

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Requiem Mass for four solo voices, chorus, and orchestra, in memory of Alessandro Manzoni

Giuseppe Verdi was born in Le Roncole, near Busseto in the Duchy of Parma, on October 10, 1813, and died in Milan on January 27, 1901. He composed the bulk of the Requiem in 1874. The first performance took place in the church of San Marco in Milan on May 22, 1874, with the composer conducting. The score calls for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass soloists, mixed chorus, two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, four bassoons, four horns, four trumpets, four more trumpets offstage, three trombones, tuba (replacing the obsolete ophicleide), timpani, bass drum, and strings. Duration is about 84 minutes.

Few Americans know the name Alessandro Manzoni, and fewer still are familiar with his great historical novel, *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*). To music lovers the name rings a bell only as the dedicatee of Verdi's "Manzoni Requiem." But to Italians, Manzoni is one of the great central figures of their literary culture; indeed, until very recently (and perhaps even today) it was impossible to obtain admission to an Italian university without passing an examination that included essay questions on two required topics: Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Manzoni's novel. In Milan, the novelist's home town, a popular epigram reflected the local view of the two major features of the city:

Un tempio ed un uomo,
Manzoni ed il Duomo.

A temple and a man,
Manzoni and the cathedral.

To Giuseppe Verdi, Manzoni was a personal hero. As early, as 1840 he set the poet's Ode *Il cinque maggio* (*The fifth of May*), a poetic treatment of Napoleon's death, along with some choruses from Manzoni's poetic tragedies, though he never published them. By this time he also knew the novel, Manzoni's major work, which had appeared in 1827, though its definitive revision was not published until 1842.* Verdi admired Manzoni both as an artist and as a man. The novelist's morbid shyness was interpreted by the composer as a dislike of personal publicity and self-promotion, qualities of which Verdi himself totally approved.

Verdi respected Manzoni's privacy as much as he wished his own to be respected, and though he and Manzoni had a close friend in common, the Countess Clarina Maffei, he never dared ask for an introduction, even after his wife, Giuseppina Strepponi, had met Manzoni through the good offices of the Countess while on a visit to Milan and had carried away with her a photograph of the great man inscribed "to Giuseppe Verdi, a glory of Italy, from a decrepit Lombard writer." Verdi framed the photo and hung it in his bedroom, and there, unable to thank Manzoni directly, asked the Countess to tender his gratitude, enclosing a photograph of himself with the inscription, "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!"

Finally, in the spring of 1868, Verdi visited Milan for the first time in twenty years and through the mediation of the Countess had his one and only visit with his idol. He wrote to her afterwards to express his thanks, asking rhetorically:

What can I say of Manzoni? How to describe the extraordinary, indefinable sensation the presence of that saint, as you call him, produced in me. I would have gone down on my knee before him if we were allowed to worship men. They say it is wrong to do so and so it

may be; although we raise up on altars many that have neither the talent nor the virtue of Manzoni and indeed are rascals.

By making his visit to Manzoni, Verdi had finally met both of the two men that he considered to be Italy's greatest cultural glory—the other being Rossini, whom he had known in Paris.

The connection of the two men in Verdi's mind is an important one for the history of the Manzoni Requiem. Rossini died in Paris on September 13, 1868, and Verdi's sense of loss for Italy's cultural life was keen. He noted bitterly in a letter to Countess Maffei that when "the other" glory of Italy (Manzoni) was also no more, all that would remain would be politicians and humiliating defeats in battle. He conceived at once a plan to honor the memory of Rossini by inviting the leading Italian composers to contribute to a special Requiem Mass to be performed just once, on the first anniversary of the composer's death, in Bologna, Rossini's "musical home," after which the score would be sealed up in the archives, to be brought out only at some future time as an occasional tribute. No one would be paid for either the composition or the performance. At first the idea was received enthusiastically. The sections of the Requiem were assigned to composers drawn by lot (though Verdi was diplomatically assigned the closing section, the *Libera me*). It is perhaps worth noting that not one of the other composers, famous though they were in their own day, is remembered now—Buzzolla, Bazzini, Pedrotti, Cagnoni, F. Ricci, Nini, Coccia, Gaspari, Platania, Petrella, and Mabellini. Verdi had his portion of the score ready in good time, but the scheduled performance never came off owing to difficulties in arranging for performers—especially a chorus—at the right time and place. Finally the whole affair was given up as a public fiasco, and each composer received his section of the score back. (A recent recording of the "Mass for Rossini," however, demonstrates that the idea was no bad one, and if the performance had taken place, it would have been a worthy tribute to the master from Pesaro.)

Nearly four years after the contretemps of the "Rossini Requiem" Alessandro Manzoni died at the age of eighty-nine on May 22, 1873. The next day Verdi wrote to his publisher Giulio Ricordi:

I am profoundly saddened by the death of our Great Man! But I shall not come to Milan, for I would not have the heart to attend his funeral. I will come soon to visit his grave, alone and unseen, and perhaps (after further reflection, after having weighed my strength) to propose something to honor his memory.

Keep this secret and do not say a word about my coming, for it is so painful to hear the newspapers speak of me, and to make me say and do what I do not say and do.

Verdi had learned from the earlier incident not to begin with a public announcement and not to rely any more than absolutely necessary on the good will of others. This time he wrote on June 3 to Ricordi:

I would also like to demonstrate what affection and veneration I bore and bear that Great Man who is no more, and whom Milan has so worthily honored. I would like to compose a *Mass for the dead* to be performed next year for the anniversary of his death. The *Mass* would have rather vast dimensions, and besides a big orchestra and a big Chorus, it would also require (I cannot be specific now) four or five principal singers. Do you think the City [of Milan] would assume the expense of the performance? The copying of the music I would have done at my expense, and I myself would conduct the performance both at the rehearsals and in church. If

you believe this possible speak of it to the Mayor; give me an answer as soon as you can, for you can consider this letter of mine as binding.

The response was enthusiastic, and Verdi set to work. After a visit to Milan, where he knelt by the recent grave, he went on to Paris for the summer and began work on the composition, continuing it at his farm in Busseto in the fall and his quarters in Genoa during the winter. On February 28, 1874, he wrote, in his typical ironic mode, to Camille Du Locle (his librettist for *Don Carlos* and French translator for some of his other operas):

I am working on my *Mass*, and it really is with great pleasure. I feel as if I had become a serious man, and am no longer the public's clown who with a great bass drum . . . shouts: "Come on in, step right up, etc." You will understand that on hearing operas mentioned now, my conscience is scandalized and I quickly make the Sign of the Cross!! What do you have say to that!

Verdi spared no pains to assure himself that the soloists, chorus, and orchestra were ready for the premiere, which took place in Milan's Church of St. Mark's on the anniversary of Manzoni's death and was repeated three times at La Scala in the following days. The soloists included Teresa Stolz and Maria Waldmann, who had been the original Aida and Amneris in the first Italian production of Verdi's most recent opera.

The event was a success in every way, reflecting honor on Manzoni, Verdi, the performers, and the city of Milan. The only sour note came from complaints that Verdi had not composed ecclesiastical music, that he had, in fact, composed an operatic score to a Latin text. It is true enough that Verdi's music does not meet the formal requirements for the musical style and performing forces usually thought of as "church music," but after all, he did not write the work for ecclesiastical performances, but rather as a grand public tribute. Quite aside from the musical "inappropriateness" for church use is the fact that Verdi introduced a number of textual repetitions—especially of the *Dies irae* section—to function as a musical refrain; thus the significance of the changes is artistic rather than ecclesiastical.

It has become conventional to reiterate the *bon mot* that the Requiem is "Verdi's greatest opera," a phrase bearing implicitly the hint of criticism that it shouldn't be operatic at all, though why this should be so is never made clear. Verdi's wife, Giuseppina Strepponi, brought her own good sense to bear in a defense of the score:

I say that a man like Verdi must write like Verdi—that is, according to his own way of feeling and interpreting the text... The religious spirit and the way in which it finds expression must bear the imprint of its time and the individuality of its author.

Certainly many scenes in Verdi's operas had dealt with questions of life or death and the emotions that are aroused by this fundamental fact of human existence. Indeed, where could an opera composer hope to find a text that raises the ultimate questions with greater dramatic force than in Thomas of Celano's twelfth-century poem, *Dies irae*, the heart of the Requiem Mass?

Most of the negative criticism of this dramatic treatment of the score arises from a review of sorts printed by Hans von Bülow after the first performance. I call it a review "of sorts" because von Bülow was in Milan to hear a performance of Glinka's *Life for the Tsar* and carefully avoided attending any of the four performances of Verdi's *Requiem* before penning these comments, written out of a combination of ignorance, Germanic prejudice, and personal

arrogance:

With this work the all-powerful despoiler of Italian artistic taste—and ruler of the taste he has despoiled—presumably hopes to eliminate the last remains, irksome to his own ambition, of Rossini’s immortality... For more than a quarter-century this Attila of the larynx has been exerting himself—with total success—to ensure that Rossini operas such as *Tell, Barbieri, Semiramide* and *Mosé* are simply no longer playable in Italy. His latest opera in ecclesiastical dress will, after the first token obeisance to the memory of the poet, be straightway exposed to secular enthusiasm at La Scala for three evenings, after which it will set off for Paris, with the soloists he has trained up himself, for its coronation in the aesthetic Rome of the Italians. Surreptitious glances at this newest manifestation of the composer of *Trovatore* and *Traviata* have not exactly whetted our appetite for this so-called “Festival” . . .

and so on, with increasingly bitter invective. The fuss was enough to convince another highly Teutonic musician to study the score himself, and when he did, Johannes Brahms commented, “Bülow has blundered, since this could be done only by a genius.”

The Requiem quickly became so popular in Italy that Verdi had to ask his publisher to take steps to protect the integrity of the work by prohibiting performances in unauthorized arrangements. The composer himself undertook one revision before allowing the Requiem out of his hands: he rewrote the *Liber scriptus* entirely. It had originally been a four-part choral fugue. Recast as a mezzo-soprano solo, it provided much more striking dramatic contrast and a better connection with the sudden return of the *Dies irae* that follows directly.

Although he was composing a piece that would be performed outside of the theater, Verdi approached the text of the Requiem Mass exactly as he approached any operatic libretto he had ever set: with a careful reading and numerous re-readings to draw out the passages of the most powerful expressive quality, to find the “*parola scenica*,” the word or phrase that would unleash his dramatic imagination. This is particularly true of the sequence *Dies irae* and its many sub-sections, where an individual word or phrase sometimes becomes the hinge of an entire passage: the trumpets spreading their call throughout all the earth, the chilling and stupefying confrontation with death, pleas for grace, massive evocations of the heavenly king, alternating and intertwining with heartfelt prayer.

Yes, the musical gestures *are* operatic throughout, but they capture something fundamental in the human reaction to death in the same overtly dramatic way as Medieval frescoes of the Dance of Death and of the Last Judgment which can be seen all over Italy. (Verdi made the acquaintance of Michelangelo’s work in Florence and found that master’s masculine sculpture greatly to his taste; it would be tempting to connect the frightful vision of the *Dies irae* with Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment” in the Sistine Chapel, but that gigantic fresco was not open for public viewing in those days, especially not to someone who, like Verdi, was connected with the government of the united Italy that had taken the temporal power away from the Papacy.)

We can hear recollections of the orchestration of *Aida*, Verdi’s most recently finished opera, and the flexible and highly personal treatment of chromaticism is found in all of Verdi’s late works. But there are connections to opera that are more than stylistic in this score: There is actually an operatic quotation as well, though that fact was not known until very recently. When Verdi’s *Don Carlos* reached its dress rehearsals at the Paris Opera in March 1867, the five-act grand opera was discovered to be too long by a good quarter of an hour: performances *had* to end in time for patrons to catch the last trains to the suburbs. As a result Verdi was forced to cut some twenty minutes of prime music from the score. It was long believed that the music was

totally lost, since the pages in question had been slit right out of the autograph score, and presumably destroyed. But in the 1960s and 1970s a great deal of scholarly attention came to *Don Carlos*, one result of which was Andrew Porter's discovery that the library of the Opéra still retained the original manuscript parts used on opening night and that in these parts the cuts were not physically removed: the pages involved were simply sewn together. It was therefore possible to reconstruct the lost scenes, which have now even made their way into performance and onto a recording. The biggest surprise to come out of this reconstruction occurred in an excised duet for Carlos and Philip which was strikingly familiar. In fact, Verdi, not willing to let a good piece go to waste, elaborated and refined that father-son duet from the opera and converted it into one of the most hauntingly beautiful passages of the Requiem, the *Lacrimosa*.

In sum, Verdi's Manzoni Requiem is more than a tribute to a great author; it encapsulates much of what is characteristic of the Italian spirit. It honors both of Verdi's cultural heroes, Manzoni in its dedication and origin, Rossini in motifs that recall the earlier composer's *Stabat Mater*. And it reaffirms Verdi's steadfast belief that, to an Italian composer—especially in the time of Wagner's innovations—orchestral music may be important, but the significance of the voice, of the sung word, remains paramount.

*Manzoni's work is a vast historical novel on the grand scale, set in Milan and surrounding regions in the seventeenth century. Inspired in its architecture by the historical novels of Walter Scott, it easily surpasses any of them in scope, characterization, feeling for the forces of history, and beauty of language. Indeed, it is the last point as much as any of the others that endeared the novel to nineteenth-century Italians, for Manzoni successfully created a beautiful, flexible, direct Italian (or, rather, Tuscan) prose that showed the way out of the bizarre Baroque adornments and decorations of so much earlier writing in the vernacular. In doing so he helped to unify the country linguistically just as it was about to be unified politically. Of course, readers lacking Italian will not be able to appreciate this aspect of the novel directly, but it is worth reading nonetheless for all of its other fine qualities. It is available in paperback in a brilliant English translation by Bruce Penman (Penguin books). To Italians, Manzoni's one novel is the equivalent of our Scott, Thackeray, and Dickens rolled into a single book.