

Verdi Requiem + Higdon Premiere

Performed March 29, 2009

It is only fitting that Mendelssohn Club celebrates its 135th anniversary with a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's monumental *Messa da Requiem*, a work which also premiered 135 years ago. Conceived as a memorial to Alessandro Manzoni, the great novelist whose works helped forge an Italian national identity and one of the leaders of the Milanese revolt against Austria, it stands as one of the greatest choral works ever written. And in keeping with a Mendelssohn Club tradition, the *Requiem* is being paired with a work commissioned for the occasion, *On the Death of the Righteous*, by noted Philadelphia composer Jennifer Higdon and based on a text by the poet and clergyman John Donne.

Jennifer Higdon

Jennifer Higdon is one of the most sought-after and widely performed American composers. She has received commissions from such major orchestras as the Philadelphia Orchestra, Chicago Symphony, Pittsburgh Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, Indianapolis Symphony, National Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Dallas Symphony, and Baltimore Symphony. She has written for the Tokyo String Quartet, the Ying Quartet, the Cypress Quartet, pianist Gary Graffman, and the eclectic sextet eighth blackbird. Her *Violin Concerto*, written for Hilary Hahn, received its premiere with the Indianapolis Symphony last month and she is currently working on an opera for San Francisco Opera. Her orchestral tone poem *blue cathedral* has received more than 160 performances and *Concerto for Orchestra*, commissioned by the Philadelphia Orchestra, has received 40 performances since its 2002 premiere. Both works have been recorded on the Telarc label by Robert Spano and the Atlanta Symphony.



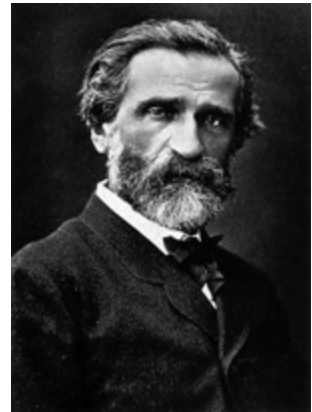
Higdon has served as composer-in-residence with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony, the Green Bay Symphony and most recently at the Mannes College The New School for Music. She has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Pew Fellowship in the Arts, Meet-the-Composer, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. She holds an Artists Diploma from the Curtis Institute and a masters and doctorate in composition from the University of Pennsylvania, where she studied with George Crumb. She is currently on the faculty of the Curtis Institute, where she holds the Milton L. Rock Chair in Compositional Studies.

Jennifer Higdon provides the following notes for *On the Death of the Righteous*. “Finding a text to be a part of a piece that would share a program with Verdi’s *Requiem* was an interesting challenge, and led me to the works of John Donne, a 16th century poet and preacher. I realized I needed something that would respect a requiem’s definition, which is to be a mass for the dead. Coming upon Mr. Donne’s sermons, I discovered a particular text that describes the non-judgmental quality of a death of one who is righteous...this seemed an appropriate emotional angle to precede a requiem.

“Of course, the challenge for the composer is creating an emotional state that is equal to the text’s, and thus a music of enough weight and seriousness, without being particularly dark; to be lacking in judgment in musical sound and to reflect the even balance of opposites, upon the death of the righteous.”

Giuseppe Verdi

There is probably no other composer whose life, music and historical times are so intertwined as Giuseppe Verdi. His career paralleled the struggle for Italian unification and independence, which he considered the most important event of his lifetime. Verdi himself was an ardent nationalist and there were recurrent themes in his operas of past Italian glories (*I Lombardi*, *La battaglia di Legnano*) or the struggle against political oppression (*Ernani*, *Il Trovatore*, *Don Carlos*). Even his name was used popularly as an acronym for *Vittorio Emanuele, Rei di Italia* (Victor Emanuel, King of Italy), referring to the movement to unite Italy under the rule of that idealistic King of Sardinia. When unification was finally achieved in 1860, Verdi served as a senator.



To understand the importance of Italian nationalism to Verdi, it is necessary to understand something of the complex political patchwork that was nineteenth century Italy. Italy had the misfortune to lie between Spain, France and Austria, whose struggle with each other for European domination was often played out on Italian soil. The Bourbon monarchy of Spain had established offshoot dynasties in Sicily, Naples and in Verdi’s native Parma. The northern Italian duchies were largely under the control of the Austrian empire, although individual territories were traded between the French and Austrians as the balance of power between them shifted. The Duchy of Parma, for example, was arbitrarily ceded to Napoleon’s widow Maria Louise by the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

There were practical consequences to this political fragmentation. Verdi needed a passport to travel the fifty miles from Busseto in Parma to study in Milan in Lombardy (and often used the lack of a passport as an excuse to avoid returning to Busseto.) When Verdi went to London to direct the premiere of *I masnadieri*, he was shocked to learn that he would be unable to obtain a copyright in England because the British only extended copyright protection to citizens of countries with whom they had diplomatic

relations. He sarcastically suggested in a letter home that Parma send an ambassador to London.

That Verdi would ever be in a position to be concerned about international copyright law was an improbable story worthy of an opera plot. He was born in 1813 in the tiny village of Roncole, where his father operated a combination inn and grocery. By the time he was ten, Verdi had exhausted the educational and musical resources of Roncole and his parents arranged for him to continue his education in the neighboring town of Busseto. Busseto had a reputation both for learning (it boasted two libraries) and an outstanding musical program under the direction of Ferdinando Provesi, a charismatic musician with a somewhat checkered past who was the local organist, choirmaster, municipal *maestro di cappella*, teacher at the music school and leader of the amateur Philharmonic Society orchestra. Over the next nine years, Verdi became Provesi's protégé and assistant, playing organ, composing for church and orchestra, arranging and copying music and conducting rehearsals. His life seemed to fall in place before him. He would succeed Provesi, marry the local girl he had fallen in love with and live out his days as the chief musician in a small town. What he lacked was the formal credentials to entitle him to apply for Provesi's posts.

With that in mind, Verdi was sent at age nineteen to Milan to apply at the Milan Conservatory. As he was older than the usual applicant, he was required to take a special examination to gain admission. Verdi was considerably abashed to find that his application was rejected, ostensibly because his keyboard technique was already too firmly established. Verdi protested in vain that he wanted a career as a composer, not a performer. He was instead advised to take private lessons and was directed to Vincenzo Lavigna, a competent composer and teacher but, more importantly, well connected in the musical world of Milan. Although Verdi began his studies with Lavigna diligently enough, he was dazzled by the musical and theatrical life in Milan and soon began neglecting his lessons. He attended plays and operas and became involved with the Milan Philharmonic Society, a serious amateur organization that presented operas and choral concerts, becoming rehearsal accompanist, chorus master and occasional conductor.

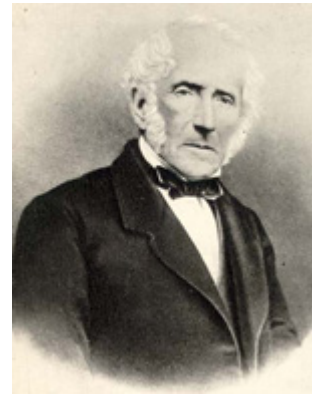
Verdi's dilatory behavior came back to haunt him when Provesi suddenly died in 1833. Lacking a certificate from Lavigna, he was not considered for the post of organist, which was given to an inferior musician. Verdi returned to Busseto to protest, but in vain. He reluctantly returned to Milan and Lavigna, finally obtaining the long desired certificate in 1835. The post of organist in Busseto was no longer open, but he was appointed to Provesi's other posts and in 1836 Verdi took up the life previously laid out before him, marrying his childhood sweetheart and taking up his duties teaching music and conducting the orchestra.

Having lived for four years in cosmopolitan Milan, Verdi soon began to chafe at the limited musical possibilities available in provincial Busseto. He had also written his first opera, *Oberto*, and was desperately trying to have it produced either in Parma or Milan. Bartolomeo Merelli, impresario at La Scala, finally agreed to present *Oberto* in 1839. The opera was a modest success and Merelli contracted with Verdi for three additional operas. But while he was enjoying his first professional success, Verdi was also struggling with

personal tragedy. His young daughter had died just before he left Busseto for Milan, then he lost his son, and a few months later his wife suddenly fell ill and died. It was against this grim backdrop that Verdi struggled to fulfill his contract and complete a comic opera, *Un giorno di regno*. It was a dismal failure and Verdi vowed never to compose again. Merelli finally persuaded Verdi to look at the libretto for *Nabucco*. With some dramatic license Verdi later recalled that he returned home and threw the libretto on the table. It fell open to the text beginning *Va pensiero*, the famous chorus in which the captive Israelites long for their homeland. He began reading, found his inspiration, and began to compose the opera which was his first great success and which established him as a major composer of opera. Over the next fourteen years he wrote an astounding fifteen operas, becoming Italy's most famous and most successful composer.

Requiem

The story of the *Requiem* actually begins with the death of Rossini in 1868. Verdi proposed a memorial *Requiem* in which the leading Italian composers would each contribute one section. Verdi was to provide the *Libera me*. The project was poorly organized and while the music was eventually written the memorial was never performed. Verdi learned from the experience and when Alessandro Manzoni died in 1873, he decided to compose a memorial *Requiem* entirely himself. Verdi reworked the existing *Libera me* and incorporated thematic material from it in the other movements. While Verdi was quite sincere in his desire to memorialize Manzoni, for whom he had the greatest respect, he was also aware of the commercial possibilities for the *Requiem*. At the same time that he was negotiating with the city of Milan to underwrite the premiere and with the Church to allow women singers to appear, he was also arranging publication and performance royalties. The premiere took place in May 1874, at the Church of San Marco as part of a liturgy, but Verdi also arranged two concert performances at La Scala, which were greeted with great enthusiasm. In the year following the premiere, it was performed all over Italy, in Paris, London, Vienna and even in America. The *Requiem* had become one of Verdi's most popular compositions.



Alessandro Manzoni

Verdi was sixty when he composed the *Requiem* and at the height of his creative powers. With *Aida* in 1871 Verdi had achieved a new compositional maturity. (It may seem odd to talk about new maturity in someone nearly sixty, but Verdi still had twenty years and two of his greatest operas, *Othello* and *Falstaff*, yet to come.) There was a new ingenuity and sophistication to his orchestration and harmonic structure. Many of the musical ideas he explored in *Aida* found their way into the *Requiem*: extensive use of both tremolo and triplet figures in the accompaniment, recurring thematic material, the dramatic prominence of the mezzo-soprano part, the extensive brass fanfares and the quiet, chant-like solo voices which end both works. Verdi even selected the same four principals from the opera's premiere to appear as the soloists for the premiere of the *Requiem*.

The *Requiem* is certainly operatic in scale and like his operas displays both Verdi's exceptional melodic inventiveness and his ability to set text with great feeling and emotion. The chromaticism of Verdi's late music is most evident in passages like the *Dies irae* or *quam olim Abrahæ* from the Offertory, but is also prominent in the orchestral parts as well, like the descending countermelody to the opening *Kyrie*. This not only expanded Verdi's harmonic palette but also allowed him great freedom in the extended modulatory sections that characterize most of the big ensemble numbers.

The *Requiem* opens almost imperceptibly, with the chorus directed to sing "as quietly as possible" on the *requiem æternam* text. There is an unexpected harmonic shift on the cadence for the text *et lux*, almost as if Verdi is introducing a sense of doubt. Nor is this the only place where that occurs. The Sequence ends with a strong unison *Amen*, but with another unsettling harmonic shift, as if Verdi's own personal agnosticism is somehow showing through.

The most recognizable part of the requiem mass is the *Sequence*, with its graphic images of the end of the world and the last judgment. Liturgically, it is a reminder to the living about the transience of earthly existence. Musically, it offers a rare opportunity for tone painting that few dramatic composers have been able to pass up. The *Dies iræ* text itself dates back to the 12th century. Much of the text alludes to passages from Scripture or ancient Hebrew texts. The Sibyl in the first stanza, for example, is not the pagan Greek seer but rather sibylline, or obscure, oracles from the time of the Maccabees in the second century B.C.E. They retrospectively "foretold" the history of the world up to that point and then went on to predict the fall of the Roman empire, which in medieval times became a metaphor for the end of the world.

Verdi's music preserves the underlying form of the text, with the individual stanzas given to different voices. He divides the text into several sections. The first four stanzas (*Dies iræ* and *Tuba mirum*) set the stage for the last judgment, and Verdi provides a great deal of musical contrast here. The *Dies iræ* opens with hammer-like chords punctuated by the pounding of the bass drum, the crack of thunder and flash of lightning as the earth is being torn asunder, while the second stanza is sung *sotto voce*, which only heightens the sense of terror. At the third verse, trumpet calls are heard from afar, gradually approaching and swelling to a huge fanfare as the dead are raised from their tombs. In the fourth stanza the detached notes, sung *sotto voce* by the bass solo, perfectly suit the text (all nature is stunned.) The next three stanzas (*Liber scriptus* and *Quid sum miser*) generally describe the format for the last judgment. The chorus mutters *dies iræ* underneath until it is unable to restrain itself and the original *Dies iræ* theme breaks out in all its vigor.

The rest of the *Sequence* text is a long appeal to God for mercy. Verdi frames some of his most intensely lyrical music between two large ensemble movements, starting with the terrifying apparition of the King of Majesty. Verdi's treatment of the text *salve me, fons pietatis* (save me, thou font of mercy) begins with a wonderfully eloquent melody taken in turn by the soloists, with the chorus joining in until a grand climax is reached. The next three stanzas (*Recordare*) form a duet for soprano and mezzo, using music originally

intended for *Don Carlos*. The next four stanzas (*Ingemisco*) essentially form a tenor aria, featuring yet another exquisite melody.

The *Sequence* text reaches something of an emotional climax in the next two stanzas (*Confutatis*), the plea for mercy intensified by the graphic description of eternal damnation. Poetically, this is reinforced by the repetition and alliteration of the rhyme. Many composers have set this text to highlight the graphic imagery; in the Mozart *Requiem* you can practically see the flames licking at the souls of the damned. In contrast, Verdi emphasizes the heightened intensity of the plea for mercy, underscoring it with yet another return of the *Dies iræ* theme. (This repetition of the *Dies iræ* text is not liturgical. Verdi gives it a structural role, separating the *Sequence* text where it changes from third to first person and back again. But perhaps he was also making an oblique allusion to the violence of Milan's struggle for freedom from Austria, in which Manzoni played a major role.) Verdi weaves yet another beautifully lyric melody through the final three verses (*Lacrymosa*), again leading to a grand ensemble climax.

The *Sanctus* is set as a fugue for double chorus (Verdi brushed up on his counterpoint by studying Scarlatti before undertaking the *Requiem*.) It rushes by at a breakneck pace from the opening brass fanfare to the closing unison chromatic scales for full orchestra. In contrast, the *Agnus Dei* is a model of simplicity and eloquence. It is based on the plainsong chant melody, presented as a set of variations for soprano and mezzo duet and chorus. The *Lux æterna* is a trio set for mezzo, tenor and bass. The orchestration, featuring tremulo strings and soft flutes, has a delicate, almost ethereal texture.

Liturgically, the *Libera me* is not part of the requiem mass but rather is recited over the coffin as it is taken from the church. It reprises some of the requiem text, and Verdi reprises some of the earlier thematic material. The music moves into a fugue which dissolves into an insistent, almost primitively rhythmic *libera me, Domine* (deliver me, O Lord) before ending quietly with the same chant-like material with which the movement opened.

The conductor von Bülow dismissed the *Requiem* as “an opera in ecclesiastical robes,” and it is indeed operatic in scope and dramatic quality. The theatricality of some of the music has led some to question the sincerity of the *Requiem* or at least its suitability as ecclesiastical music. This really mistakes the point. Verdi intended the *Requiem* as a monument to a great man, not as a liturgical work, and in this Verdi succeeded beyond all expectation. And whatever his own personal religious views, Verdi invested the text with a great intensity and depth of feeling that still rings true.

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