

Consider, if you will, the commonality between great opera and the Catholic Mass. The grand, cavernous, and awe-inspiring settings. The dramatic and poetic use of language to convey narrative and meaning. The adherence to, and manipulation of, form. The cast, costumes, set pieces, lighting, all of which, taken together, create a total and immersive experience. Among the most significant shared elements is the inclusion of music to both heighten the emotional connotations of the text, and to provide rhythm and momentum to the scene. Although there is perhaps far greater piety in the motivations of its participants, those involved in the Mass are inarguably performers: their audience both earthly and divine.

It should come as little surprise given these similarities that among the greatest and most cherished of Requiem Mass settings – perhaps the most dramatic ceremony in the Catholic liturgy – come to us from revered composers of opera. Mozart, Berlioz, Dvořák, Britten, Stravinsky, Henze, Ligeti, and even the great musical theater composer Andrew Lloyd Weber each excelled in theatrical music and each contributed to the significant legacy of the Requiem Mass. If we consider the broader scope of *all* musical representations of the liturgical Mass, the list grows further still, including composers ranging from Haydn to Rossini, Janáček to Bernstein, and countless others. Few names are more synonymous with opera than Giuseppe Verdi’s, and few large choral works have proven more enduring and popular than his *Messa da Requiem*. The appeal of the Requiem Mass had little to do with religious piety for Verdi. He was not especially devout, and in fact spoke out against corruption in the Catholic Church during his lifetime. However, he recognized in this medium the dramatic extremity of human feeling that he often explored in his own operatic works.

Verdi’s first attempt at a Requiem setting was but one movement of a collaborative composition commemorating the death of Gioachino Rossini in 1868. Verdi’s *Libera me* was to end the entire setting, which included other movements from various composers well-known to the Italian opera world at the time. Few of these other figures have remained household names, vastly overshadowed by Verdi’s legacy. Shortly before the intended premiere, the project was abandoned, which greatly angered Verdi. However, upon hearing of the death of novelist and poet Alessandro Manzoni – whose enormous *The Betrothed* is one of the most celebrated of Italian literary works – Verdi found the purpose he needed to complete a *Requiem*. The composer venerated the writer, who had shared many of his values in the spirit of Italian unification and nationalism. Verdi’s remorse over Manzoni’s death can be seen in his artistic response. This response, in Verdi’s words, “is an impulse, or better yet, the need of my heart, which impels me to honour, as much as I can, this great man whom I so respected as a writer and have revered as a man, a model of virtue and of patriotism.”

When he took up the *Requiem*, Verdi had completed a series of monumental mature works over the preceding decade, including the Parisian *grand opera* commission *Don Carlos* and culminating with the epic *Aida*, commissioned for the opening of the elaborate royal opera house in Cairo. In these works, the scale and dramatic complexity of nearly every element was magnified to an extreme, from the orchestration to the size of the cast, and with prominent flashes of spectacle, in the French tradition. When we take this into account, the *Requiem* fits perfectly into this period of the composer’s output and artistic growth: combining moments of great intimacy and tenderness,

through which he expressed his own despair at the loss of Manzoni, paired with grand and striking dramatic gestures, through which he continued in the style of his most recent works.

The Mass begins with a hushed atmosphere and a solemn prayer. A sombre, hesitant descending gesture in the cellos starts the work, leading to the choir's plea to God: "Grant them eternal rest," uttered in a whispered, quivering tone. The dramatic *Dies Irae*, which makes up the largest single section of the entire Mass, shows us with its sinuous inner voice motion tearing against the unwavering outer voices the very destruction of the earth, its surface tearing apart to reveal eruptions of fire. The cataclysmic landscape is marked by explosive accents in the brass and rapid trills in the strings that seem to tremble and quake. As the movement progresses, Verdi adds to the pandemonium of the scene. The bass drum thunders on off-beats, as though echoing the collapse of mountains.

The chorus later intones *Tuba mirum spargens sonum*, a text describing the trumpet sounding to call forth the dead to rise and come before the throne of God. This exceptionally dramatic image is prepared by the theatrical use of antiphonal trumpets, as though echoing from the four corners of the earth. Not only do the choir and soloists serve as Verdi's operatic cast, but he brings the audience itself into the action.

In the *Rex Tremendae*, the low timbres of the bass voices, joined by the low brass, bassoons, and timpani, evoke the booming voice and majesty of God, against which the solo voices seem sorrowfully outnumbered: their pleas for salvation coming across as meek by comparison to the enormity of Verdi's scoring. The dramatic episodes of the *Dies Irae* conclude with a final, exhausted prayer in the *Lacrimosa*, led by the bass soloist: to grant rest to the souls of the dead and judged.

Following the intensity of the *Dies Irae*, the *Offertory* is a calm sigh. Pastoral in quality, with its gently rocking rhythmic character, the music evokes the hopeful pleas of man's prayers to God. A triumphant fanfare opens the *Sanctus*: it is the most overt expression of joy in the *Requiem* mass. It is also the most traditionally contrapuntal of the mass movements, with a double fugue, divided between two sections of the choir.

If the *Sanctus* somehow evokes the fugal style of the late Renaissance, the *Agnus Dei* harkens further back still, with an infusion of medieval plainchant and a stark simplicity of scoring, albeit in a late Romantic tonal context. Featuring the soprano and mezzo-soprano soloists in dialogue with choir, the movement is unusually (in the context of this large and complex work) clear and unadorned: something like a continuously evolving variation on the same simple theme.

Verdi's considerable gifts for expressive orchestral color and carefully calibrated orchestration are on full display in the *Lux aeterna*, in which the transparent, quivering voice of divisi violins provide a weightless background to mezzo-soprano and tenor's depiction of "eternal light," juxtaposed directly against the weighty bass soloist's recollection of the "Requiem" motive, and accompanied by the deep, guttural intonations of the trombones and bassoon, and rumbling tympani. Verdi plays light against dark throughout the entire movement, featuring the brilliant chirping of the piccolo in one memorable instance. The conclusion of the movement is among the most exceptional moments in the entire *Requiem*: a lone mezzo-soprano, accompanied once more by delicate violins, is interrupted by the ominous recollection of the "Requiem" motive in the low instruments. A solo flute

strives upward, yet the final chord is richly scored in the low voices. One can almost imagine the frequent and ambiguous manipulations of stage lighting, had this *Requiem* instead been an opera.

Verdi's operatic Mass ends, in true theatrical style, with the sudden, often unprepared shifts in tempo, style, and mood that we come to expect in an opera house. The solo soprano, whose "aria" is perhaps the most intimately humanistic passage in the *Requiem*, her pleas of "Deliver me, O Lord" always addressed in the first person. She is now alone: a tragic heroine evoking the solitude of any human left alone to face judgement. The chorus and orchestra recall preceding themes from the Mass: the instantly recognizable *Dies Irae* imparting one final reminder of the impending day of wrath. Its energy dissipates, leaving only a fragile, sustained F in the oboe and horn that melds with the final iteration of *Requiem aeternum*, in the pitch-black key of B-flat minor. Tenderly, the soloist slides up, unexpectedly, to a G natural, and, like the "eternal light" which shines upon the saved, the brightness of B-flat emerges.

Perhaps most composers would have ended things there, but Verdi is unlike most composers. In a moment that seems to have been pulled straight from an orchestrated operatic recitative, the soprano makes another plea for salvation, yet her line plunges downward, overtaken by the trembling of the earth depicted by the tympani. The choir launches into a complex fugue, the prayer for liberation echoing among the voices, who represent, very possibly, us. The conclusion of the *Requiem* is hardly optimistic, with the soprano and choir weakly and exhaustedly lamenting. It is difficult to ascertain from this ambiguous conclusion precisely how Verdi expects for us to feel. Few composers before or since have so accurately rendered the wide and unpredictable swings of emotion that humans feel when faced with the prospect of death and its immensity. It is a subject that, perhaps more than a Mass, truly needs an opera.