

# HISTORY OF THE *Verdi* Requiem

by Dr. Lily Kass

Before Verdi composed a requiem in 1874 to honor poet Alessandro Manzoni, he organized a requiem to honor composer **Gioachino Rossini**, who died in 1868 at 76. This *Messa per Rossini* would influence portions of Verdi's own *Messa da Requiem* for Manzoni.

Rossini had been a major figure in the opera world, writing such popular comic operas as *The Barber of Seville* (1816) along with serious works like *William Tell* (1829). Rossini virtually stopped composing forty years before he died, and he did not compose any operas during that period. Many people around the world had been hoping he would start to compose again, and they mourned his death. **Giuseppe Verdi**, who, like Rossini, had also based his career on writing operas, wanted to pay his respects to Rossini and to honor his memory. Since writing music was the main way he expressed himself, Verdi decided to write a piece of music for Rossini: a requiem mass. A requiem is a Christian religious ceremony to remember the dead and ask for the souls of the dead to be put to rest. The text of the requiem is often set to music, and Verdi decided that a musical setting of the requiem should be written in honor of Rossini.

Verdi did not want to write this requiem by himself. He knew that other Italian composers were also sad to hear about the death of their predecessor and role model, and he wanted them all to be able to write the requiem together. Each composer would write one section of the requiem. Italy had recently been unified, and it was an especially patriotic time for Italy. Verdi therefore didn't want any foreign composers to participate, even if he liked their music. He thought it was important that the life of Rossini, a quintessentially Italian composer, would be celebrated in music by Italians. Thirteen composers ended up participating: **Antonio Buzzolla, Antonio Bazzini, Carlo Pedrotti, Antonio Cagnoni, Federico Ricci, Alessandro**



*Verdi organized several composers to write a requiem in honor of composer Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868) in 1874.*

**Nini, Raimondo Boucheron, Carlo Coccia, Gaetano Gaspari, Pietro Platania, Lauro Rossi, Teodulo Mabellini,** and of course Verdi, who wrote the section "Libera Me," the final movement of a requiem's text.

Although the *Requiem* written in honor of Rossini was completed, it was never performed. Verdi had a lot of ideas about how to make the performance of the *Requiem* perfect, and he set up so many rules and regulations around exactly how the work should be composed and performed that he accidentally made the performance impossible! Verdi wanted the *Requiem* to be performed in a particular church in **Bologna**, and only on the anniversary of Rossini's death. He didn't want anyone to be able to make any money from the work, so he insisted that the composers and performers donate their time, and he suggested that they and others should also donate the money to fund other aspects of the work's performance and publication. Verdi even said that after the work was performed it should be sealed up and put away, only to be brought out for

other anniversaries of Rossini's death. This was a *Requiem* that was supposed to be only for Rossini, and for no one else.

The mass was thought to be lost, but *Messa per Rossini*, as it was called, was rediscovered in the mid-20th century and performed for the first time in 1988. Since then, it has been performed and recorded a few times, but is not very popular because, as Verdi predicted when he first envisioned the project, it didn't hold together as a single piece of music. Thirteen composers working separately on their own movements and not talking to each other or collaborating at all meant that each movement sounds different from every other movement. It is a kind of musical **Frankenstein!**

Verdi never really wanted to write a full requiem himself. In fact, when someone commented on how beautiful his "Libera Me" was for the *Messa per Rossini*, Verdi confessed that he felt tempted to expand it into a full requiem of his own, but concluded: "I do not like useless things. There are so many, many Requiem Masses!!! It is useless to add one more."

Why were there so many requiems? Masses to celebrate the dead began to be sung as early as the 2nd century. At first, they were chants that were relatively simple, that a group of men could sing all together at the same time. In the beginning of the 15th century, composers decided that although requiems were solemn, they could be made more beautiful with more complex choral writing. requiems eventually became very grand and beautiful pieces of music in which composers showed off all of their skill using instrumental music and vocal music (a choir and also sometimes solo singers). There are many different movements in a requiem (See the article "The Structure of Verdi's *Requiem*."), and so composers had room to demonstrate various different musical techniques and styles.

The text of the *Requiem* is very evocative, meaning that it talks about many things that readers or listeners can picture vividly in their minds. In the midst of asking for eternal rest for

the souls of the dead and asking God for mercy, it talks about trumpets being sounded, (See the article "Tuba Mirum."), judges seated on high thrones, fire and ashes, sheep and goats, praying and groaning and silence. This text calls out to be illustrated using music, and many composers over the centuries have answered. Some of the most famous requiems that were written before Verdi wrote his were by **Ockeghem**, **Mozart** (who died before he could finish the work), **Cherubini**, **Berlioz**, **Bruckner**, and **Brahms**. Requiems are still being composed today.

Despite the overabundance of requiems, which Verdi very much acknowledged, the composer finally did decide to write one himself. One of his favorite authors, **Alessandro Manzoni**, the author of *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*) had died, and he wanted to honor his memory. Verdi had seen Manzoni and Rossini as two outstanding examples of the glory of Italy at a time in which he thought Italian politics was too tumultuous and that Italian art was the country's greatest triumph. The death of both figures in just a few years was a crushing blow. In addition, Verdi was in the middle of a self-imposed break from writing operas. Verdi wrote *Aida* in 1871, but he didn't write another opera until *Otello* in 1887.

Why should we be glad that Verdi broke down and decided to write a requiem? Verdi was an experienced opera composer, and as such he knew how to create big effects with an orchestra and voices. Verdi's *Requiem* is therefore very exciting and dramatic. **Hans van Bülow**, a German composer, conductor, and pianist, called Verdi's *Requiem* "[Verdi's] latest opera in ecclesiastical garb." Or in other words, it is an opera that should be performed in a theater pretending to be a piece of sacred music performed in a church.

The *Requiem* pulls us in and then holds our attention even without any staging, costumes or even characters. Verdi used his experience writing opera and his strong, patriotic feelings about honoring the legacies of the Italian artists Rossini and Manzoni to create a work that is at times frightening, at times peaceful, but always engaging.