

Verdi *Requiem*

Variously called Verdi's "latest opera in church vestments" and "an opera written to a sacred text", the Verdi *Requiem* (1874), like the earlier one of Berlioz (1837), is a large-scale, opera-dominated piece that calls for vocal and instrumental resources equal to or exceeding their operas.

Hardly a religious person, Verdi stretched liturgical propriety in his rearrangement of the requiem text and thereby earned for the work intense musical, aesthetic and liturgical criticism after its premier on May 22, 1874, first at the Church of San Marco in Milan followed by performances at La Scala opera house the next three evenings. In his time, only the *Requiem*, the operas *Otello* and *Falstaff* and, to some extent, *Aida*, were considered worthy of study by serious musicians. Despite its turbulent beginning, the *Requiem* has become a staple of the choral repertory.

Never intended for use in a sacred service, Verdi envisioned his *Requiem* as a monument to Italian genius, specifically as a public tribute to poet and novelist Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873). Verdi regarded Manzoni, the author of *I promessi sposi*, as a virtual saint, a man who combined the highest talent with great virtue and personal nobility, although they had met but once.

True to his groundbreaking practice of composing operas made with ideas, as opposed to operas made of a succession of solos, duets, cavatinas, etc., Verdi honored the two artists by creating music where the orchestra is very important, but the sung word is paramount. The text of the Requiem Mass, with its contrasting moods of supplication, fear of eternal judgement, and promise of everlasting peace, provided the composer with some of the most dramatic situations with which he had ever worked. Especially in the *Lacrimosa*, Verdi could communicate his vision of suffering, suppliant humanity. Thus Verdi honored his two cultural heroes, Manzoni in the *Requiem's* dedication and Rossini in the use of certain motifs that recall the earlier composer's *Stabat Mater*. Interestingly enough, the uproar that occurred after the *Requiem's* premiere, especially the invectives hurled by prominent conductor Hans von Bülow without hearing it performed or reading its score, led Johannes Brahms to study the work intensely. Brahms' subsequent pronouncement was "Bülow has blundered, since this could be done only by a genius." Amen.