

## Te Deum and Jubilate in D

Henry Purcell (1658 or 1659-1695)

In November of 1694, Purcell received a major commission for an extremely prestigious event. A "*Te Deum and Jubilate*" were required for the celebration of St. Cecilia's Day, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, to be performed in St Bride's Church in Fleet Street in front of a congregation that included all the most important musical figures in London.

The text of the *Te Deum* is long and of a rather episodic nature, and Purcell decided to play to this rather than attempt to disguise it, and wrote music which characterises each short section individually. It is full of musical pictorialism; two trebles portray the cherubim and seraphim, and at the phrase "and lift them up forever", Purcell sets the words to a simple scale over a full octave which begins in the bass, moves to the alto and ends in the soprano. The centrepiece of the work is "Vouchsafe, O Lord", where the dissonant harmony builds up a moving plea to the Saviour. The movement ends with a serene affirmation of trust in the Lord.

The shorter *Jubilate* text begins with typically dotted rhythms in the exhortation to be joyful, but is more deeply felt in the lovely pastoral duet of "Be ye sure that the Lord he is God". In the concluding "Glory be to the Father", Purcell shows off his contrapuntal ingenuity to the assembled musical worthies and concludes with a blaze of sound at the "Amen".

Purcell's contemporary Thomas Tudwell, who was a chorister in the Chapel Royal and organist at King's College Cambridge from 1670 to 1680, described his friend's composition thus: "*There is in this Te Deum, such a glorious representation, of the Heavenly Choirs, of Cherubim, & Seraphim, falling down before the Throne & singing Holy, Holy, Holy &c As hath not been Equall'd, by any Foreigner or Other... This most beautifull, & sublime representation, I dare challenge, all the Orators, Poets, Painters &c of any Age whatsoever, to form so lively an Idea, of Choirs of Angels singing and paying their Adorations.*"

The work was a great success, and a repeat performance was given in front of the King and Queen, William and Mary, in the Chapel Royal on 9<sup>th</sup> December. No-one could have known that on the 28<sup>th</sup> of the same month, at the age of 32, Queen Mary was to be carried off by smallpox and Purcell would compose some of his most memorable music for her funeral. Almost exactly a year after the first performance of the *Te Deum*, on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1695, Purcell himself died, aged about 36. The music he had written for Queen Mary's funeral was performed at his own.

Purcell's *Te Deum and Jubilate* remained hugely popular for the next half century (though badly hacked about and "improved" by John Blow) and were annually performed at St Paul's Cathedral until 1712, after which they were performed alternately with Handel's *Utrecht Te Deum and Jubilate* until 1743.

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June 2011

## **Prelude and Fugue in B minor (BWV 544)**

**J.S. Bach (1685-1750)**

The *Prelude and Fugue in B Minor (BWV 544)* is one of the five large-scale organ prelude and fugues that Bach composed during his years in Leipzig (1723 until his death). It is one of the few whose autograph survives—indicating it was written in or before 1727. Bach's biographer Christoph Wolff has suggested that it was composed for use at the Academic Memorial Service for Saxon Electress Christiane Ebhardine, which took place in October 1727; this may well be true, as Cantata 198 ("Lass Fürstin, lass noch einen Strahl"), which we know to have been performed at that service, is similarly expressive and chromatic and also in the key of B minor.

The Prelude is in Ritornello form, with the opening material returning after each of the four episodes. Unlike the majority of Bach Preludes, it is slow and intensely packed with embellishment, appoggiaturas and chromaticism. The Fugue is in contrast, and is based on a very simple subject, melodically and rhythmically, which allows Bach a great amount of compositional freedom in the countersubjects. The Fugue is also notable as its middle section, without pedals, is particularly lengthy and contains several fugal entries, building up the anticipation of the return of the main subject in the pedals.

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## Petite Messe Solennelle

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

Finally in tonight's concert, we present a selection of movements from Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle*, his last major composition, and indeed one of his last compositions of any sort.

Rossini was born in 1792 in the Italian town of Pesaro, entering the Liceo Musicale in Bologna in 1806, where his reluctance to submit to the dustier and more esoteric aspects of counterpoint made his teacher Mattei describe him as "the dishonour of his school". He did, however, acquire a love of Mozart which he would not have gained without exposure to him at the Liceo, describing Mozart much later as "the admiration of my youth, the desperation of my middle years and the consolation of my old age". Although he appears not to have composed a great deal whilst at the Liceo, he was commissioned to write his first opera (*Demetrio e Polibio*) in 1807, aged 15, though it was not performed until 1812. Rossini proceeded to revolutionise the form and style of Italian opera in the succeeding years, transforming the now-moribund forms of *opera seria* with elements of Neapolitan *opera buffa* and the more sophisticated *scenas* and ensembles of his beloved Mozart into what became the Romantic world of Bellini, Donizetti and Verdi. Between 1810 and 1829, Rossini composed an astonishing 39 operas, culminating in the one of his greatest, *Guillaume Tell*, written for the Opéra in Paris, the city to which he had moved in 1824. He then, quite simply, stopped composing operas for the next 39 years until his death in 1868. His only large-scale compositions during that time were both liturgical: the *Stabat Mater*, which RCS performed in June 2010, and tonight's work.

Exactly why Rossini should have retired from operatic composition so completely is not known for certain. Sheer exhaustion may well have played a part; 39 operas in 19 years is a murderous workload. He also suffered from crippling ill-health, both physical and mental, in the 1840s and 1850s, which could well have stemmed from this overwork. In 1830 the management of the Paris Opéra changed with the revolution which overthrew Charles X, and Rossini was too closely identified with the old regime and lost his influence there. He was also enmeshed in very long-winded and troublesome legal battle to retain the right to an annuity which had been granted him by the old monarch. It seems highly unlikely that there was any grand decision on his part to forsake composition. It seems to me most likely that Rossini, who has been described as "the last Classical composer", saw himself as having been overtaken by musical developments. The new Grand Opera which his friend Meyerbeer was developing and the overtly melodramatic Romantic works of Bellini, Donizetti and later Verdi were simply not to his taste and foreign to his style.

He did, however, compose over 150 mainly short pieces, which he described as *péchés de vieillesse* (sins of old age) during the almost 40 years of his "retirement". Tonight's *Messe*, which is by far the most substantial, he called "the last mortal sin of my old age". The 71 year-old Rossini began its composition in 1863, finishing it in the following year. Again, we do not know why he should have decided to compose a work of such unprecedented size, the largest piece he had written since *Guillaume Tell* 35 years earlier. It was requested by his friend the Comtesse Louise Pillet-Will for the consecration of her private chapel, but Rossini had been begged without success by many people to write something, so this in itself cannot be all there was to it. Perhaps, like the *Mass in B Minor* of Bach, which we performed at our last concert, the imminence of death made both composers wish to leave behind one final masterwork as a kind of last testament. It was written to be performed by extremely modest forces, only 12 singers accompanied by two pianos and harmonium, and was first performed at the Comtesse's new house on 14<sup>th</sup> March

1864 in front of a small, but very distinguished audience, including the composers Auber, Meyerbeer, Ambroise Thomas and Carrafa, and was a tremendous success. At the end of the manuscript, Rossini wrote the following self-deprecatory postscript: "*Dear God, here it is finished, this poor little Mass. Is this sacred music which I have written or damned music? [Est-ce bien de la musique sacrée que je viens de faire ou bien de la sacrée musique?] I was born for opera buffa, as you well know. A little technique, a little heart, that's all. Be blessed, then, and admit me to Paradise.*"

He refused to allow it to be published, and only allowed it to be performed three times (all at the Pillet-Will's home) before his death. He was urged to orchestrate it so that it would achieve more frequent performance, but he refused to do so until, reluctantly, he did so in order to forestall its orchestration by anyone else after his death. The orchestrated version was not performed until after his death when his widow Olympe sold the rights. Rossini's star was already well on the wane by the time he died, and the *Messe* was soon forgotten - indeed, between about 1880 and 1960 he was essentially only remembered for *The Barber of Seville*, but there has been a huge revival of interest in him over the last 40 years.

The standard joke which musical wags like to make about tonight's work is that is neither *petite* nor *solennelle*, but this witticism is a mistake on two counts. The *petite* aspect is a reference to its originally intended scale of only 15 performers in total, and *solennelle* is a technical term. A "missa solemnis" is a setting of all the standard sections of the mass, as opposed to a "missa brevis", which often consists only of the Kyrie and Gloria. However, underlying the joke is often a sneer by (usually) north Europeans at what is seen as a lightweight, even trivial, piece. This is a serious misconception stemming from a historical oddity. The only other pieces of Italian sacred music written between the end of the Baroque period and the present day to have survived in the repertoire are Rossini's *Stabat Mater* and Verdi's *Requiem* (which has its own shallow witticism of being "Verdi's greatest opera"). The canon of sacred masterpieces written between 1750 and 1900 is made up of works by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Bruckner with a side order of Berlioz and Fauré, and so the expectations we have of sacred music are essentially Teutonic. Rossini's and Verdi's works are routinely called "operatic", and if this only meant that their essence was lyrical rather than symphonic it would be fair enough, but it is often more truthfully a disguised attack implying that these works are trivial and melodramatic, without genuine spiritual depth. This is to elevate a habitual expectation of what is appropriate in sacred music into an inviolable norm. Despite Rossini's standard defensive irony and self-deprecation, there is no reason at all to doubt his sincerity or spirituality, and if the music is listened to on its own terms rather than under the shadow of expectations formed from German masterpieces, its own status as a masterpiece will be evident.

The opening "Kyrie" begins with keening sustained chords on the harmonium over a restless staccato tread on the piano, giving an atmosphere of tremendous disquiet and agitation. This "Kyrie" begs for mercy against a background of deep uncertainty of its being granted. The "Christe eleison", written in a *stile antica* showing an unexpected knowledge of the style of Palestrina, is a calm oasis of hope in the intercession of Christ, before the disquiet returns in the second "Kyrie". The peremptory fanfare of the opening of the "Gloria" is an exuberant, indeed triumphant, celebration of God's glory. A tenor aria, "Domine Deus", follows which is perhaps the most obviously operatic section of the work, yet is, in fact, unlike any tenor aria in any of Rossini's operas. The first section seems at first to be an exuberantly simple affirmation of God's status, but the frequent flashes into the minor and the whole of the middle section have a troubled feel to them which implies a rather more complex relationship with the text. The "Qui tollis" is a heartfelt, imploring duet for sopranos

and altos. The following bass aria "Quonian" is written to a march rhythm like the "Domine Deus". The opening fanfares of "Cum sancto spiritu" echo those at the start of the Gloria. Is there a more joyous, life-affirming fugue in all music than that which follows? Rossini exuberantly portrays the life to come in the presence of the Holy Spirit. The "Credo" contains one of Rossini's little jokes, the tempo being marked "Allegro Cristiano". It is a robust statement of faith, and the section ends with another wonderful fugue at "Et vitam venturi"; could this be a gesture of apology to the spirit of his old counterpoint teacher Mattei to show that perhaps he wasn't "the dishonour of his school" any longer? The style of the unaccompanied "Sanctus" owes nothing to the shade of Palestrina, with its very 19<sup>th</sup> century chromaticism. The "Agnus Dei" with which the work ends is an exquisite aria originally scored for solo alto and chorus, but tonight sung by the alto section of the chorus. Its restless piano part against sustained harmonium chords echoes the opening "Kyrie" in its request for peace. It reaches a passionate, imploring climax, which then modulates into the major, as though certainty has been attained, only for the work to end with a most enigmatic postlude which seems to undercut any such certainty. Rossini challenges our expectations of what a "sacred" work should be like right to the end.

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