program notes  
by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

Requiem Mass (1873-1874)  
GIUSEPPE VERDI ■ 1813-1901

Giuseppe Verdi was, above all, a patriot. From his earliest years, he was an ardent supporter of the Risorgimento — the “resurgence” of ancient national pride — to free Italy from foreign domination and unify it under a single, native rule. Though he never personally manned the barricades, he became, through his music, one of the most illustrious embodiments of the Italian national spirit.

Almost all of Verdi’s early operas ran afoul of the censors because of the political implications of their plots. In 19th-century Europe, no one doubted that music and drama could inspire strong emotions and, perhaps, even action. The political arbiters were ever wary about allowing ideas of insurrection or royal fallibility to escape from the stage into the public consciousness. One such idea that did slip past their suspicious examination, however, was contained in Verdi’s Nabucco of 1842. The chorus of longing for their lost homeland sung in that opera by the Israelites captive in Babylon, Va, pensiero, sull’ali dorate (“Fly, thoughts, on wings of gold”), was quickly adopted by the Risorgimento as an anthem of struggle for Italy’s freedom. So great and enduring was the fame of this lovely music that it was sung by the crowds that lined the streets for Verdi’s funeral procession almost six decades later.

During the insurrections of 1848, the name VERDI became a rallying cry for the nationalists, and was scrawled across walls and carried on signs. Beside being a tribute to their beloved composer, the letters of his name were also an acrostic for “Vittorio Emanuele, Re d’Italia,” the Duke of Savoy whom the nationalists were fighting to bring to power as “King of Italy.” When Cavour called the first parliamentary session of the newly united Italy in 1859, Verdi was elected as the representative from Busseto. Though reluctant to enter the political arena, he was sufficiently patriotic and cognizant of his standing with his countrymen to accept the nomination.

With his love of country and constant efforts to promote Italian culture, Verdi viewed the death of Gioachino Rossini in Paris on November 13, 1868 as a national tragedy. He felt that a musical memorial should be erected to Rossini — not as a religious expedient to usher his soul into heaven, or as an expression of personal grief (the two were never close friends), but rather as an act of patriotism. One of the great Italians was gone, and Verdi believed the nation should properly mourn his passing.

Verdi proposed the composition of a composite Requiem Mass for Rossini to which the leading Italian composers would contribute. (“No foreign hands!” he insisted.) The performance was to take place on the first anniversary of Rossini’s death. Following Verdi’s instructions, the composers were chosen by lot by the publisher Giulio Ricordi, and each was assigned a section of the work. The closing Libera me fell to Verdi. However, preparations for the Rossini
Mass founedered on Verdi’s proposal that all those involved offer their services free of charge. The twelve other composers agreed to this plan, and the Mass was actually written, but the performers could not be secured. The project was cancelled, and the manuscripts were returned to their composers, whose reputations faded along with the prospects for the memorial Mass — Platania, Mabellini and Cagnoni, for example, are unknown today even in Italy. Verdi’s Libera me was filed away and forgotten, as were the plans for the Rossini Requiem.

In 1871, Alberto Mazzucato, a friend of Verdi and a composition teacher at the Milan Conservatory, discovered the Libera me manuscript in Ricordi’s vaults. He was enraptured with its beauty, and wrote to its creator urging him to complete the entire work. Verdi responded, “Your words nearly prompted me to compose the whole Mass at some later date.... Think what a disastrous result your praise could have had!” He continued that to add yet another Requiem to the “many, many” that existed was “useless.” Soon, however, he was to find a use for such a work, and give in to the temptation to take up his Libera me once again.

Alessandro Manzoni was one of the dominant figures of 19th-century Italy. His poems, plays and novels spoke directly to the Italian soul as it quested for freedom and national identity. His most famous work was the novel I promessi sposi (“The Betrothed”), which was considered not only the greatest Italian prose piece of the time, but also, as William Weaver noted in his study of Verdi, “a kind of stylebook for the country, which ... was linguistically chaotic.” Manzoni accomplished for Italy with this book what Luther’s translation of the Bible had done three centuries before for Germany — brought a standardized language to a country factionalized by innumerable dialects.

As he had been five years earlier with the passing of Rossini, Verdi was again inspired to commemorate the death of a great Italian with a memorial Mass. He sent his proposal to compose a Requiem in honor of Manzoni to the mayor of Milan, and it was eagerly accepted. When the mayor expressed his appreciation, Verdi replied, “You owe me no thanks. It is an impulse, or I might better say, a need of my heart which impels me to honor, as far as I can, this Great Man whom I so respected as a writer.”

Verdi scheduled the Requiem’s premiere for the first anniversary of Manzoni’s death, and began the score immediately. Remembering his earlier experience with the Rossini Requiem, however, he decided this time to control the entire project himself — composition, preparations and performance. He revived the Libera me for inclusion in the Manzoni Requiem, but newly composed the rest. The work was finished on April 10, 1874, and the first performance six weeks later in San Marco Cathedral was a triumph.

Verdi’s Requiem is in seven large movements, based on the text. The Requiem’s initial gesture, in the cellos, comes as if from a great distance and establishes the grave solemnity of the movement. The chorus intones a sweet, pathetic invocation for departed souls that leads directly into the Kyrie eleison (“Lord have mercy”), a broad, flowing prayer for divine compassion.

The Dies irae paints the awe-inspiring “Day of Wrath” when the world will stand in judgment. This movement,
which occupies fully one-third of the Requiem’s length, is divided into nearly a dozen successive scenes, which encompass a broad range of musical moods and technical devices.

The Offertorio (Domine Jesu Christe — “Lord Jesus Christ”) that follows comes like a halcyon spring breeze after the winter’s blast. Its gently swaying rhythm and huge melodic arches bear to celestial reaches the supplicant’s entreaty for the deliverance of the departed from the pains of hell. Its contrasting center section (Quam olim — Hostias — Quam olim repeated) is followed by a brief return of the gentle opening music.

The Sanctus (“Holy, Holy, Holy”) begins with a joyous shout. The music then launches into a bracing fugue on two subjects for divided chorus, which is followed by an antiphonal setting (i.e., choruses in alternation) of the Hosanna.

The Agnus Dei (“Lamb of God”), plain in texture and introspective in expression, is dominated by the voices with only the most sparse orchestral accompaniment. The Lux aeterna (“Light eternal”) is memorable for some of Verdi’s most translucent orchestral scoring.

The concluding Libera me (“Deliver me”) is the remnant of the earlier Requiem for Rossini. In the Manzoni Requiem, the movement consists of several sections: an introductory verse for soprano soloist that rises from a freely chanted beginning; a recall of the tempestuous Dies irae movement; a reminiscence of the opening Requiem aeternam in a breathtakingly beautiful setting for unaccompanied chorus and soprano; and a fugue which concludes with the quiet, resigned chanting that opened the movement.

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Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis. Rest eternal grant them, O Lord; and let perpetual light shine upon them.

Te decet hymnus, Deus, in Sion, et tibi reddetur votum in Jerusalem. There shall be singing unto Thee in Zion, and prayer shall go up to Thee

in Jerusalem.

Exaudi orationem meam. Hear my prayer.

Ad te omnis caro veniet. Unto Thee all flesh shall come.

Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.

Dies irae, dies illa
solvet saeclum in favilla,
teste David cum Sibylla.
Quantus tremor est futurus,
quando Judex est venturus
cuncta stricte discussurus!

This day, this day of wrath shall consume the world in ashes, so spake David and the Sibyl. Oh, what great trembling there will be when the Judge will appear to examine everything in strict justice!

Tuba mirum spargens sonum
per sepulchra regionum,
coget omnes ante thronum.
Mors stupebit et natura,
cum resurget creatura
cupidi responsura.

The trumpet, sending its wondrous sound across the graves of all lands, shall drive everyone before the throne. Death and nature shall be stunned when all creation rises again to stand before the Judge.

Liber scriptus proferetur,
in quo totum continetur,
de unda mundus judicetur.
Judex ergo cum sedebit,
quidquid latet apparebit,
il inultum remanebit.

A written book will be brought forth, in which everything is contained, from which the world will be judged. So when the Judge is seated, whatever is hidden shall be made known, nothing shall remain unpunished.

Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?
Quem patronum rogaturus,
cum vix justus sit sicurus?

What shall such a wretch as I say then? To which protector shall I appeal, when even the just man is barely safe?
Rex tremendae (Soloists and Chorus)

Rex tremendae majestatis, qui salvandos salvas gratis, salva me, fons pietatis!

King of awesome majesty, who freely saves those worthy of salvation, save me, fount of pity!

Recordare (Soprano and Mezzo-Soprano)

Recordare, Jesu pie, quod sum causa tuae viae, ne me perdas illa die.
Quaerens me, sedisti lassus, redemisti crucem passus; tans labor non sit cassus.
Juste judex ultionis, donum fac remissionis ante diem rationis.

Recall, dear Jesus, that I am the reason for Thy time on earth, do not cast me away on that day. Seeking me, Thou didst sink down wearily, Thou hast saved me by enduring the cross; such travail must not be in vain. Righteous judge of vengeance, award the gift of forgiveness before the day of reckoning.

Ingemisco (Tenor)

Ingemisco tamquam reus, culpa rubet vultus meus, supplicanti parce, Deus.
Qui Mariam absolvisti et latronem exaudisti, mihi quoque spem dedisti.
Preces meae non sunt dignae, sed tu bonus fac benigne, ne perenni cremer igne.
Inter oves locum praesta et ab hoedis me sequestra, statuens in parte dextra.

I groan like the sinner that I am, guilt reddens my face, Oh God, spare the supplicant.
Thou, who pardoned Mary and heeded the thief, hast given me hope as well.
My prayers are unworthy, but Thou, good one, in pity let me not burn in the eternal fire.
Give me a place among the sheep and separate me from the goats, let me stand at Thy right hand.

Confutatis (Bass and Chorus)

Confutatis maledictis, flammis acribus afflictis, voca me cum benedictis.
Oro supplex et acclinis, cor contritum quasi cinis, gere curam mei finis.

When the damned are cast away and consigned to the searing flames, call me to be with the blessed. Bowed down in supplication I beg Thee, my heart as though ground to ashes: help me in my last hour.

Dies irae, dies illa solvet saeculum in favilla, teste David cum Sibylla.

This day, this day of wrath shall consume the world in ashes, so spake David and the Sibyl.
Lacrimosa (Soloists and Chorus)

Lacrimosa dies illa
qua resurget ex favilla
judicandus homo reus;
Hic ergo parce Deus.
Pie Jesu, Domine,
dona eis requiem.
Amen.

Oh, this day full of tears
when from the ashes arises
guilty man, to be judged:
Oh Lord, have mercy upon him.
Gentle Lord Jesus,
grant them rest.
Amen.

Offertorio: Domine Jesu Christe (Soloists)

Domine Jesu Christe, rex gloriae,
Libera animas omnium
fidelium defunctorum
de poenis inferni
et de profundo lacu.
Libera eas de ore leonis,
ne absorbet eas tartarum,
ne cadant in obscurum;
Sed signifer sanctus Michael
representet eas in lucem sanctam,
quam olim Abrahae promisisti
et semini ejus.

Lord Jesus Christ, King of glory,
deliver the souls of the faithful departed
from the pains of hell
and the bottomless pit.
Deliver them from the jaws of the lion,
lest hell engulf them,
lest they be plunged into darkness;
but let the holy standard-bearer Michael
lead them into the holy light,
as Thou didst promise Abraham
and his seed.

Hostias et preces tibi, Domine,
laudis offerimus,
tu suscipe pro animabus illis,
quarum hodie memoriam facimus:
fac eas, Domine, de morte
transire ad vitam,
quam olim Abrahae promisisti
et semini ejus.

Lord, in praise we offer to Thee
sacrifices and prayers,
receive them for the souls of those
whom we remember this day:
Lord, make them pass
from death to life,
as Thou didst promise Abraham
and his seed.

Sanctus (Chorus)

Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus,
Dominus Deus Saboath!
Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua.
Hosanna in excelsis!
Benedictus qui venit
in nomine Domini!
Hosanna in excelsis!

Holy, holy, holy,
Lord God of hosts!
Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.
Glory to God in the highest!
Blessed is he who comes in the name
of the Lord.
Glory to God in the highest!
Agnus Dei (Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano and Chorus)

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,
dona eis requiem.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,
dona eis requiem sempiternam.

Lux aeterna (Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor and Bass)

Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine,
cum sanctis tuis in aeternam,
quia pius es.
Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat eis.

Libera me (Soprano and Chorus)

Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna
in die illa tremenda,
quando coeli movendi sunt et terra,
dum veneris judicaret saeculum
per ignem.
Tremens factus sum ego et timeo,
dum discussio venerit atque
venture ira:
quando coeli movendi sunt
et terra.
Dies irae, dies illa,
calamitatis et miseriae,
dies magna et amara valde,
dum veneris judicaret saeculum
per ignem.
Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat eis.
Libera me, Domine, etc.
Giuseppe Verdi
Requiem Mass
In Memory of Alessandro Manzoni
for Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor and Bass, Chorus and Orchestra

I. Requiem
II. Dies Irae
III. Offertorio
IV. Sanctus
V. Agnus Dei
VI. Lux Aeterna
VII. Libera Me

Soprano Soloist: Toni Marie Palmertree
Mezzo-Soprano Soloist: Patricia Risley
Tenor Soloist:
Bass Soloist: Jeremy Galyon
Allentown Symphony Chorus
Eduardo Azzati, Chorus Master
Muhlenberg College Chorus
/, Director