

Verdi • Requiem

When Rossini died in 1868, Verdi proposed a memorial Requiem Mass to be composed by thirteen Italian composers, each of whom would contribute one section. Although the work was completed, it never was played because of what Verdi called the "egotistical indifference" of persons who might otherwise have made the performance financially and artistically possible. Verdi always remembered the episode with extreme distaste, but this did not prevent him from returning to the idea of a Requiem Mass in 1873 after the death of his friend, the leading Italian writer, Manzoni. This time Verdi composed the entire work himself, using the *Libera me* section that he had contributed to the Rossini project five years before. He personally conducted the first performance in Milan's San Marco Church, receiving enthusiastic public acclaim which has followed the *Requiem* ever since.

Drama rather than Ceremony

Even though it was first heard in a church, Verdi's *Requiem* is not a solemn ecclesiastical ceremony. It is an intense personal drama of the soul seeking salvation, and its keynote is emotional rather than metaphysical. Verdi was familiar with religious tradition and he admired the austere compositions of men like Palestrina, but he chose to express this drama in his own personal style rather than by writing an imitation of conventional church music. As a result, the *Requiem* is conceived like an oratorio or an opera. It contains the equivalent of operatic arias, duets and trios in which the soloists pour forth their feelings in unrestrained melodies. The chorus, too, takes part in the drama as it describes the terror of Judgment Day or the serenity of final rest.

Verdi's experience in opera gave him a flair for exploiting strong dramatic contrasts without breaking the continuous unity of a work. In the *Requiem*, it is the *Dies Irae* ("Day of Wrath") which joins together the various other sections. First summoned by distant trumpets, this turbulent, stormy music keeps returning to re-

mind us that we are dealing with a violent, desperate situation. We hear prayers for salvation which are by turns pleading, ecstatic, fearful and calm. At last, after enduring all the anxiety and tumult of final crisis, the soul resigns itself before the inevitable, looking toward a new life where conflict and fear are forgotten.

Verdi and his Critics

Verdi's personal interpretation of this drama and his full-blooded style in giving vent to these strong emotions, caused inevitable criticism of the *Requiem* for being secular and irreverent in the face of such a serious religious subject. Even today one occasionally hears this protest, but most listeners have come to accept Verdi's treatment of the *Requiem* as a sincere form of devotional piety mixed with human understanding, expressed in the terms which he felt most strongly. Certainly Verdi paid fitting tribute to the dead Manzoni, whose writings had taught him to disregard momentary fashions of style and to search only for honesty in the content of an artistic work, however expressed.

One severe critic was Hans von Bulow, friend of Brahms and first husband of Liszt's daughter who later married Wagner. Many years after tagging Verdi the "all-powerful destroyer of Italian artistic taste" and the "Attila of the throat," von Bulow wrote to Verdi apologizing for his former views and telling how he had come to love the *Requiem*. With his usual straightforwardness Verdi replied that while he admired anyone for admitting such a change of heart, he thought that people need never make apologies for an honest opinion. Certainly Verdi never felt compelled to offer any apology for having written the *Requiem* as he did—in the musical style of his own deepest convictions, rather than in a sober and restrained style generally considered more appropriate for religious music. In its frank heartfelt expression that appeals directly to listeners, the *Requiem* rises above dogma or creed to reach the essential core of the human drama in all its anguish and eternal hope.

— Notes by John W. Freeman