

The 'Manzoni' Requiem – Verdi's Best Opera!

Zane Dalal examines this claim and many others in support of this extraordinary masterpiece

Once more it is a great privilege to write for ON STAGE in furthering the NCPA's mission to reach out to our ever growing audience. We hope that your interests will be piqued whether coming to this subject matter for the first time, or returning to it – as we all do – with a certain love and reverence. It is a particular privilege to write on the great Verdi Requiem because there are few works in the entire repertoire that consistently evoke such passionate feelings among listeners and performers. It is a work for the ages.

To understand why, it is important to first examine the Requiem Mass. What are now known as Roman Catholic traditions were the dominating force of the Universal Church in Europe from the 4th century to the Protestant reforms of the 16th century. The Catholic church continued to dominate many European countries that were not greatly affected by reform and so the legacy can be seen in a continuous context of over 1700 years. This is particularly true of Italy and particularly true of the city of Milan, at the forefront of church influence as early as St. Ambrose its first bishop. The Church of San Marco, in Milan where this Requiem was given its first performance, dates back to 1254. Roman Catholic Mass was – and still is – the centerpiece and cornerstone of worship on a daily basis, and informed the daily contact between a very powerful church and its people. The Mass has five particular sections, the *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*. These five sections have been intoned, sung in harmony, or performed in this order for all of nearly two millennia. It is a sacred and ritual format. On especially important occasions the Mass format changes, to include different texts, and different obeisance, particularly at Christmas and Easter.

However, there is one particularly changed format – solemn and ancient – and that is the *Missa di Requiem* (Mass for Eternal Peace) or *Missa pro Defunctis* (Mass for the Dead). This solemn mass is said at funerals and in its many varied sections remind the surviving listeners **still alive** that the road to salvation is hard and requires supplication and penitence. The Mass begins, as it has always done with the Greek intoning of an ancient formula- the *Kyrie Eleison* - Lord have Mercy, Christ have Mercy, Lord have Mercy. But more so than in the normal daily mass, this contrite formula is the opening penitence before unspeakable horrors. This penitence-one hopes- will lead God to separate sheep from goats, separate good from evil in a cosmic last judgment – where all shall be weighed and measured and answer for their sins. On this terrible, last day an awesome trumpet shall sound, the dead shall be awoken in number and driven before a throne of terrible majesty, as the sky and the earth are rent with trembling. Therefore, pray for mercy, entreat, implore for pity from the Lamb of God who if inclined will save you from eternal damnation on that awful day. Of course, your local church could make the road easier or shut off access to you whilst you lived, depending on your conduct or expedient politics. This flowery language is in most part a direct representation of the Requiem text, and shows the source of at least some of the Church's unchallenged power. In the medieval rite of excommunication, the 'damned' were hauled into a church and made to watch as this Mass for the Dead was intoned for them, and as the monks left they extinguished their candles leaving the church and the living soul in a state of symbolic permanent darkness. Powerful stuff?– Yes, it was intended to be.

If one reviews these elements outside the context of the Mass – they make for unparalleled drama. If one then hands the chance to compose a Requiem mass to the greatest dramatic composer of almost any age; one who handles story telling with complete deftness and one who is an unimpressed agnostic,

(-Verdi, though forced to church at an early age, sometimes walking barefoot to services as a child, later in life, drove his wife to church but didn't go in himself-) the work is likely to show more dramatic passion and less reverent worship. In Verdi's Requiem you have a bold storytelling in operatic format. It is worth noting that the orchestral Requiem has changed in the hands of various composers, as society has changed. In Mozart's time, salvation was assured to the faithful, and that is the work we have. In Verdi's time the salvation was not so assured, and the dynamic forces competing for the soul and the pleas for mercy are real and palpable. By the time we reach the Penderecki Requiem it is a forgone conclusion that salvation is a lost cause, and the clamouring pleas somehow realize that damnation is a more likely destination.

The success of the opera *Nabucco* in 1842 made Verdi the most popular composer in Italy. The great trilogy that followed of *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata* and *Il Trovatore* made him the most popular composer in Europe. This success would lead him to imaginative experimentation which led to the extraordinary scores for *Simon Boccanegra*, *Il Forza del Destino*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *Don Carlo* and by 1871 *Aida*. It is in this period that the Requiem comes to fruition. There are some complicated stories surrounding Verdi's first foray into the Requiem style. The fêted composer Rossini had died in 1868 and Verdi undertook the memorialization of this great Italian hero. He suggested a Requiem written in compilation by all the great composers of the day, and he himself would take one portion – the final *Libera Me*. If one looks at that list of composers today, none of them stood the test of time, with Verdi outshining them all. Nothing came of the project because of squabbling over performance issues, money and arguing with the conductor. What an ignominious end to a noble cause.

In Verdi's estimation Alessandro Manzoni was the other great figure – an object of great and equal veneration. At Rossini's death, Verdi remarked "When the other one, who still lives, is no more, what will we have left?" Manzoni was a literary figure, a poet and an equally prominent figure in the national psyche of Italy. Both Verdi and Manzoni were powerful compatriots in the Risorgimento. In fact, the reorganization and centralized independence of Italy under Victor Emmanuel II had led to the strange and unrelated scrawling of "VERDI" in graffiti many feet high – over walls and buildings throughout Italy. VERDI was the accidental acronym for Victor Emmanuel Re d' Italia. Nevertheless, Manzoni's sudden death after a fall in 1873 that led to cerebral meningitis re-propelled Verdi into thoughts of memorialization and thoughts of a Requiem. This time he would write it himself and pledged to perform it within a year of Manzoni's funeral, in Milan. The date was set for 22 May 1874.

Now to the music and its performances.

Verdi had produced a gigantic work which was to strike with such force that it caused everyone to sit up and take notice. Brahms praised it to the skies, likely because of genuine feeling or perhaps because Wagner – the arch rival - had remained silent but averse - leaving the caustic Cosima to brush it off with her "best not to comment" line. Bülow, the great Wagnerian conductor was to leave the Wagner camp and join in praise of the Requiem, and several other unlikely luminaries were moved to comment on the sheer weight of the piece. It was first performed in the Church of San Marco in Milan, in whose monastic accommodation Mozart had spent time in the 1770's. A special dispensation from the Archbishop allowed women to perform as long as they were veiled and partitioned from sight as they sang. The congregation unable to applaud could not show, in those first moments, what had happened to the world of Requiem writing. Verdi himself conducted and his soloists, Teresa Stolz, Maria Waldmann, Giuseppe Capponi and Ormondo Maini had all sung in the European première of AIDA in

1872. What a cast! The choice of Stolz and Waldmann -one of the most dramatic Aida/Amneris pairings in history to join in this Requiem, was an indication of how operatically Verdi viewed this music. The great writing for soprano and mezzo propels this piece far beyond the norm for Requiems, hinged on the very premise that to sing any part in this work, one must be an accomplished opera singer with great voice, great vocal range and the power and technique to use it dramatically. This is as true of the chorus, who provide such monumental and such varied sections – going effortlessly between moments of extreme pathos and moments of extreme power. The work was a hit immediately, especially after the La Scala performance three days later, where the audience, unfettered from their church regulations, brought down the house.

The work had a popular revival in the 1930's leading to some very fine performances – that in turn are documented in great recordings. Of note, I refer our readers to the following recordings that truly display the scope of this work. First - Toscanini's 1951 Carnegie Hall performance is relevant for two great reasons. Up to that point, and especially following the Germanic trend of Wagner, conductors thought it their right to orchestrate, amend, improve and otherwise interfere with compositions. Toscanini was in antithesis to this trend- and insisted on faithfully executing the wishes of the composer. The result is visceral whether in his Beethoven Symphonies or in this recording of the Requiem. Also, his punctilious nature in rehearsal allows for some of the best orchestral playing, - a sound –especially in the brass -that possibly hadn't been heard in such clarity until that moment. Second- Karajan's great recording to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Toscanini's death, provides a wonderful glimpse into how far recorded technology had come by 1967. The soloists, Price, Cossotto, Pavarotti and Ghiaurov are a quartet in their prime, and Karajan coaxes sounds from the La Scala orchestra that draw the listener deeply into the work at every turn. Third – Giulini's fabled studio recording with EMI – from 1963-4 with Schwarzkopf, Ludwig, Gedda and Ghiaurov is a remarkable account, not only in passionate and powerful singing and orchestra playing, but in almost historic proportion to the arch that Giulini sets for the whole work. It remains my favourite and I had the good fortune to hear Giulini conduct the Requiem in his Los Angeles years and this recording is where he first discloses his mastery of the Requiem form, whether Fauré, Mozart or any other. Fourthly, and heading a long list of modern era recordings which include the latest triumph by Tony Pappano, - I refer our readers to Riccardo Muti's recording with Studer, Zajick, Pavarotti and Ramey, which is as visceral in its power as the Toscanini, as faithful to the score as is Muti's trademark with top tier performances from the soloists. Muti's triumphal Chicago Symphony 2013 version that promises to be a yardstick with Frittoli, Borodina, Zeffiri and Abdrazakov continues an undying trend. It is of great satisfaction and a point of pride that the SOI now takes up this monument. Performing, recording and listening to this work is addictive. It must be done, and redone and done again in order to see the work from its many angles and each generation is enthralled by its gifts.