
*The genesis of the Messa da Requiem per l'anniversario
 della morte di Manzoni 22 maggio 1874*

The Messa per Rossini of 1869

Despite its connection with Alessandro Manzoni, underscored by Verdi's official title for the work,¹ the story of Verdi's *Requiem* begins with the death of Gioachino Rossini (13 November 1868) and Verdi's reaction to it: 'A great name has disappeared from the world! His was the most widespread, the most popular reputation of our time, and it was a glory of Italy! When the other one who still lives [Manzoni] is no more, what will we have left? Our ministers, and the exploits of Lissa and Custoza.' The subtext of Verdi's bitter remark is his general disgust with Italy's political and military leaders. Lissa and Custoza were humiliating, though not crucial, Italian defeats in the 1866 war for Venice, a war won on behalf of Italy by her ally, Prussia – another humiliation. Matters were no better on the domestic front: there were serious economic problems and the continuing problem of the South. 'I don't read newspapers anymore', Verdi wrote to a friend in August 1868. 'I don't want to hear about our woes anymore. There's no hope for us, when our statesmen are vain gossips.'²

But if Italy's statesmen and military men were a source of humiliation, her artists were a source of national pride; in particular, her music 'still carries with honour the name of Italy to every part of the world'.³ Verdi may have been especially sensitive about this point at the time of Rossini's death, for earlier that year the Minister of Public Instruction, Emilio Broglio, in advancing an ill-advised plan to remove government support for the Conservatories, asked, 'since Rossini, that is, in the last forty years, what have we had? Four operas by Meyerbeer . . . How can such grave sterility be remedied?' Not unreasonably, Verdi took this as 'an insult to Italian musical art' and, having been named Commendatore of the Order of the Italian Crown, promptly returned the decoration. He did so not for his own sake, he told friends, but out of respect for Bellini and Donizetti, 'who filled the world with their melodies' and 'who were no longer able to defend themselves'.

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Four days after Rossini's death Verdi sent a letter to Tito Ricordi, his publisher in Milan, proposing that a Requiem Mass be composed by 'the most distinguished Italian composers' and performed on the anniversary of Rossini's death. The letter was published in the Ricordi house journal, the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* (22 November 1868), and in other Italian newspapers as well.

To honour the memory of Rossini I would wish the most distinguished Italian composers (Mercadante at the head, if only for a few bars) to compose a *Requiem Mass* to be performed on the anniversary of his death.

I would like not only the composers, but all the performing artists, in addition to lending their services, to offer also a contribution to pay the expenses.

I would like no foreign hand, no hand alien to art, no matter how powerful, to lend his assistance. In this case I would withdraw at once from the association.

The *Mass* should be performed in San Petronio, in the city of Bologna, which was Rossini's true musical home.

This *Mass* would not be an object of curiosity or of speculation; but as soon as it has been performed, it should be sealed and placed in the archives of the Liceo Musicale of that city, from which it should never be taken. Exception could perhaps be made for His anniversaries, if posterity should decide to celebrate them.

If I were in the good graces of the Holy Father, I would beg him to allow, at least this once, women to take part in the performance of this music, but since I am not, it would be best to find a person more suitable than I to achieve this end.⁴

It would be best to set up a committee of intelligent men to take charge of the arrangements for this performance, and especially to choose the composers, assign the pieces, and watch over the general form of the work.

The composition (however good the individual numbers may be) will necessarily lack musical unity; but if it is wanting in this respect it will serve nonetheless to show how great in all of us is the veneration for that man whose loss the whole world mourns.

The first question raised by this problematic document concerns the choice of a Requiem Mass as a means of commemorating Rossini's death. Verdi was anticlerical and, at least in this period, almost certainly an agnostic. Furthermore the period was one of intense conflict between Church and State: in 1864 Pius IX had issued the reactionary Syllabus of Errors; two years later the Italian parliament passed a law declaring 'that almost all the religious orders and congregations should have their houses dissolved and their goods confiscated'.⁵ Most important perhaps was the State's continuing effort to wrest Rome from the papal power, accomplished only in 1870.

The Requiem Mass, however, was considered as much a public and political ritual as a religious one, as Cherubini's C-minor Requiem and Berlioz's *Grande messe des morts* attest (both were designed for political celebrations).

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Many of the commemorations of Rossini's death included performances of a Requiem Mass, whether works of established pedigree (Mozart's, Cherubini's D-minor Requiem) or not.⁶ Verdi's decision to propose a Requiem Mass as the means to honour Rossini in a national ceremony is therefore understandable.

Had Verdi's ambitious project come to fruition, his idealistic but stringent conditions would have added moral prestige to it; as it turned out, they may have sealed its fate. His insistence that the composition should not be an 'object of speculation' shifted the responsibility for organization and financing from impresario and publisher to a committee, and to the composers and performers themselves, who were asked not only to contribute their labour but also to subsidize the performance. Even other sources of disinterested support were ruled out: from foreign hands, from hands alien to art. As a supposedly national event, it competed with countless local celebrations. And finally, when insuperable difficulties arose – the immediate cause being the refusal of the impresario of the Bologna Teatro Comunale to make his singers, chorus, and orchestra available – Verdi's continued insistence that the event must take place in San Petronio on the anniversary of Rossini's death made it impossible to perform the work at all.

The defensive stance of the final paragraph of Verdi's letter testifies to serious doubts about the aesthetic quality of the composition, in particular its lack of *unità musicale*. However, he would consistently maintain that the aesthetic value of the *Messa per Rossini* was less important than its value as an essentially patriotic ritual: 'What does it matter, then, that the composition lacks unity, that the contribution of this or that composer is more or less beautiful? . . . It's enough that the day comes, the ceremony takes place, and, in short, that the *Historic fact* – mark well, the *Historic fact* – exists.'

A committee was duly formed,⁷ and in early June 1869 it promulgated a prospectus with the composers, their assignments, and – in an attempt to minimize the artistic anarchy entailed by the composite nature of the work – the resources, key, and tempo of each piece. Verdi's assignment was the final movement, *Libera me*. Although it seems that it was the committee – not Verdi – that took primary responsibility for selecting the composers and designing the large-scale structure of the *Messa per Rossini*,⁸ Verdi was pleased with the results: 'it seems to me that it was done with the greatest judgment regarding the division, form, and distribution of the pieces'. As we shall see, the prospectus of the *Messa per Rossini* may have influenced him in planning some aspects of his 1874 *Messa da Requiem*.

On 1 August 1869 Verdi asked Tito Ricordi to send him music paper so that

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he could write his piece. He had probably already made preliminary sketches, for only four days later he could inform Giulio, 'My piece is almost finished and lacks only a bit of *polishing* and the orchestration.' And on 20 August he announced, 'Tomorrow I shall send my piece for the *Messa a Rossini: Libera me, Domine*. In case this ceremony does not take place . . . I urge you to see that the piece is well taken care of and returned to me.' There was good reason for Verdi's concern. Although all of the composers finished their compositions in time, the proposed ceremony came to naught, and the *Messa per Rossini* had to wait until 1988 for its premiere.

Towards the *Messa da Requiem*

When did Verdi decide to build a complete Requiem around the already composed *Libera me*? It was once thought that he had continued to work on the composition, completing three-quarters of it (the *Requiem e Kyrie*, the entire *Dies irae*, and, naturally, the *Libera me*) by early 1871 and the whole work by the autumn of 1872.⁹ But the evidence suggests that Verdi did not take up the work again until 1873.

In the year and a half following the cancellation of the Bologna ceremony Ricordi attempted to persuade Verdi to allow the Mass to be performed in some other context. Verdi would have none of it: with the cancellation of the Rossini commemoration, the work had lost all significance. Nonetheless, taking the position that he was merely one of the contributors, he stopped short of making non-negotiable demands and even recognized the possibility that the Mass might be performed elsewhere. Consider, for example, his reply to a proposal made by the committee at the end of 1869: ' . . . allow me to ask you *sotto voce*: is this Mass such that it can stand the comparison with the other celebrated Requiem Masses, which perhaps aren't even the masterpieces that the world pretends to believe? If this were so, I too would be reconciled with the idea of seeing it performed.' And again: 'Conclusion. Can the new *Mass* compete with those of Mozart, Cherubini, etc. . . . with the *Stabat*, with the *Petite Messe*? Yes? Give it. No? Then *Pax vobis*.'¹⁰

Difficult conditions, but Verdi seems to have been willing to allow the committee's decision to rest on the artistic merits of the composition. It seems unlikely that he would have begun to construct a Requiem around the *Libera me*, if it seemed possible that the *Messa per Rossini*, crowned by this very same piece, might soon receive a public performance.

Matters came to a head in January 1871, when the committee, urged by Verdi 'to conclude the business of this Mass once and for all', decided to 'examine

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the entire *Mass* with the most scrupulous rigour . . . to see if it is a composition that can risk a theatre performance'. This is the context for Alberto Mazzucato's well-known letter of 2 February 1871, written after his examination of Verdi's *Libera me*: 'You, my dear Maestro, have written the most beautiful, the greatest, and most colossally poetic page that can be imagined.'

Verdi responded two days later in an important letter:

. . . those words of yours would almost have instilled in me the desire to finish, later, the entire *Mass*: so much the more so because with some more development I would find myself already having finished the *Requiem* and the *Dies iræ*, of which the reprise in the *Libera* is already composed. Consider then, and regret, what dreadful consequences your praise could have – but do not worry: it is a temptation that will pass like so many others. I do not like useless things. There are so many, many *Requiem Masses*!!! It is useless to add one more.

It is hard to see how some writers could interpret this as evidence that Verdi had continued to work on a Requiem: the letter says only that *if* he were ever to complete it, he would borrow material for the 'Requiem æternam' and 'Dies iræ' from the 1869 *Libera me*, so that the appearance of that material there, in the last movement of the *Requiem*, would function as a reprise. The fate of the *Messa per Rossini* was soon sealed, and the *coup de grâce* was given in August 1871 when the committee returned one of the contributions to its composer (Federico Ricci).

Verdi's autograph score of the *Libera me* was returned to him on 21 April 1873. He surely would not have started work on completing a Requiem before then: since the *Libera me* was to provide material for the first two movements, he would have asked Ricordi for that score the moment he decided to do so.¹¹ Furthermore, it seems likely that the score was returned at his request, or at least after hints that he was contemplating returning to the work. It can hardly be a coincidence that, two weeks earlier, a note signed 'Un dilettante' (but probably planted by Ricordi) had appeared in the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* (6 April issue): 'Why could not Verdi give new life to sacred music, now fallen to such a low point?' All this suggests the puzzling conclusion that Verdi's decision to complete the *Messa da Requiem* may have been reached a month before Alessandro Manzoni's death on 22 May 1873.

It is understandable that Verdi would wish to honour Manzoni with a Requiem Mass. Verdi regarded Manzoni and Rossini as pillars of Italian glory, and it is for this reason, rather than any deep personal attachment to Rossini, that Verdi initiated the *Messa per Rossini* project. But in addition to the esteem

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he accorded to Manzoni as a quasi-political figure – as a world-renowned Italian – Verdi felt a great personal reverence towards the man as writer and patriot. At the age of sixteen he first read *I promessi sposi*, the novel he later described as ‘not only the greatest book of our epoch, but one of the greatest ever to emerge from a human brain’. The novel, in its revised, tuscanized form, was also critical in the establishment of a common vernacular language for the emerging Italian nation. In his teens he composed settings of Manzoni’s Ode ‘Il cinque maggio’ and several choruses from his tragedies *Il conte di Carmagnola* and *Adelchi*.¹² It was only in June 1868 that the two men finally met, the meeting arranged by Clara Maffei. Verdi’s letters reveal an uncharacteristic awe and even more uncharacteristic quasi-hagiographical imagery:

What could I say to you of Manzoni? How to explain the very sweet, indefinable, new sensation produced in me, in the presence of that Saint, as you call him? I would have knelt before him, if men could be worshipped. They say it must not be done, and so be it: although we venerate on altars many who did not have the talent or the virtues of Manzoni, and [here Verdi’s more typical voice returns] who indeed were downright rascals. When you see him kiss his hand and tell him for me all my veneration.¹³

It therefore comes as no surprise that Verdi wanted to commemorate Manzoni’s death, but one wonders why he seems to have made his decision to complete the Requiem – or at least begun to give serious consideration to doing so – even before that event occurred. He probably did not become aware of the writer’s failing health until early May. By 10 May the newspapers had referred to a serious blow inflicted upon his mind by the recent death of his son Pietro; a few days later they reported that he was suddenly stricken with paralysis and that his life was in danger. The end came on 22 May 1873.¹⁴

However, even if Verdi had no information about Manzoni’s health in April 1873, he *did* know that he was eighty-eight years old. It hardly required medical reports to know that a Requiem would prove useful, sooner rather than later. And yet Verdi might possibly have decided to complete the composition for reasons independent of Manzoni. He believed that with *Aida* he had taken his leave of the hurly-burly of the theatre; yet he did not want to, or could not, renounce composing altogether. The string quartet was composed in the previous month, and, given his view that German music is instrumental while Italian – ‘la nostra’ – is vocal, it is not surprising that he next turned his hand to sacred vocal music. If *Aida* was to have been his *Guillaume Tell*, the *Requiem* would be his *Stabat Mater* or *Petite Messe*. The parallel with Rossini’s career cannot have escaped him.

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Verdi learned of Manzoni's death through a telegram from Clara Maffei, and on the following day he wrote to Ricordi: 'I am profoundly saddened by the death of our Great Man! But I shall not come to Milan, for I would not have the heart to attend his funeral. I will come soon to visit his grave, alone and unseen, and perhaps (after further reflection, after having weighed my strength) to propose something to honour his memory.' And his letter to Clara Maffei on the day of the funeral picks up the thread begun with the death of Rossini five years earlier: 'Now it is all ended! And with Him ends the purest, the most holy, the highest of our glories.' This mixture of nostalgia and pessimism makes plausible the view of some writers that, in bidding farewell to Manzoni, Verdi was also writing a 'Requiem for the Risorgimento' and marking the passing of a whole generation and a whole tradition.¹⁵

At the beginning of June Verdi came to Milan to visit Manzoni's grave; on 3 June he wrote to Ricordi:

I too would like to demonstrate what affection and veneration I bore and bear that Great Man who is no more, and whom Milan has so worthily honoured. I would like to set to music a *Mass for the Dead* to be performed next year for the anniversary of his death. The *Mass* would have rather vast dimensions, and besides a large orchestra and a large chorus, it would also require – I cannot be specific now – four or five principal singers.

Do you think the City would assume the expense of the performance? 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. If you believe this possible speak to the Mayor about it . . . you can consider this letter of mine binding.

The Mayor of Milan gratefully accepted Verdi's offer. Verdi in turn assured him that no thanks were owed him for 'It is an impulse, or better, a need of the heart that impels me to honour, insofar as I can, this Great Man, whom I so admired as a writer and venerated as a man, model of virtue and of patriotism!' And so Verdi was formally bound to complete his *Messa da Requiem*.

The chronology of composition

The Verdis spent most of the summer of 1873 in Paris and, according to Giuseppina Verdi, the composer worked 'un pochino' on the *Requiem* in August there. They were back at Sant'Agata by 14 September, and for about a month Verdi '[didn't do] anything but stroll around in the fields, eat, and sleep'. 'But now', he wrote on 19 October, 'if the weather turns bad, as it seems it will, I'll be forced to stay inside, and I'll take up my *Mass* again. I'd like to finish it before going to Genoa; at least I'd like to finish the creative part.'

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By 'la parte creativa' Verdi meant the skeleton score; elaborate and imaginative as much of the orchestration is, he still viewed it as secondary.¹⁶ After Verdi visited Milan in late January 1874, Clara Maffei observed: 'I have never seen Verdi work with so much love on a work and lavish such care upon it.' His enthusiasm for the project, though cloaked in irony, is also evident in his comments to his friends Camille Du Locle and Giuseppe Piroli. To the former he wrote:

I'm working on my *Mass* and doing so with great pleasure. I feel as if I've become a solid citizen and am no longer the public's clown who, with a big *tamburone* and bass drum, shouts 'come, come, step right up', etc., etc. As you can imagine, when I hear operas spoken of now, my conscience is scandalized, and I immediately make the sign of the Cross! . . . What do you say to that? Am I not an edifying example?

On 7 March he told Piroli, 'I've been here since the beginning of the year and haven't done anything but write notes upon notes for the greater glory of God, and perhaps for the future annoyance of my fellow man. But be that as it may, the music is now finished, and I'm pleased that I've done it.' Verdi probably meant that he had finished a continuity draft or skeleton score of the entire work, for it was not until 30 March that he sent off the first two movements of the work, with additional instalments on 9 April (all of the remaining movements, except the *Offertorio*, 'in which [he wanted] to make a small change at the beginning'), and 15 April. On 16 April he informed Piroli that he had been 'very busy and worried over that *devil* of a *Mass*, which is finally finished'.

Precompositional decisions

There were a number of basic decisions that Verdi needed to reach before putting pen to paper. With the exception of the *Libera me*, composed in 1869, Verdi had not tried his hand at sacred music for more than thirty years. It would have been natural for him to seek to acquaint (or reacquaint) himself with some of the standard settings of the Requiem Mass, as one contemporary account claims:

Verdi, who knows what is due to his reputation, and leaves nothing to chance, took care to make himself acquainted at Paris with all the Requiems written by the great masters. He read Mozart's, Berlioz's, and Cherubini's two, as well as others less celebrated, and came to the conclusion that the *Dies Irae* had never been musically treated in the exact spirit of the Latin text.

Whether or not one credits this account, a letter of December 1869 (see p. 4) implies some familiarity with the Requiems of Mozart and Cherubini

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and suggests that Verdi regarded them as the most eminent examples of the genre. To what extent he was familiar with the Berlioz *Grande messe des morts* remains an open question; although he apparently did not own the score, he did own Alberto Mazzucato's Italian translation of Berlioz's *Grande traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes*, which includes three excerpts from the *Grande messe*: the 'Tuba mirum', and portions of the 'Rex tremendæ' and the 'Hostias'.¹⁷ Moreover, while Verdi never saw his colleagues' contributions to the *Messa per Rossini*, he had conserved his copy of the prospectus – a document which he had praised warmly.¹⁸

Even though Verdi did not require the services of a librettist, he still needed to decide upon the liturgical text to be set to music rather than relegated to performance as plainchant. For in the Requiem Mass, unlike the Mass Ordinary, there is no standard text common to all polyphonic settings. For example, while Mozart's Requiem includes Introit, Kyrie, Sequence, Offertory, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, and Communion, Cherubini's two Requiems also include a Gradual and a 'Pie Jesu Domine' positioned between the *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei* (an item found in the Requiems of Dvořák and Fauré as well). For the text of the Mass itself, the committee for the *Messa per Rossini* followed the example of Mozart, incorporating the Introit and Kyrie into a single movement, dividing the *Dies iræ* into about a half-dozen sections, and allocating a separate movement for the Communion (Cherubini and Berlioz incorporated it into the *Agnus Dei*). On the other hand, it did not allot a separate movement to the 'Benedictus' or specify fugal treatment of the 'Osanna'. The committee added as a final movement the responsory from the Burial Service (Absolution ceremony): *Libera me*, a movement not uncommon in nineteenth-century Italian Requiems. The text Verdi adopted is identical with that of the *Messa per Rossini*, including, of course, the *Libera me* already composed.¹⁹

Verdi also followed the example of the *Messa per Rossini* regarding the role that soloists would play. Neither of the Cherubini works employs soloists, and Berlioz limited himself to a single tenor in the *Sanctus*, offering the option of assigning the 'solo' to ten tenors in unison. The four soloists in Mozart's Requiem have few substantial assignments and generally appear as a quartet. But the *Messa per Rossini* and Verdi's *Requiem* are 'Cantata-Masses', where entire sections or movements are assigned to individual soloists and to ensembles drawn from the pool of soloists, sometimes with the participation of the chorus.²⁰ This is an important feature not found in the Requiems of Mozart, Cherubini, or Berlioz, or, for that matter, in the remainder of Verdi's own sacred music. The *Messa per Rossini* calls for five soloists, but Verdi eventually settled on four.

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The prospectus for the *Messa per Rossini* limited the orchestra to strings, piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, four bassoons, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones and ophicleide, timpani, gran cassa, and organ.²¹ In writing his 1869 *Libera me*, Verdi accepted these limitations, also forgoing the English horn and bass clarinet – instruments in wide use in the opera house but not part of the standard symphonic orchestra – and organ, an instrument obviously associated with the church and, indeed, frequently used in his operas to evoke ‘Church Music’. Although Verdi had a free hand in writing his own *Messa da Requiem*, he adopted the same orchestra he had used in the 1869 movement, but with the addition of four off-stage trumpets for the ‘Tuba mirum’ section of the *Dies iræ* and the substitution of a third flute for piccolo in the *Agnus Dei*.

Borrowings and revisions

The relationship of the 1869 *Libera me* and its counterpart in the 1874 *Messa da Requiem* had been a subject of controversy until a manuscript of the *Messa per Rossini* came to light about twenty-five years ago, demonstrating that the 1874 *Libera me* is a revealing but not radical revision of the earlier piece.²² We encounter borrowed material of a different kind in the ‘Lacrymosa’ section of the *Dies iræ*. Verdi drew its theme from a duet composed for *Don Carlos* but removed before its 11 March 1867 premiere at the Paris Opéra. Since the number had never been performed he could recycle it for the *Requiem* with impunity.

Verdi’s autograph shows many signs of ‘pentimenti’, but most of these concern details: he must already have prepared a continuity draft and, of course, for the *Libera me* and music derived from it, he had the completed 1869 score at hand. Although Verdi made a handful of further small revisions during his cursory proofreading of a manuscript copy of the orchestral score, the only revision that can be securely dated after the 1874 premiere is the replacement of the original setting of the ‘Liber scriptus’ section (see pp. 13–14).