

Requiem

Giuseppe Verdi (1813 - 1901)

Unlike the Mozart Requiem, which we performed in our last concert in April, Verdi's Requiem was never intended for liturgical performance. It does, however, have something in common with Mozart's in that it has an unusual compositional history, and in its first incarnation was not performed at all.

On 13 November 1868, Gioachino Rossini died at his country house at Passy in France. Although he had composed his last opera, *Guillaume Tell*, almost forty years before and had lived in Paris for forty-five years, he was still regarded as the grand old man of Italian opera. Verdi's respect for Rossini was such ("A great name has disappeared from the world" he wrote on hearing the news) that he suggested to his publisher, Giulio Riccardi, that the first anniversary of Rossini's death should be marked by a performance in the city where Rossini had grown up, Bologna, of a requiem to be composed by himself and twelve other leading Italian composers. Verdi knew very well that such a piece was bound to be something of a hotchpotch, but he had other ideas in mind. Verdi had always been strongly in favour of the unification of Italy, which had finally been accomplished in 1860. However he soon became disillusioned with the way that national politics had degenerated into petty, regional squabbles and self-interest. A requiem written by a range of Italian composers to venerate the life and work of a great national figure would be an opportunity to bring together the disparate local factions to form a truly pan-Italian commemoration.

The composers were approached, with Verdi deciding to contribute the final "Libera me" movement, and the project was underway. The other composers were well-known in Italy at the time, but not a single one has kept even the smallest toehold in the repertoire today. Unfortunately, the conductor, Angelo Mariani, despite having been on the organising committee from the start, had lost interest, and only nine days before the premiere, a year to the day after Rossini's death, and despite all the composers having written their movements, the project was abandoned, much to Verdi's fury. The manuscript lay in Riccardi's archive until the piece (named the *Requiem per Rossini*) was given its first performance almost 120 years later in 1988 in Stuttgart.

In April 1873, the poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni died. Manzoni was the writer of possibly the greatest Italian novel of the 19th century, *I promessi sposi*. This sprawling historical novel, published in 1827 but set in the early 17th century in Spanish-ruled northern Italy, was much influenced by the works of Sir Walter Scott. It has been called "the most widely read work in the Italian language" and "has been the object of more intense scrutiny or more intense scholarship" than any piece of Italian literature except Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Verdi, who had first read *I promessi sposi* aged 16 and had admired Manzoni all his life, had met him in 1868, and was so distraught when he heard of his death that he could not attend the funeral. He decided to visit the grave "alone and unseen", and on the night of this visit he wrote to Riccardi of his resolve to write a requiem "as a way of honouring his memory", and even offered to conduct the premiere himself and pay for the copying of the parts. Never a man to waste good music, Verdi revised the "Libera me" from the Rossini project, and it became the final movement of the Manzoni Requiem.

Although never intended for liturgical performance, it was first performed at the church of San Marco in Milan, close to the first anniversary of Manzoni's death. It was conducted by Verdi himself with the four soloists who had been in the premiere of *Aida* two years before, and within a matter of days had had three further performances with the same forces at La Scala. Incidentally, as with Haydn's *Creation* which we performed in November 2011, the balance of the forces at the premiere seems to us strangely weighted towards the orchestra: an orchestra of 100 and a choir of 120. Verdi took the Requiem on tour to Paris (where it was performed seven times), Vienna (Brahms said of it "Only a genius could have written such a work") and London. Verdi wrote the mezzo-soprano "Liber scriptus" for the London performance to replace a choral fugue

which he had come to believe did not fit the drama of that section. In London, its Catholic nature and the general contempt in which English musicians held Italian opera meant that it could not sell out the Albert Hall for even one performance, and Verdi left London in a very disgruntled state of mind. It did, however, gain a surprising amount of praise from the critics. The *Times* wrote that “it evidently made a great impression”, and the *Telegraph* that “in Verdi’s latest work we have a remarkable, because distinctive and masterly, addition to Italian sacred music.” The *Pall Mall Gazette* called it “the most beautiful music for the church that has been produced since the requiem of Mozart”, and the *Standard* considered that it “may fairly be placed beside the masterpieces of Mozart and Rossini. A greater compliment than this could not be paid to any composer”. In an interesting sidelight on the different expectations of the time, the *Morning Post* informs us that “Every number was applauded, and more than one piece encored”.

Before its premiere, the German conductor Hans von Bülow managed to get a look at the score and sarcastically described it as “Verdi’s latest opera, though in ecclesiastical robes” and for many years there were often mocking references made to its being “Verdi’s greatest opera”. In von Bülow’s defence, when he finally actually heard the piece eighteen years later, he was moved to tears and wrote to Verdi to apologise. His original view of the Requiem has long been consigned to oblivion, and not only has its status as a masterpiece been recognised, it has become one of the most popular pieces in the choral repertoire.

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