

Verdi's Requiem: An Opera In Disguise

Researched and present by Kurti Plohn

Composed by a grief-stricken Verdi to memorialize the passing of his friend and idol, the Italian poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni, the Verdi Requiem (in Italian: ***Messa da Requiem***) transforms fear, piety, supplication and hope into an earth-shattering operatic work. But fear not, it is not a convoluted piece of religious music as are some of the compositions of Bach, for example. As my chosen title indicates, it is rather an opera in disguise. We usually think of requiems and religion in the same context, but this is rather a composition written by an agnostic and anti-clerical composer in the memory of a dear friend and a public hero. Nor did he compose this work for fame. Verdi was then sixty years old and his reputation as an opera composer was firmly established as this work falls between 'Aida' and 'Otello'.

First of all, some background explanation is called for.

So then, who was this Alessandro Manzoni? A remarkable Italian poet and novelist, famous for his novel *The Betrothed* (Italian: *I Promessi Sposi*) published in 1827, a literary opus which is now ranked among the masterpieces of world literature. But the novel was conceived in the same time also as a symbol of the Italian *Risorgimento*, both for its patriotic message and for being a fundamental milestone in the development of the modern, unified, Italian language, indeed the paradigm of today's Italian language.

What was that Italian *Risorgimento*? The word translates as *resurgence* or *revival* but it was the unification of Italy. It was the political, intellectual and social movement that consolidated all the separate states of the Italian peninsula, which were quite a few, such as the Kingdom of Two Sicilies, the Papal States, the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, the Duchy of Parma, the Duchy of Modena and the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia, into one single unified state of the Kingdom of Italy, a process that began in 1815 and was completed only in 1871. And Alessandro Manzoni's novel, together with the patriotic revolutionary exuberance of Garibaldi made all this happen.

When Manzoni died in 1873, his funeral was celebrated with almost royal pomp. His remains were followed to the cemetery in Milan by a vast cortège, including the king, the royal princes and all officers of state.

Verdi was too grief-stricken to even attend his funeral, but he went to the mayor of Milan and proposed composing a memorial in the form of a requiem, to honor the memory of Manzoni. The mayor agreed immediately and Verdi's *Requiem* was performed on the first anniversary of Manzoni's death.

Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem* is a conductor's dream come true. Few pieces in the repertoire offer the drama of opera and the thrill of wonderful symphonic writing combined with stellar, virtuosic solo moments. But Verdi's *Requiem* does all that and more. Throughout the work, Verdi uses vigorous rhythms, sublime melodies, and dramatic contrasts—much as he did in his operas — to express the powerful emotions engendered by the text.

The progression of the piece tells the ultimate dramatic story of end of life, from profound loss in a subdued key at the start, to sheer terror at what lies ahead on judgment day in the famous *Dies Irae* (Latin for Day of Wrath) section; this is the dominant movement of the piece: it splits off in different directions, but always returns to the crushing hammer blows of the bass drum and orchestra blaring full tilt. This section always takes my breath away!

There are so many other transcendent moments: the *Lacrymosa* aria (Latin for "weeping") that palpably weeps; the uplifting and angelically scored *Lux Aeterna* (Latin for "eternal light"), and the *Libera Me* (Latin for "Deliver me"). The text reads, "Save me, Lord, from eternal death," and the music brings the return of the *Dies Irae* terror and then ultimate resignation as the words die out into uncertainty about what lies ahead. Trumpets surround the stage to produce a call to judgment in the *Tuba mirum* (Latin for wondrous sound), and the almost oppressive atmosphere of the *Rex tremendae majestatis* (Latin for King of tremendous majesty) creates a sense of unworthiness before the All Mighty. Yet the well-known tenor solo *Ingemisco* (Latin for I groan) radiates hope for the sinner who asks for the Lord's mercy. The *Sanctus* (Latin for Holly) scored for double chorus begins with a brassy fanfare to announce him "who comes in the name of the Lord". Finally, the *Libera me Domine* (Latin for Deliver me, Lord), interrupts. Here the soprano cries out, begging, "Deliver me, Lord, from eternal death ... when you will come to judge the world by fire."

As an opera composer, Verdi was always conscious of dramatic effect. Here he calls for four additional trumpets played alternately by two groups, placed usually down in the concert hall, to evoke archetypal **[arketaipl]** images of the call into the next world. Those trumpet fanfares are a stroke of pure genius, and I just wish to hear that part one day with 20 trumpets throughout the concert hall, what an effect that would be!

The playwright and music critic George Bernard Shaw was a great admirer of the work from its first London performance, and had the *Libera me* section played at his own funeral.

Let me mention here that, incredibly, **Verdi's** Requiem was performed 16 times, between 1943 and 1944 by the prisoners in the Nazi concentration camp of Theresienstadt, Terezín in Czech, located in German-occupied Czechoslovakia, a concentration camp established by the SS during World War II. Tens of thousands of people died there, mostly from malnutrition and disease. More than 150,000 other persons (including tens of thousands of children) were held there for months or years, before being sent by rail transports to their deaths at Treblinka and Auschwitz extermination camps in occupied Poland. The Nazis claimed that Theresienstadt was a model community for Jews, when in fact it was only a transfer camp for the unfortunates waiting to be transferred to the other death camps better equipped for mass killing. Strangely enough, may be to maintain moral, the Nazis permitted musical performances in Theresienstadt, even of this Requiem by Verdi. The performances were extraordinary on several counts: first, they had only a single vocal score with piano accompaniment, so every part had to be learned from memory; second, they practiced in a dark, cold, damp basement with only a broken piano and after long days of forced labor; and third, as the performances took place over an extended period, many of the singers were removed by the Nazis for destination Auschwitz and had to be replaced. The final performance particularly provided a basis for dignified self-expression as well as attempting to symbolically communicate to the outer world the circumstances at the camp to a visiting International Red Cross delegation in 1944.

In 2006, the American conductor Murry Sidlin performed the Requiem in the same hall in which this Red Cross performance had taken place and rehearsed the choir in the same basement where the original inmates learnt and practiced their parts. It was part of the Prague Spring Festival and children of the survivors sang in the choir with their parents sitting in the audience. Quite a story!

Today's 1970 DVD recording is with the London Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Chorus, and with the unforgettable Leonard Bernstein conducting. The four soloists are the American soprano Martina Arroyo, a 2013 Kennedy Center Honors recipient, the British mezzo-soprano Josephine Veasey, the much loved Spanish tenor Plácido Domingo, a United States Presidential Medal of Freedom honoree and the Italian bass-baritone Ruggero Raimondi, whom you heard last week in the Barber of Seville.

Bernstein, aged 52 at the time of this recording, unabashedly represents Verdi's theatrical side in this recording, and provides a superbly crisp and dramatic account that bristles with bold energy and owes far more to the stage than the pulpit.

Mr. Bernstein was born in 1918 as the son of Ukrainian-Jewish parents and was named Louis, a name imposed by his grandmother, but which nobody in the family liked, so that at age 15 he changed it officially to Leonard. A couple of years later, starting in menial musical jobs (transcribing music) he used the pseudonym **[súdānim]** Lenny Amber. (as Bernstein in German means Amber in English).

Duration of this recording: 90 min.

But before calling Mr. Bernstein to the podium, let me add that we lost this wonderful musical personality on October 14, 1990, when Leonard Bernstein died in his apartment at the Dakota on the Upper West Side of Manhattan of a heart attack caused by progressive lung failure. He was suffering from emphysema, pulmonary infections and a pleural tumor. He was 72 years old. The New York Times, in his obituary, called him so aptly: the Music's Monarch **[mónark]**.

And now, maestro Bernstein, please come to the podium...

Verdi – Requiem

Martina Arroyo, soprano
Josephine Veasey, mezzosoprano
Plácido Domingo, tenor
Ruggero Raimondi, barítono

London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus

Leonard Bernstein

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uh1-aQU7Ak4>