

THE ARCHITECTURE

of the Requiem

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INTRODUCTION: THE REQUIEM'S TEXT

A requiem is a Christian ceremony for remembering someone who has died. It is normally recited or sung in a church. Over the years, many composers have set the text of the requiem to music in such a grand way that these pieces are equally at home in a concert hall as in a church service. Verdi's *Requiem* is one of these pieces, and although it was premiered at the **Church of San Marco** in **Milan**, it went on to be performed in concert halls all over the world. However, the *Requiem* still contains all of the main sections of the requiem text that would have been necessary for the church ceremony. There are seven main sections, or movements, in Verdi's *Requiem*, and they all have different purposes. The text doesn't exactly tell a story, but it does have a clear progression.

SECTION	SUBSECTION	CHORUS	SOLOISTS
Introit	Requiem aeternam	Yes	No
	Kyrie	Yes	Yes (All)
Dies Irae	Dies irae	Yes	No
	Tuba mirum	Yes	No
	Mors stupebit	No	Yes (Bass)
	Liber scriptus	Yes	Yes (Mezzo-soprano)
	Dies irae (Repeat)	Yes	No
	Quid sum miser	No	Yes (Soprano, Mezzo-soprano, Tenor)
	Rex tremendae	Yes	No
	Recordare	No	Yes (Soprano, Mezzo-soprano)
	Ingemisco	No	Yes (Tenor)
	Confutatis	No	Yes (Bass)
	Dies irae (repeat)	Yes	No
	Lacrymosa	Yes	Yes
	Pie Jesu	Yes	Yes
Offertorio	Domine, Jesu Christe	No	Yes (All)
	Hostias	No	Yes (All)
Sanctus	Sanctus	Yes (Split into two choirs)	No
	Benedictus	Yes (Split into two choirs)	No
Agnus Dei		Yes	Yes (Soprano, Mezzo-soprano)
Lux Aeterna		No	Yes (Mezzo-soprano, Tenor, Bass)
Libera Me	Libera me	Yes	Yes (Soprano)
	Dies irae (repeat)	Yes	No
	Requiem aeternam (repeat)	Yes	Yes (Soprano)
	Libera me	Yes	Yes (Soprano)

MOVEMENT 1:

The first movement contains the **Introit**, or “Introduction” to the *Requiem*, which contains the main idea and purpose of the piece: to ask God to give eternal rest to the souls of the dead. It also includes the “Kyrie,” the only part of the *Requiem* text that is not in Latin. This Greek text asks God for mercy.

MOVEMENT 2:

The next movement of the *Requiem* is the **Dies Irae**, which means “day of wrath.” This movement has the longest text, and it focuses on Judgment Day, a day when Christians believe all people will come before God to be judged on how they have behaved throughout their lives. The text describes in great detail exactly what Judgment Day will be like: God will be sitting on a throne with a book containing information about everything everyone has ever done, and people will tremble before Him as a trumpet sounds (See the article about the section “Tuba Mirum” on page 38). The text then goes into a first-person narrative, with the author imagining how they will feel in that moment and begging for God to remember them, forgive them, and grant them peace.

MOVEMENT 3:

The third movement is the **Offertory**, a prayer that asks God to save the souls of the dead from Hell, which is described as “the bottomless pit,” “the lion’s mouth,” and “darkness,” and bring them to the “holy light.”

MOVEMENT 4:

The fourth movement is the **Sanctus**, which quotes angels singing the praises of God.

MOVEMENT 5:

The fifth movement is the **Agnus Dei**, which is addressed to the “Lamb of God,” another name for Jesus, asking Him to grant rest to the souls of the dead.

MOVEMENT 6:

The sixth movement is the **Lux Aeterna**, which asks God to shine an “eternal light” on the souls of the dead, and for them to be at rest with the saints, who are particularly holy people.

MOVEMENT 7:

The final movement is the **Libera Me**, which means “Deliver me (from eternal death)” It refers back to the “Dies Irae,” imagining again the horror of the day of wrath, before ending where the whole *Requiem* began, asking for eternal rest to be granted to the souls of the dead. Like the “Dies Irae”, it is written in the first person.

REPETITION AND CONTRAST

The *Requiem* text comes full circle, but along the way there are descriptions of terrifying experiences, heartfelt requests for forgiveness, praise of God, and images of the souls of the dead in a happy, light-filled place. Verdi took the structure of this text and built his music around it, highlighting the contrasts in the text and tying similar ideas together with musical repetition.

The central contrast in the *Requiem* is between the idea of peaceful, eternal rest and the idea of a terrifying day of judgment. How are these two ideas different? First of all, rest is quiet and does not involve much movement, and the day of judgment is loud with a lot of different things going on all at once — complete with a trumpet call! Rest is private, but the day of judgment is public. Rest is pleasant and relaxing, while the day of judgment is terrifying.

If we look at Verdi’s “Introit” to his *Requiem*, which talks about eternal rest, we see that Verdi indeed chooses to set this text as softly as possible. String instruments play, but all with mutes on. (Mutes are special additions to the instruments that prevent them from getting too loud.) Then the lower voices in the choir, tenors and basses, sing the first two words, but Verdi instructs them to sing *sotto voce*, which means “in a whisper.” Next, the higher voices sing the same words on the same notes, also whispered. When all of the voice parts sing “requiem aeternam” together, Verdi writes “as soft as possible.” Then, even that is not soft enough for him so he cuts down the choir to just four soprano voices, who sing “dona eis domine,” or “give to us, God,” in a way that sounds like sighing or sobbing, with pauses between each word and a downward gesture in

the notes. The strings in the orchestra play long notes, supporting the voices, and the orchestra even stops playing entirely for a few moments, leaving the voices to sing by themselves.

If we compare this to the opening of the "Dies Irae," we see that there couldn't be a bigger contrast. The entire orchestra enters at the dynamic *fortissimo*, or very loud. The tempo, or speed of the music, is also faster than it has been so far in the *Requiem*. Again, the lower voices of the choir enter first, but they are soon joined by the higher voices, which sound like they are wailing or even screaming. The string and woodwind instruments play very fast downward scales, which create a scared and frantic feeling like falling into the dark.

We read in the description of Movement 7 that the "Dies Irae" text repeats in the final movement, "Libera Me." Verdi also brings back these words and the music he associates with them at a few other points in the *Requiem*. In fact, it is as if the idea of a day of judgment haunts the *Requiem*, bursting through at unexpected moments, and never far from the surface.

CONTRASTS THROUGH CHORAL MUSIC

In order to talk more in depth about how Verdi creates contrasts in the *Requiem*, like the one we have noticed between the "Introit" and the "Dies Irae," we need to take a step back and remember what resources Verdi had at his disposal. Verdi had a very big orchestra, of about one hundred players. (See page 32 for more details about the orchestra.) He also had a very large chorus, of more than one hundred singers. The choir needed to be bigger than the orchestra so that the voices could be heard on top of all of the loud orchestra, since engineers were still working on inventing an effective technology for amplifying voices. Verdi can do a lot of different things with so many singers, even without the use of technology. One thing he can have them do is to all sing the same notes at the same time all together, so that it almost sounds like one voice. This texture is called **monophony**. It is the texture that you hear if all of your friends sing you "Happy Birthday"

all together as a group. This might seem like the easiest kind of music for Verdi to write, but he doesn't use monophony all that much in the *Requiem*, so when he does it sounds special. You can listen for a monophonic texture when the chorus sings the words "Libera animas omnium fidelium..." a line which means "Deliver the souls of all the faithful departed..." in Movement 3, the Offertory. In having the chorus sing all together as one voice here, Verdi makes this moment of prayer very direct and persuasive.



Verdi uses **homophonic** writing more often. This is where the different voice parts in the chorus (sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses) sing the same words in the same rhythm at the same time, but they sing different notes, creating harmonies. This is probably like a lot of music you might sing in your school's chorus or that you might hear when a hymn is sung in a church service. Some parts of the "Dies Irae", Movement 2, are sung in homophony.

The final choral texture Verdi uses is **polyphonic** writing. This means that the different sections of the chorus sing at different times from one another, with their notes overlapping but not lining up. This can be done in a very organized way. For example, try singing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" with one of your classmates. After you sing "stream," keep singing while one of your friends starts the song from the beginning. This is a round, or a canon, just like the one that can be found in Movement 1, the "Introit" movement of Verdi's *Requiem*. This is powerful because we hear different groups of people singing separately but ultimately coming together.



CONTRASTS THROUGH VOCAL SOLOISTS

In addition to the choir, Verdi's *Requiem* has four vocal soloists: one soprano, one mezzo-soprano, one tenor, and one bass. With this group of people, Verdi was able to do many different things just by changing the combinations of who is performing at what point in the piece. For example, in some sections Verdi chooses to have only the chorus sing -- for example at the start of Movement 2, the "Dies Irae." In some sections, Verdi chooses to have only the soloists sing — for example in Movement 3, the "Offertory" and in other sections, like the "Kyrie" in Movement 1, Verdi has the orchestra and chorus sing together. He also decides whether his soloists sing by themselves or as a group. Listen for solos with only one singer singing, but also different variations of duets (with two singers) and trios (with three singers). How many combinations are possible with four soloists? Does Verdi use them all?

CONTRASTS THROUGH ORCHESTRAL ACCOMPANIMENT

An even bigger contrast that Verdi can create with these resources is having the singers sing *a cappella*, or without the orchestra. When the orchestra plays throughout most of a piece of

music that is this long, it creates an extremely surprising effect when it stops playing. It makes us as listeners do a double-take. We say, "Wait! What is happening? Where did the orchestra go?" Verdi does this for the first time in Movement 1, the "Introit," on the words "Te decet hymnus deus in Sion," a phrase that means "You are praised, God, in Zion." This is the same phrase you see pictured in our polyphony example at the bottom of the page. Verdi has the choir emphasize these words by singing unaccompanied by the orchestra. In this way, we can imagine that the voices we hear are not the voices coming from the singers on the concert stage in front of us, but instead that they are the voices of people in ancient, Biblical times, singing in Zion — where one hundred piece orchestras didn't yet exist. Listen for other instances of *a cappella* singing and think about why Verdi chose to have the singers sing alone at those times.

CONCLUSION

Verdi uses all these techniques so that he can make his music fit the text of the *Requiem*. When the text changes mood or talks about something new, his music changes along with it. The fact that there are so many changes can contribute to a general feeling of uncertainty — we don't always know what is going to happen next in the music, just like we don't always know what is going to happen next in life. But with the few moments of repetition that Verdi does include, and with the overall feeling that everyone — chorus members, soloists, orchestral musicians, and audience members — are experiencing the same situations together, the Verdi *Requiem* feels whole and complete.

