburst of the "Dies irae" music directly follows. "Quid sum miser" is a trio of lamentation. (A solo bassoon provides a haunting accompaniment.) "Rex tremendae" is a dialogue between chorus and the four soloists, reaching some common ground only in the final measures. The prayer "Recordare" is the duet Verdi conceived with the voices of his favorite Aida and Amneris in mind, though here they don't sing as adversaries (for a moment, at the words "O Judge of Justice," their voices join as one). Two arias follow--the tenor's "Ingemisco" and the bass's "Confutatis"--before the chorus again interjects the refrain of "Dies irae." The lament "Lacrimosa" (based on a duet withdrawn from *Don Carlo*) brings together chorus and soloists in a magnificent, sobering conclusion to a movement that began with fire and fury. The final "Amen" momentarily lifts the music into full sunlight, but darkness quickly falls.

Domine Jesu Christe is scored for solo quartet, though Verdi saves the soprano solo for a breathtaking moment well into the movement, when the entire fate of the music hangs, seemingly forever, on her one sustained note. At "quam olim Abrahae" the music gathers force (maintaining tradition, it behaves like a fugue); the central "Hostias" is quiet and utterly still.

Verdi's Sanctus is a brilliant double fugue for split choirs, moving quickly and with great energy straight through the "Hosanna" and "Benedictus" texts that detain most composers. The Agnus Dei begins with thirteen measures for the soprano and mezzo-soprano soloists, unaccompanied, singing in octaves. The melody is a nineteenth-century version of plainchant--it's diatonic, rather than modal--and it's repeated, alternately by the two soloists and the chorus, to an increasingly rich accompaniment.

The soprano solo withdraws, leaving the three lower solo voices to the Lux aeterna, a trio of urgent drama and death-scene tremolos. The soprano now reenters, unaccompanied, declaiming the text of the Libera me. This powerful final scene, for soprano and chorus, is based on the music Verdi wrote for the Rossini Requiem in 1869. It could only have been composed by someone steeped in opera, yet it's unlike anything else in Verdi's output. The music moves freely from dramatic recitative to soaring arioso, reprising both the "Dies irae," in all its concentrated terror, and the opening Requiem aeternam, here magically rescored for soprano and unaccompanied chorus. The last stretch, climaxed by the urgent pleas of the soprano, and finally dissipating into hushed and desperate prayer, is as compelling as anything Verdi ever put on the stage.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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