

Giuseppe Verdi: Requiem

About a month after Giuseppe Verdi's death (1813-1901), his coffin was moved from the municipal cemetery in Milan to the newly built *Casa Riposo per Musicisti*, a retirement home for opera singers that Verdi himself had funded. It is estimated that a whopping 300,000 people filled the streets of Milan to see the procession, which included politicians, ambassadors, and other important officials of all stripes. At the start of the procession, a chorus of hundreds gathered to sing one of his most famous tunes, "The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves" from his opera *Nabucco*. This is but one example that illustrates how Verdi is far more than a composer: he is one of Italy's national treasures and a symbol of Italian patriotism.

Verdi is best known for composing operas—28 in total. Although the style of his compositions significantly changed from his first opera (completed in 1839) to his final masterpiece, *Fallstaff* (1893), there are some common traits in these action-packed dramas: catchy melodies, intense passion, and exaggerated emotional conflict, all expressed in the music. He once stated, "There is one thing the public will not tolerate in the theater: boredom." One might think of him as the Steven Spielberg of his era.

Between 1848 and 1870, Italy was marked by three wars and several revolts in its quest for unification and independence, a period known as *Risorgimento* ("rising again.") Verdi was the most important Italian composer of this time, and although he was not in the front lines of this turbulent political movement, his music served as a kind of soundtrack for those who were. His name was even converted into a slogan of support for installing the Italian monarchy: "VERDI — Vittorio Emanuele Re D'Italia." In 1861, after King Vittorio Emanuele took the throne, Verdi was elected to the Italian parliament, and was even appointed to the senate years later.

1873 marked the passing of a man whom Verdi greatly admired: the writer Alessandro Manzoni, whose work had significant patriotic appeal for those involved in the *Risorgimento*. In a letter to his publisher, Verdi wrote, "I would like to set to music a Mass for the Dead to be performed next year on the anniversary of [Manzoni's] death. The Mass would have rather vast dimensions... a large orchestra and a large chorus... principal singers... I would have the copying of the music done at my expense, and I myself would conduct the performance both at the rehearsals and in church."

Verdi's *Requiem* is much more than a religious service for the dead. The powerful force and expression of this piece reaches operatic levels, with even the vocal soloists seeming to take on roles and personalities. Verdi brings his unique brand of drama to this epic work.

The first movement opens with hushed tones, and vocal soloists enter proclaiming "Lord have mercy." The second movement, by far the largest of this 7-movement work, unleashes musical fire and brimstone with full orchestral and choral forces ("The day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in glowing ashes.") This is juxtaposed with moments of contemplation and reflection by the vocal soloists ("Recall, merciful Jesus, that I was the reason for your journey.")

In the offertory third movement, Verdi showcases his well-honed operatic skills with the use of small vocal ensemble, as the soloists become a quartet ("We offer to you, oh Lord, sacrifices and

prayers.”) The brief Sanctus fourth movement is heralded with an electrifying trumpet fanfare, displaying a lively tapestry of complex counterpoint between the simultaneous musical lines.

The fifth movement treats the listener to an exquisite duet, in octaves, between soprano and mezzo-soprano, with majestic response from the full choir. This gives way to the sixth movement, another tender section featuring Verdi’s ingenious writing for small vocal ensemble (“Let eternal light shine on them, oh Lord.”)

The seventh and final movement begins with an expressive solo from the mezzo-soprano (“Deliver me, oh Lord”), which later transitions back to the earlier fire and brimstone from the Dies irae movement. The ending features more fervent pleas from the solo mezzo-soprano, joined in by full choir, and quietly closing with reverent harmonies.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.

If your Latin is a bit rusty, no worries—below is an English translation of the full text:

I. Requiem & Kyrie (Lord have mercy)

Grant them eternal rest, O Lord; and may perpetual light shine upon them. A hymn in Zion befits you, O God, and a debt will be paid to you in Jerusalem. Hear my prayer: all earthly flesh will come to you. Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us.

II. Dies irae (The day of wrath)

The day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in glowing ashes, as David and the Sibyl prophesied. How great will be the terror, when the Judge comes to give strict justice. The trumpet, scattering a marvelous sound through the tombs of every land, will gather all before the throne.

Death and Nature shall stand amazed, when all Creation rises again to answer to the Judge. A written book will be brought forth, which contains everything for which the world will be judged. Therefore, when the Judge takes His seat, whatever is hidden will be revealed: nothing shall go unpunished. The day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in ashes, as David and the Sibyl prophesied.

What can a wretch like me say? Whom shall I ask to intercede for me, when not even the righteous are safe from damnation? King of dreadful majesty, who grants salvation to the redeemed ones, save me, O fount of mercy.

Recall, merciful Jesus, that I was the reason for your journey: do not destroy me on that day. In seeking me, you sat down wearily; enduring the Cross, you redeemed me: do not let these pains to have been in vain. Just Judge of punishment: give me the gift of redemption before the day of reckoning.

I groan as a guilty one, and my face blushes with guilt; spare the supplicant, O God. You, who absolved Mary Magdalen, and heard the prayer of the thief, have given me hope, as well. My prayers are not worthy, but show mercy, O benevolent one, lest I burn forever in fire. Give me a place among the sheep, and separate me from the goats, placing me on your right hand.

When the damned are silenced, and given to the fierce flames, call me with the blessed ones. I pray, suppliant and kneeling, with a heart contrite as ashes: take my ending into your care.

The day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in ashes, as David and the Sibyl prophesied. That day is one of weeping, on which shall rise from the ashes the guilty man, to be judged. Therefore, spare this one, O God. Merciful Lord Jesus: grant them peace. Amen.

III. Offertory

O Lord Jesus Christ, King of Glory: deliver the souls of all the faithful dead from the pains of hell and from the deep pit; deliver them from the mouth of the lion; that hell may not swallow them, and that they may not fall into darkness. But may the holy standard-bearer Michael show them the holy light; which you once promised to Abraham and his descendants. We offer to you, O Lord, sacrifices and prayers. Receive them on behalf of those souls whom we commemorate today. Grant, O Lord, that they might pass from death into that life which you once promised to Abraham and his seed. Deliver the souls of all the faithful dead from the pains of hell; Grant that they might pass from death into life.

IV. Sanctus (Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty)

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth. Heaven and earth are filled with your glory. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!

V. Agnus dei (Lamb of God)

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant them rest. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

VI. Lux aeterna (Light eternal)

Let eternal light shine upon them, O Lord, with your saints forever; for you are merciful. Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon them with your saints forever; for you are merciful.

VII. Libera me (Deliver my soul)

Deliver me, O Lord, from eternal death on that awful day, when the heavens and the earth shall be moved: when you will come to judge the world by fire. I tremble, and I fear the judgment and the wrath to come, when the heavens and the earth shall be moved. The day of wrath, that day of calamity and misery; a great and bitter day, indeed. Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon them. Deliver me, Lord, from eternal death on that awful day. Deliver me, O Lord, when the heavens and the earth shall be moved; when you will come to judge the world by fire. Deliver me, Lord, from eternal death on that awful day. Deliver me.