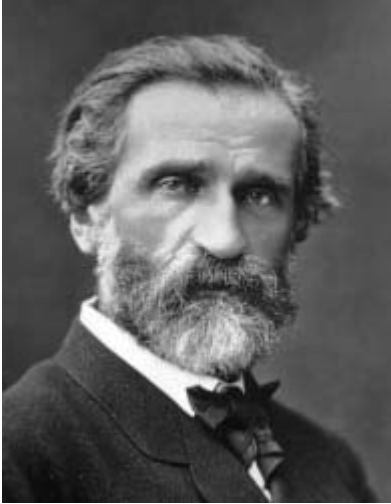


# Verdi: *Requiem*

**Performed March 14, 1999**



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 **V**ittorio **E**manuele, **R**ei **d**i **I**talia (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. And the *Requiem* itself

was written as a memorial for Alessandro Manzoni, the great Italian novelist whose works helped forge an Italian national identity and who was one of the heroes of the Milanese revolt against Austria.

## Political Background

To understand the importance of Italian nationalism to Verdi, it is necessary to understand something of the complex political patchwork which 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's father brought goods from Genoa to Busseto, they had to clear customs at the Parma border. 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 observed copyright protection for citizens of countries with whom they had diplomatic relations. He sarcastically suggested in a letter home that Parma send an ambassador to London.

## Verdi's Early Life

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 he really had no grounds. 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 showed a great deal of faith in Verdi, not to mention great patience. After two years he 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.

## How the *Requiem* came to be

The story of the *Requiem* 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 great 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 given all over Italy, in Paris, London, Vienna and even in America. The *Requiem* had become one of Verdi's most popular compositions.

## Similarities with *Aida*

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 an ingenuity and sophistication to his orchestration and harmonic structure, which is clearly evident in the *Requiem* as well. There are in fact a number of stylistic similarities between *Aida* and 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 (Verdi even had special trumpets cast for the triumphal victory scene in *Aida*) and the quiet, chant-like solo voices which end both works (Verdi had characterized the last scene in *Aida* as a sort of "Requiem and Egyptian De profundis.")

## Structure of the *Requiem*

The *Requiem* is certainly operatic in scale and like the 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 Abrahae* 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 which 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 aeternam" 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 Sequence

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 irae" text itself dates back to the 12th century and is in the form of seventeen rhymed tercets followed by three couplets, the last of which is unrhymed. 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 BC. 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 set the stage for the last judgment, and Verdi provides a great deal of musical contrast here. The "Dies irae" 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 generally describe the format for the last judgment. The chorus mutters "dies irae" underneath until it is unable to restrain itself and the original "Dies irae" 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 form a duet for soprano and mezzo, using music originally intended for Don Carlos. The next four stanzas essentially form a tenor aria, featuring yet another exquisite melody. The oboe countermelody and tremolo accompaniment creates an exotic atmosphere reminiscent of *Aida*.

The *Sequence* text reaches something of an emotional climax in the next two stanzas, 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 irae"

theme. (This repetition of the "Dies irae" text is not liturgical. Verdi does give 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, again leading to a grand ensemble climax.

## ***Sanctus, Agnus Dei, Libera Me***

The *Sanctus* is set as a fugue for double chorus (Verdi brushed up on his counterpoint by studying Scarlatti before undertaking the *Requiem*.) If there is any movement that might have offended the orthodox, it was probably the *Sanctus*, with the brass scales and syncopation at the end sounding a bit like a stage band. In contrast, the *Agnus Dei* is a model of simplicity and eloquence. Liturgically, the *Libera me* is not part of the requiem mass but 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 which still ring true.

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