

Petite Messe Solennelle

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

Gioachino 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 at the Liceo, describing that composer 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 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 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, who was closely identified with the old regime, lost his influence there. He was also enmeshed in a very long-winded and troublesome legal battle to retain the right to an annuity which had been granted to 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. Among Rossini’s great friends in Paris was Count Alexis Pillet-Will and his family, and in 1860 both the Count’s father and his 24 year-old-eldest daughter died. In 1861 the Count’s second-eldest daughter also died, aged 23. The family were in process of building a magnificent new home in Paris which included a private chapel, and Comtesse Louise Pillet-Will requested a work for the consecration of the new chapel. Rossini had been begged without success by many people to write works for them, but perhaps (though there is no documentary evidence to support this theory) he was deeply touched by the tragedies which had fallen so suddenly on his friends. When the death of the soprano Laure Cinti-Damoreau, who had taken the lead soprano roles in all five operas which Rossini had written for Paris, occurred in 1863, perhaps that was the final spur to write a religious work. It may also have been that the imminence of death put into Rossini’s mind a

wish to leave behind one final masterwork as a kind of last testament, as seems to have been the case with Bach's *Mass in B Minor*.

The *Petite Messe Solennelle* was written to be performed by extremely modest forces, only 12 singers accompanied by two pianos and harmonium. It was first performed at the Comtesse's new house on 14th March 1864 in front of a small, but very distinguished, audience, including the composers Auber, Meyerbeer, Ambroise Thomas and Carrafa, with 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."

(In typical fashion, Rossini here makes punning use of the two meanings of the word "sacrée", which bizarrely can mean both "sacred" and "cursed".)

He refused to allow the *Messe* to be published, and only allowed it to be performed three times before his death, all at the Pillet-Wills' home. He was urged to orchestrate it so that it would achieve more frequent performance, but refused to do so until, reluctantly, he did so in order to forestall its orchestration by anyone else after his death. However, towards the end of his life, Rossini did show a desire to have the work performed publicly, but at this time a Papal Bull dating from the ninth century was in place which forbade the use of women's voices in church performances (a ban which was, astonishing, technically still in operation until 1967!) Rossini, who had something of an aversion to boys' voices, even wrote to Pope Pius IX in 1866 requesting permission to perform the mass with female singers in one of the Paris churches, but to no avail. The orchestrated version was not performed until 1869, after his death, when his widow Olympe sold the rights, and it took place in the Théâtre des Italiens, not in a church. Rossini's star was already well on the wane by the time he died, and the *Messe* was soon forgotten - indeed, between about 1890 and 1950 he was essentially only remembered for *The Barber of Seville*, though 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 it is neither *petite* nor *solennelle*, but not only is this witticism a mistake on two counts, it also assumes that Rossini was some sort of naïve fool who could not recognise the irony. 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 another Rossini piece, the *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. These works of Rossini and Verdi are routinely called "operatic", and if this meant only that their essence was lyrical rather than symphonic it would be fair enough, but it is often more truthfully a disguised attack implying that they are trivial, melodramatic and 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 status as a masterpiece will be evident. Rossini actually anticipated this himself when he wrote in answer to a question from the Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick "This is not music for you Germans. My holiest music is always only semi-seria". It is, however, in its understatement and ironic detachment, clearly an antecedent of the music of Satie, Poulenc and the other composers of Les Six.

The opening "Kyrie" begins with keening sustained chords on the harmonium over a restless staccato tread on the piano, giving an atmosphere of 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", which contains more-extreme chromatically wandering harmonic progressions. The uncertainty is even greater.

The peremptory fanfare of the opening of the "Gloria" is an exuberant, indeed triumphant, celebration of God's glory, but the succeeding section, "Laudamus te, glorificamus te", seems anything but joyful with its strange, unexpected modulations into the minor. The unease of the "Kyrie" is very much still with us. A gently consoling "Gratias" for the solo quartet follows, the first time that there seems to be no disquiet in the music. The tenor aria, "Domine Deus", which follows 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 aria ends with a remarkable postlude where the music gradually seems to disintegrate until it ends with a final crashing unison C natural - a note which is not a part of the D major key of the aria. The "Qui tollis" is a heartfelt, imploring duet for soprano and alto soloists, with its pleading cries of "Miserere nobis". The following bass aria "Quoniam" is written to a march rhythm, like the "Domine Deus", and is similarly undercut by flashes into the minor and unexpected harmonic progressions. The opening fanfares of "Cum sancto spiritu" which ends the "Gloria" echo those at its beginning. 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, and finally in this movement we have almost unalloyed optimism and certainty.

The "Credo" contains one of Rossini's little jokes, the tempo being marked "Allegro Cristiano" - a touch that Satie surely must have appreciated. It is a robust statement of faith. The "Crucifixus" for solo soprano is one of the strangest and most perplexing movements in the work. The setting, with its charming melody and suavely side-slipping harmony, seems to have no connection with the events described in the text. But that may be the whole point; perhaps Rossini was anticipating a Brechtian "verfremdungseffekt" (distancing effect) by over half a century, making the audience think again about the crucifixion precisely by taking an opposite path to the sort of tortured chromaticism that had been the norm since the renaissance. The triumphal "Et resurrexit" follows a much more conventional course, though the apparent naivety of the upward scales preceding "et ascendit in caelum" is, rather, a highly knowing, sophisticated gesture. 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 "Preludio religioso" is, of course, no part of the Mass as such, but reflects the standard practice of French churches of the period in having music to accompany the

Offertory. Again its chromatic discursiveness and enigmatic simplicity look forward to late Liszt and Satie. A very brief "Ritornello" for harmonium follows which (in another Satie-esque touch) never actually returns.

Unlike the "Christe", the style of the unaccompanied "Sanctus" owes nothing to the shade of Palestrina, with its very 19th century chromaticism. "O salutaris", to a text by St Thomas Aquinas, is another piece which is not part of the proper mass text, but follows the French practice of having music during Communion. The "Agnus Dei" with which the work ends is an exquisite aria for solo alto and chorus. It begins with a most enigmatic prelude, leading into a restless piano part against sustained harmonium chords which echoes the opening "Kyrie" in its request for peace. It reaches a passionate, imploring climax, which finally modulates into the major, as though certainty has been attained, only for the work to end with a repetition of the enigmatic prelude, undercutting any such certainty. Rossini challenges our expectations of what a "sacred" work should be like right to the end.

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