

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
April 12-13-14, 2024
98th Season / Subscription Program 7
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This program is dedicated to a single great work: Verdi's *Requiem*. One of the most dramatic settings of the Latin Mass for the Dead, it captures a huge range of emotions in this traditional text. The Madison Symphony Chorus and Orchestra welcome four distinguished vocal soloists for this work: soprano Alexandra LoBianco, mezzo-soprano Margaret Gawrysiak, tenor Jonathan Burton, and baritone Kyle Ketelsen.

Verdi's *Requiem* is one of the great sacred works of the 19th century, and one of the most dramatic settings of the Mass for the Dead.

Giuseppe Verdi

Born: October 10, 1813, Le Roncole, Italy.

Died: January 27, 1901, Milan, Italy.

Messa da Requiem

- **Composed:** In 1868 and 1873.
- **Premiere:** Verdi himself conducted the first performance in Milan on May 22, 1874.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1936, 1937, 1945, 1954, 1965, 1978, 1991, 2002, and 2009.
- **Duration:** 83:00.

Background

This huge work is Verdi's contribution to a centuries-old tradition of *Requiem* settings. It had its roots in an unsuccessful attempt to memorialize composer Gioacchino Rossini. Verdi eventually completed the *Requiem* in honor of the poet Alessandro Manzoni.

The Latin text of the *Requiem*, or Mass for the Dead, has provided composers with inspiration for over 500 years. The first polyphonic settings of the text were composed in the 15th century, and there is an unbroken tradition of *Requiem*s that continues down to our own day: there are literally thousands of settings of the complete Mass for the Dead, or its individual movements. In the Catholic liturgy

prior to the Vatican II reforms, the Latin *Requiem* was sung at burial services and on All Soul's Day (November 2), in remembrance of the faithful dead. The chant texts that comprise this Mass were complete by the 14th century, and they provide a rich source of imagery and emotion. At the heart of the *Requiem* is the lengthy sequence *Dies irae*, which was written by the 13th-century monastic poet Thomas of Celano. This text dwells on the terror and destruction of the Day of Judgment foretold in the Book of Revelations, and the petitioner interjects forlorn prayers for safety from the Lord's wrath. After the horror of the *Dies irae*, the texts become more comforting in nature. The offertory *Domine Jesu Chiste* offers prayers for the dead, and recalls the promise of redemption. The gentle imagery of the *Lux aeterna*, a further prayer for intercession, celebrates the merciful Lord. The final movement, *Libera me*, speaks with the most personal voice of all the *Requiem* texts: the petitioner prays directly to the Lord, expressing fear and hope for deliverance.

Verdi's monumental setting of the *Requiem* began in 1868, the year of Gioacchino Rossini's death. Verdi, who called Rossini as "one of the glories of Italy," proposed a musical tribute by Rossini's colleagues: a *Requiem* Mass, whose individual sections would be composed by thirteen leading Italian composers. Verdi reserved the final section, the *Libera me*, for himself, and assigned the remaining sections of the Mass to the other twelve composers according to an overall tonal and textural plan. Nearly all of the twelve were influential church musicians, though most had written for the stage, as well. (For the most part, they are forgotten today.) The project was completed early in 1869, when all of the individual movements were gathered in Milan, and submitted to Verdi's publisher, Ricordi. Verdi's original proposal was to have the *Messa per Rossini* performed in Bologna, on the first anniversary of Rossini's death. After this first and only performance, the score would be sealed and placed in the vault of Bologna's Music School as a monument to Rossini, who had spent much of his career in that city.

This grandiose plan fell victim to a lack of available funds and to Italian musical politics: the opera partisans in Bologna would have nothing of a proposal that originated in the rival city of Milan! The projected concert was never arranged, and Verdi was soon too busy with the production of his opera *Aida* to make his own arrangements for a performance of this musical patchwork. He set aside the *Messa per Rossini*, although he showed his completed score for the *Libera me* to his colleague Alberto Mazzucato. Mazzucato urged Verdi to abandon the opening twelve sections, and complete the *Requiem* himself, suggesting that, by itself, the *Libera me* contained enough musical material to generate an entire Mass.

The death of Alessandro Manzoni in 1873 rekindled Verdi's interest in the *Requiem*. Manzoni was a beloved literary figure, and a leading voice of the Catholic spiritual revival that took place in 19th-century Italy. On hearing of Manzoni's death, Verdi immediately wrote to the mayor of Milan with an offer to write a *Requiem* for Manzoni, saying: "It is a heartfelt impulse—or rather necessity—that prompts me to honor as best I can that Great One, whom I so much admired as a writer and venerated as a man." As suggested by Mazzucato, Verdi had already realized much of the music for the *Requiem* in his *Libera me* setting of 1869. The *Dies irae* section of the *Libera me* was used to bind together the many sections of the sequence, and much of the musical material for the opening *Requiem aeternam* was ready-made in the 1869 movement, as well. The remainder of the music was completed by the end of 1873. Verdi conducted the first performance of his *Requiem* at church of San Marco in Milan on May 22, 1874, the first anniversary of Manzoni's death. The response to the premiere was so enthusiastic (at least three of the movements were encored) that the Milanese demanded three more performances, produced at the theater of La Scala. Verdi took the work on an international tour soon thereafter, and it was heard throughout Italy, in Paris, and in London.

There were a few critics who found Verdi's treatment of the Latin texts too "operatic" for the solemn Mass, but the composer's wife Giuseppina answered them simply and effectively: "Verdi must write like Verdi—according to his 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 the author." Just what did the *Requiem* mean to Verdi himself? The genesis of the *Requiem* was certainly tied to what seems to have been genuine regard for Rossini and Manzoni, and a desire to memorialize them in a fitting way. However, the work does not seem to have been an expression of deep Catholic faith: Verdi was notoriously private about his inner life, but all indications point to the probability that the *Requiem*'s composer was an agnostic. (In his classic biography of Verdi, Julian Budden points out that two more openly agnostic composers, Brahms and Vaughan Williams, produced similarly profound religious works.) Sacred composers in Italy at this time—generally regarded as second-raters who did not work in the more refined world of opera—worked within an established style that fit the conservative liturgical purposes of the Church. Verdi's setting of this traditional text transcends any traditional boundaries.

Throughout his life, Verdi the dramatist was attracted to strongly emotional topics—selecting poems, novels, and historical subjects that would transfer well to the stage after they had been adapted to the dramatic needs of a stage work and

made “singable” by a librettist. In the *Requiem* Mass, Verdi had a ready-made, dramatic, and eminently singable text that covered to entire range of human emotions, from terror, shame, and sadness to hope and exaltation. Verdi’s response to this text contains a tremendous scope of musical sentiment, ranging from the awful power of the *Dies irae* and the strict counterpoint of the *Sanctus*, to the unabashedly emotional outbursts of *Recordare* and *Ingemisco*.

What You’ll Hear

Verdi clearly saw the *Requiem* texts with the eye of a great dramatist, and his settings capture the *Requiem*’s huge range of emotions. [Note that this performance will be accompanied by a projected translation.]

The *Requiem* opens quietly, with hushed statements by the choir. Though Verdi is not usually described as a writer of counterpoint, the lush four-part writing at *Te decet hymnus* shows him to be a master. At the *Kyrie*, Verdi introduces the soloists, one by one. The end of the movement builds towards the first musical climax of the *Requiem*.

Verdi’s setting of the sequence text *Dies irae* is complex and lengthy, spanning nearly half the duration of the *Requiem*. The movement opens with the first statement of the words “The day of wrath” together with full *fortissimo* orchestra. Verdi may have been inspired, in part, by the similarly massive and theatrical setting of *Dies irae* by Berlioz in his *Requiem* Mass. Verdi’s *Dies irae* returns throughout the second section, as a reminder of the horrible Day of Judgment. The *Tuba mirum* begins, appropriately, with trumpet calls echoing between the orchestra and four offstage trumpets, and the choir’s music continues this fanfare-like character. The stunning mezzo-soprano solo at *Liber scriptus* was written specifically for Maria Waldmann, a fine contralto, whose voice Verdi admired. This aria is followed by a reprise of the *Dies irae*. The bleak prayer of the vocal trio at *Quid sum miser* is followed by the distinctive dotted-note theme of *Rex tremendae*, and countermelodies in the solo quartet. The *Rex tremendae* ends with a passionate setting of the words “Save me, O Fount of Pity.” The *Recordare*, *Ingemisco*, and *Confutatis* are more soloistic in character: here Verdi gives his gift for melody free reign. After a final reprise of the *Dies irae*, is the closing scene of this religious drama’s first act. The quartet and chorus intone the passionate prayer of the *Lacrymosa*, and the section closes with a hushed “Amen.”

The third movement, the Offertory, is a showpiece for the quartet, containing moments of what one writer has called “undiluted opera.” The movement is held

together by two statements of the music for *quam olim Abrahæ*—a gentle reminder to the Lord of his promised redemption.

The *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei* texts are familiar parts of Ordinary of the Mass—those movements that are sung at every Catholic service—although the *Agnus Dei* is changed slightly in the traditional *Requiem* to include a prayer for the dead. In the *Sanctus*, Verdi once again displays his skill in contrapuntal writing: after an opening fanfare and intonation, he writes eight-part counterpoint for two opposed choirs. The setting of *Pleni sunt coeli* at the end provides contrast with its more reserved style. The *Agnus Dei* is a series of exchanges between the two female singers and the chorus. The choral writing here is beautiful in its simplicity, and recalls many of Verdi's operatic choruses. The brief *Lux aeterna* that follows contains quiet, almost chantlike music for the three lower voices of the vocal quartet.

Like the second movement, the *Libera me* is lengthy and complex in structure. Verdi made only slight revisions to the 1869 version of this movement for the Manzoni *Requiem*. The result is that much of the musical material he used for earlier movements is present here, as well. This makes it particularly effective—it works like a recapitulation of the most stirring themes and sentiments. Verdi begins with a quick recitation of the opening line of text and an expanded treatment of the imagery of catastrophe. After a final statement of the *Dies iræ*, there is a passage of breathtaking beauty: a soprano melody on *Requiem aeternam* that soars to a high B-flat above unaccompanied chorus. For me, this passage represents the culmination of the entire *Requiem*—a jewel of absolution and forgiveness set amidst the destruction and fear of Judgment Day. With the soprano's benediction still hanging in the air, the movement moves towards its musical climax: a massive choral fugue. The *Requiem* does not end at this high level of volume and excitement, however. Verdi brings the Mass to a close with a quiet and intensely personal appeal for deliverance.

Postscript: For more than a century, the *Messa per Rossini* was known only as the first chapter in the story of Verdi's *Requiem*. However, there is an epilogue to this part of the story. In 1970, musicologist David Rosen (who—I can't resist adding—was one of my teachers at UW-Madison!) was in Milan, doing research on Verdi, when he discovered a complete score of the *Messa per Rossini*, together with several autograph scores of the individual movements. It had long been supposed that the Mass was lost, but it had it had been quietly gathering dust in the Ricordi

vault for over a century. The *Messa per Rossini* was finally given its world premiere in 1988—some 119 years late!

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