



"REQUIEM FOR NON-BELIEVERS"

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When Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem* had its world premiere on May 22, 1874, it was generally recognized as a musical masterpiece. Nonetheless, many critics felt that it was not a true religious work, perceiving it to be a musical drama, indeed yet another opera. The common jibe was that it was "Verdi's best opera." For some the contention that the *Requiem* was actually an opera in disguise was intended to be a demeaning criticism.¹ Hans van Bülow, the famous German conductor who was Wagner's devoted proselytizer as well as his cuckold, harshly called it Verdi's "latest opera ... although in ecclesiastical robes." Eighteen years later Bülow recanted this view and sent a humble letter to Verdi asking him "will you forgive me?"²

The controversy over the dramatic or operatic nature of the *Requiem* continues to this day.

The genesis of the *Requiem* was not from any ecclesiastical or devotional impulse. Rather, Verdi's motivation for the composition of a *Requiem* arose out of patriotism. The famous opera composer Gioachino Rossini died on November 13, 1868. Verdi felt his passing was the loss of one of the last great contemporary Italians, "one of the glories of Italy."³ He came up with an idealistic and highly impractical idea to honor both Rossini and Italian music. Verdi's unusual proposal was that a committee of musical experts, chaired by the publisher Giulio Ricordi, would select eleven outstanding Italian composers who would collectively compose a *Requiem* in honor of Rossini without receiving any compensation. Each would contribute a section of the mass, which was to be performed on the anniversary of Rossini's death in a church in Bologna. Verdi intended that this would be the sole performance of the work; the score would be thereafter deposited and sealed into the archives of the Liceo Musicale in Bologna, to be subsequently performed, if at all, only on anniversaries of Rossini's death.

This odd Requiem by Committee was actually composed. Eleven composers were

selected, all of whom but Verdi are today totally forgotten except by scholars of the arcana of 19th century Italian music. The one possible exception is Antonio Bazzini, who became Puccini's teacher and who – as you may recall from my prior presentation on Puccini -- had composed an opera on the subject of Turandot. The younger contemporary composers whose works are sometimes still be heard in the operatic repertoire – Boito, Ponchielli, and Faccio – were all excluded.⁴

The *Requiem* for Rossini did not take place. Disputes over funding, contention between Bologna and Rossini's birthplace, Pesaro, as well as personality disputes, all contributed to the ultimate fiasco of Verdi's idealistic conception. The score languished in the archives for 120 years until it was unearthed and performed in 1988. It has been recorded and is now occasionally performed.⁵

The Verdi *Requiem* that we know owes its genesis to this quixotic project. Verdi had undertaken the task of writing the final section, *Libera Me*. In setting this portion, Verdi included references to other sections of the requiem mass, the *Dies Irae* and the *Requiem Aeternam*. A conductor who saw and admired the *Libera Me*, Alberto Mazzucato, wrote to Verdi, implicitly suggesting that Verdi should compose a complete *Requiem*. Verdi wrote back saying that Mazzucato had “almost planted in me the desire to set the mass in its entirety at some later date.” He recognized that he had composed the core of three major sections of the mass. Still Verdi dismissed the idea, saying “[d]on't worry. It's a temptation that will pass like so many others. There are so many requiem masses; there is no point in writing one more.”⁶

If this was Verdi's intention, everything changed when the Italian novelist Alessandro Manzoni died on May 22, 1873. Manzoni was the author of *I Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*),

which is universally considered the greatest Italian novel of the 19th century, as well as the model for a standard national written language in a country riven by diverse local dialects. Although to modern sensibilities his novel seems imbued with a deep, if not syrupy, religious feeling, Manzoni was a Catholic humanist whose works, like Verdi's, reflected a sympathy for people in all walks of life and as well as a strong interest in historical detail.⁷ In his time, "Manzoni's liberal ideas were anathema to the Church."⁸

While Verdi respected Rossini, he revered Manzoni. Too shy to seek him out personally, he finally met Manzoni in 1867, when Verdi's wife and a close friend, Clara Maffei, arranged a meeting. Verdi sent Manzoni a photograph with a humble dedication to "one who did true honor to this strife-torn country of ours," adding "You are a saint, Don Alessandro." He subsequently wrote of his emotion at this meeting: "I would have knelt down before him if it were possible to worship mortal men."⁹ Verdi grieved deeply upon learning of Manzoni's death. Avoiding the public ceremonies, he went privately to visit the grave-site. He wrote of Manzoni's death: "with him dies the purest, holiest, and highest of our glories."¹⁰

Once again, Verdi decided to honor a great compatriot with a requiem mass to be performed on the anniversary of his death. But this time, it would be different and highly personal. Verdi would write all of the music, incorporating almost unchanged the *Libera Me* he had written for the Rossini *Requiem*. This work was not intended to be performed just one time in a church, but to be played throughout Italy and Europe in the great opera houses and most important musical venues. Verdi conducted the first performance in Milan in the church of San Marco, but the subsequent performances were conducted by him and then Franco Faccio in La Scala .

The Verdi *Requiem* is a massive work of approximately 90 minutes, which requires a very large orchestra, chorus, and four soloists who must be capable of singing music of operatic scope and difficulty. Indeed, Verdi wrote the music for the soprano and mezzo soloists to accommodate the vocal abilities of the same artists for whom he had written *Aida* only three years earlier, Teresa Stoltz and Maria Waldmann. Indisputably, the *Requiem* has operatic sounding music – powerful arias, duets and ensembles. These opera-like pieces diverge greatly from the style of most previously composed requiems, although they do reveal a kinship with Rossini's *Stabat Mater*.

It is hard to dispute that the musical language of the *Requiem* is dramatic; as one commentator noted, “that was his *metier*.”¹¹ But in writing the *Requiem* Verdi was free of the constraints that are imposed by the strictures of writing an opera. Thus, one leading critic finds that the *Requiem* represents Verdi's “genius at its most concentrated,” with his musical creativity unimpeded by the demands of the theater.¹² To some extent, Verdi felt liberated by the freedom he had in writing a work that was not intended for the stage. He happily wrote “I am no longer a clown serving the audience, beating a huge drum and shouting 'Come on! Come on! Step up!’”¹³

Dramatic yes, but is it a stageable opera in disguise? Surprisingly, in recent years there have been several staged performances of the *Requiem*. In Berlin, the Deutsche Oper has put on, and several times revived, a remarkable production by Achim Freyer, where the four soloists are presented as “The White Angel,” “Death is the Woman,” “Solitude” and the “Load Bearer,” complemented by various choreographed allegorical characters. A trailer for this production, available on YouTube, shows that it is a visually striking production, vaguely reminiscent of the medieval *Totentanz* or Dance of Death, which was a common artistic conception in the

frightening era of the Black Death.¹⁴

In Cologne, Oper Köln has put on a fully staged version, dealing with contemporary life and death situations, in which the soloists take on the personas of a victim of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, a Turkish writer in prison, a young woman with bulimia, and an aid worker in Africa.¹⁵

Ingenious or outrageous, these concepts reflect German *regietheater*, where directors feel free to superimpose their own ideas and interests with little regard for the intentions of the composer. Certainly, these productions do not reflect Verdi's own concerns in 1874.¹⁶

David Rosen, who is the leading scholar on the Verdi *Requiem*, rejects the argument that the *Requiem* fits into the *genre* of opera. Rosen argues that

“[t]he *Requiem* can surely be called ‘dramatic’ in the metaphorical sense of ‘forcefully effective’ but it would be difficult to call it ‘dramatic’ in the more central and restrictive sense of resembling a literary drama.”¹⁷

Rosen notes the many ways in which the *Requiem* differs from customary operatic settings of literary dramas.

- (1) The *Requiem* lacks a plot. It is a setting of a religious text;
- (2) The soloists are not characters with distinct, consistent and clearly defined personalities;
- (3) *A fortiori*, even when the solists sing in duets and ensembles, they do not interact in a dramatic fashion, representing conflicting views or interests;
- (4) The *Requiem* is not intended to be a staged¹⁸ piece although, as we have seen, this has not inhibited recent directors from conceiving possible stagings, however unrelated they may be to Verdi's intentions.

Rosen also notes more technical musical differences between the *Requiem* and operas – e.g., the greater proportion of the music given to the chorus and to ensembles, the lack of traditional alternation between recitative and set pieces, and the absence of the aria-cabaletta format. He also finds that the *Requiem* exhibits less variety of tempo than the typical opera. Still, Rosen does recognize the resemblance between some of the music to operatic mad scenes – particularly in the *Liber Scriptus* and *Libera Me* sections where the soprano is reduced to desperate stammering and trembling. He finds that in these sections, like mad scenes, “the women lose control of the musical discourse, unable to complete their thoughts.”¹⁹

Rosen concludes that the *Requiem* does not qualify as an opera, notwithstanding its often operatic sound:

“Verdi did not forge a completely new style for it, and, since he is known primarily for his operas, it is understandable that unwary listeners might perceive another vocal work sharing some of the same local characteristics as ‘operatic.’ The sound is similar. And of course there are soloists, there is a bass drum, and there are exciting moments in both. But in important ways the *Requiem* is fundamentally different from Verdi’s operas.”²⁰

We can agree with Rosen that the *Requiem* does not fit easily in the *genre* of opera. But that is really a straw-man issue. The real issue is whether Verdi’s *Requiem* goes beyond sounding dramatic to whether it has dramatic content and a dramatic theme, regardless of whether it is a true stageable opera.

In my view, it surely does. Furthermore, that theme is clearly not the devotional theme of traditional requiems which seek to reconcile the audience to the inevitable fact of human mortality. Verdi’s conception does not fit in easily with normal ecclesiastical values. Rather than exalting the divine, let alone the Church, Verdi focuses on the desperate heroism of human beings struggling with the irrationality, indifference and cruelty of the universe.

In considering the meaning of the *Requiem*, we must address Verdi's own beliefs and attitudes.

Verdi was indisputably anti-clerical. While Verdi could generously depict individual clergymen as admirable and even saintly human beings – Padre Guardiano in *La Forza del Destino* being a classic example – he had a fierce hostility to organized religion, perceiving it to be oppressive, unjust, and even cruel.

The operas immediately preceding the composition of the *Requiem* provide the best examples. In *Don Carlos*, Act III concludes with an *auto-da-fe* scene in which Protestant heretics are burned at the stake at the bidding of the Church. Verdi depicts the pomp and power of the Church – and its lack of mercy. To conclude this scene, Verdi inserts a heavenly voice which proclaims the salvation of the Church's victims. In perhaps the most powerful scene of this opera, the austere and terrifying Grand Inquisitor confronts and browbeats King Phillip into condemning to death his closest friend.

In *Aida*, the established church, in the guise of the Egyptian priesthood, is implacable in refusing any mercy to the captured Ethiopian prisoners, and equally implacable in demanding the death of the tenor hero, Radamés, oblivious to the desperate pleas of the Pharaoh's daughter, Amneris. She concludes her magnificent *scena*, which often steals the show, by shrieking at the departing priests: "Infamous race – may you be cursed!" The music associated with the High Priest and the priesthood is insistent and fearsome.²¹

Anti-clericalism in itself was not an unusual stance for a mid-19th century Italian liberal and patriot. Despite the false hopes that Italian nationalists initially had that Pope Pius IX would

prove to be the leader who would create a free and unified Italy, this Pope proved to be an obdurate reactionary and unrelenting opponent of Italian unification. Until their inclusion into the Italian state in 1861-2, the Papal States were a theocratic dictatorship. The Pope resisted until the bitter end the incorporation of Rome into Italy as its capital. When this was accomplished in 1870 – only four years before the *Requiem* was composed – Pius IX characterized himself as “the prisoner in the Vatican” and threatened excommunication for anyone who dared vote, let alone actively participate, in the newly unified Italian state. The hostility between the Church and the new Italian state was such that there was serious opposition in the Milan City Council to providing any funding for the first performance of the *Requiem* because it was to be put on in a church.²²

But Verdi was more than just an anti-clerical like Manzoni. He was a non-believer. Although Verdi never wrote about his religious beliefs, there is evidence which is accepted by most experts that he was an agnostic, if not an atheist.²³

The strongest proof of this comes in two letters written by his wife, Giuseppina Strepponi, in the year before he began work on the Manzoni *Requiem*. Although perhaps not a conventional Catholic in her daily life, Giuseppina was by most accounts a devout believer. In a letter to Countess Clara Maffei she discussed her opinion that Verdi was a totally moral and upright man who unfortunately had no need for religion:

“There are some highly virtuous natures that need to believe in God; there are others no less perfect who are quite happy to believe in nothing at all, while rigorously observing every precept of strict morality.”²⁴

Earlier that year she wrote an even more explicit letter about Verdi’s lack of religious belief:

“Verdi is the soul of honesty, he understands and feels every lofty and delicate sentiment, yet with all that, this *brigand* allows himself to be, I won’t say that he is an atheist, but certainly not much of a believer – and all with a calm obstinacy that makes one want to hit him.”²⁵

The original version of this letter was less equivocal; in it Giuseppina stated without qualification that Verdi was an atheist.²⁶

Arrigo Boito, the librettist of Verdi’s final two masterpieces and the intimate friend of his last years, similarly described the contrast between Verdi’s moral values and religious beliefs:

“In the ideal, moral or social sense he was a great Christian. But one must be very careful not to present him as a Catholic, in the political and strictly theological sense of the word: nothing could be farther from the truth.”²⁷

Of course, as a 19th century Italian, Verdi grew up imbued with Catholic culture. He was familiar with the Church’s rites, practices and musical liturgy, and also had a deep knowledge of the Bible. As one scholar wrote: “Verdi coexisted with religion as a country landowner might coexist with a distant but powerful sovereign.”²⁸

If the Verdi *Requiem* is dramatic in essence but neither religious nor devotional, what is its overriding theme? In my view, it is the identical humanist theme that permeates his greatest operas – the struggles of ordinary human beings against an unjust and indifferent universe where harsh fate and injustice conspire to frustrate their hopes and happiness. As Gilles de Van writes, Verdi composed the *Requiem*

“in the language he always spoke in his operas, the individual kicks and scruples, cries and implores, passes from rebellion to appeasement and from prostration to hope, yet without shaking his prison walls or forcing open the bronze doors of the unknown.”²⁹

How did Verdi accomplish this feat? As an opera composer Verdi was notorious for exhausting his librettists with demands to structure the operatic text with the precise words he

needed to clearly express his dramatic needs. But in composing a requiem mass, Verdi had a pre-existing text, a “libretto” consisting of some of the finest medieval Latin religious poetry, a text indisputably written as an expression of deep faith. This was the inflexible material that Verdi had to work with.

Yet perhaps not so inflexible. The text of the traditional requiem mass consists of many sections added over the years, and composers have often picked and chosen which sections to include or omit. More importantly, composers have the capacity to give emphasis to different sections and to instil through their music quite diverse moods and ambience.

For example, look at the contrast between what Verdi wrote and the beautiful *Requiem* written slightly more than a decade later by Gabriel Fauré. Fauré’s *Requiem* is a gentle piece, composed in the wake of the death of his parents. Its focus is on eternal rest and consolation. It has been called a “lullaby of death.” To achieve this, Fauré edited the standard text of the requiem mass to create a version quite different from what Verdi used. He completely omitted the terrifying *Dies Irae* section which so dominates the Verdi work. While Verdi’s *Requiem* ends enigmatically with either despair or resignation, Fauré comfortingly ends his work with the seldom used *In Paradisum* (“Into Paradise”).³⁰

The text that Verdi set, what we may call its libretto, is structured quite differently from Fauré’s *Requiem* and indeed any other previous requiem using the Latin text. If the collaborative *Requiem* for Rossini had the fatal flaw of lacking what Verdi called an essential *unità musicale*, musical consistency, the *Requiem* he wrote for Manzoni is permeated by the awesome sounds Verdi conceived for the *Dies Irae*, the terrifying words that describe the Last Judgment, when the entire universe will dissolve into ashes before the coming of the strict and unyielding divine

judge.³¹ Verdi's *Dies Irae* is "an unearthly storm" announced by "four tutti thunderclaps of the kettledrums."³² This *Dies Irae* has been compared to a musical description of Dante's Inferno, or to the raging tempest that Verdi wrote twelve years later for the beginning of *Otello*.³³

Verdi did not just merely write a fearsome *Dies Irae*; he restructured his text so that it recurs, with incredible dramatic effect, three other times in the course of the *Requiem*, with what David Rosen calls "cataclysmic disruption."³⁴ This *Dies Irae*, with its awesome terror, becomes – to use a concept enunciated previously by Verdi – the "principal idea that reigns over and dominates the entire composition."³⁵ As we shall see, in Verdi's hands the *Dies Irae* expresses a merciless heaven indifferent to humanity's desperation and deaf to its prayers.

The text of the requiem mass was structured by Verdi to become a series of pleas by the soloists, sometimes in ensembles with each other, sometimes in conjunction with the chorus, punctuated by the devastating recurrence of the *Dies Irae* theme or other manifestations of an awesome but alien celestial power. The human protagonists resort to every type of imprecation – devout, insistent, guilty, desperate, terrified, and ultimately pure resignation. Verdi carves out of the traditional words of the requiem mass powerful set pieces for his soloists, most typically when the Latin text is in the first person – e.g., "*quid sum miser*," "*ingemisco*," "*oro supplex*," "*libera me*," and "*tremens factus sum*." While the soloists are not, as David Rosen points out, true dramatic characters, they are individuals singing in every possible way and combination the urgent prayers of humanity for mercy and salvation.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the noted British critic Frances Toye felt that the *Requiem* functioned "like an oratorio, a sacred opera if you will on the subject of the Last Judgment, with Alessandro Manzoni's soul as the objective theme of the drama."³⁶ Toye carefully goes through

the score, focusing on the emotional tone of each section, from pleas to terror, to pathos and desperation, back to terror and ending in quiet supplication, with appropriate comparisons to the music of various Verdi operas.

Toye's effort to fit the *Requiem* in the *genre* of oratorio may be only a little less strained than the arguments that it is a disguised opera. Further, the dramatic theme of the *Requiem* is more universal than the just the fate of Manzoni's soul. Still, his musical analysis is very cogent and highlights the dramatic impact of the *Requiem*.

A few examples will demonstrate how Verdi's music and arrangement of the text create a drama of the great human struggle in a universe which is unyielding and merciless. It is a struggle with a supreme power which is always indifferent, where desperate prayers are either unheard or brusquely rebuffed.

After the first occurrence of the *Dies Irae* melody we hear a splendid trumpet fanfare, the "*tuba mirum*" which depicts the fearsome power of the celestial judge. Death and all nature will be stunned. The terrified mezzo soprano soloist envisions the Judgment Book which contains everything so that absolutely nothing will go unpunished. Sometime she shouts with fear, sometimes she is reduced to stuttering again and again the words "*nil ... nil*" – "nothing ... nothing." All the while, underscoring her fear and dread, the chorus murmurs the words "*Dies Irae*" before finally bursting out in full force with a recapitulation of the musical theme of the Last Judgment. Individually and in concert the soloists then ponder their hopeless status before the supreme judge: "*quid sum miser tunc dicturus*" – "what shall I, a wretch, say ... when even the just one is uncertain of his fate." The soprano sings the words "*cum vix justus sit securus*" with what has been called "a desperate descending melody."³⁷ This despair will shortly be

“brusquely answered” by a fortissimo cadence³⁸ with which the chorus anticipates the coming of the Supreme Judge, the King of Awesome Majesty, “*rex tremendae majestatis*.” This music is not mere pomp and splendor; it has been called “menacing,” creating the “oppressive atmosphere”³⁹ in which human penitents must implore mercy.⁴⁰

Perhaps the best example of Verdi’s transformation of the liturgical text into pure human drama is the great aria for the bass soloist – “*confutatis maledictis*.”

Other composers had set this text for the chorus, but Verdi transformed it into a noble yet desperate plea of one man to celestial forces that are utterly unmoveable in their cold indifference. This aria is a lineal descendant of other powerful moments in Verdi operas where a protagonist desperately seeks mercy from unforgiving powers that have absolute control over his fate. In it we hear echoes of Rigoletto’s aria, “*cortigiani, vil razza dannata*,” where Rigoletto is reduced from fury to humiliatingly and vainly seeking pity from the callous courtiers who have kidnapped his daughter. Or perhaps we even can go back to Verdi’s first great success, *Nabucco*, where the once-mighty Babylonian king has become a prisoner of his daughter who has usurped his power, forcing him to beg and fruitlessly plead for her compassion.⁴¹

The bass aria in the *Requiem* begins with a fearsome vision of the damned being condemned to searing flames, while the soloist expresses the hope of being spared and called among the blessed. This develops into an urgent plea from the bass, now reduced to utter humility: “I pray as a suppliant with my heart ground into ashes; have a care for my fate.” As the aria reaches its powerful climax with the words “*gere curam mei finis*,” we approach the expected final cadence. But listen to what happens! On the last note, we get the immediate celestial response. It is a shocking, musically unexpected, transition. The chorus shouts “*Dies*

Irae.” Once again we hear the terrifying music of the Last Judgment. In technical musical terms, David Rosen explains that this powerful aria ends with a “violent deceptive cadence”; instead of the chord we expect we get “the *fortissimo* G-minor chords that open the *Dies Irae*.”⁴² Another Verdi scholar declares that at this moment the *Dies Irae* “bursts with a volcanic force.”⁴³ In brief, the cruel answer to this urgent plea is another reminder of the day of wrath, without a glimmer of mercy.

Sometimes, the theme of humanity’s desperate search for divine kindness is highlighted in more subtle fashion. In the *Offertorium*, first the soloists and then the chorus seek to remind heaven of the promise of redemption given to Abraham. At the climax of this section the chorus repeats these words singing not once, but three times, the word “*promisisti*” – you promised, you promised, you promised. It is as if mankind is daring to try to hold God accountable to his own pledges of mercy and justice.

The dramatic climax of the *Requiem* is the final section, *Libera Me*. This was the section that Verdi had reserved for himself in the collaborative *Requiem* project for Rossini. Here the theme of doomed humanity struggling against inexorable fate is most vividly demonstrated. Verdi composed this section as an overwhelming extended *scena* for the soprano soloist and the chorus.⁴⁴

Most critics recognize that this section comes closest to the world of opera.⁴⁵ The soprano begins with an essentially monotone declamation of the plea “deliver me, o Lord, from eternal death on that awful day,” but sometimes her voice shrieks with terror. She is then reduced to virtually stuttering the words “*tremens factus sum ego et timeo*” —“I am seized with fear and trembling,” but then her emotions reach a climax in ascending cries of sheer fright.

And the response from heaven? The same as before – yet another reprise of the horrors of the Last Judgment, a full scale reiteration of the *Dies Irae* music. Once again this terrifying music bursts in with shocking effect, a musically unprepared “cataclysmic disruption.”⁴⁶ This is the third time with which this awesome music has been the brutal response to the human protagonists’ prayers and their hopes and fears.

The soprano resumes her plea for eternal rest and perpetual light, her voice again ascending over the chorus.

Next, the chorus, now representing all humanity, joins in with a tremendous fugue. Against the overwhelming mass of sound created by the chorus, the soprano’s voice soars, crying over and over again “*libera me*” – “deliver me, deliver me.”

The effect created here by Verdi is the same as in the magnificent *concertati*, the concerted ensemble pieces and finales, of his greatest operas. In the *Libera Me* the urgent pleas of the soprano rise above the enormous mass of the full orchestra and chorus just as do Verdi’s other doomed heroines. In the *Libera Me* we recognize Aida, alone amidst the crowd in the Egyptian palace, lamenting her hopeless destiny. Here, too, we anticipate Desdemona, humiliated and thrown to the ground, her voice soaring above the shocked crowd, stunned by Otello’s wrath and curse. Perhaps when we hear the *Libera Me* we also recall Violetta in the ensemble that ends Act II of *La Traviata*, similarly humiliated and cast to the ground, expressing her shame and yet her love. Francis Toye memorably finds that the sheer force and violence of the soprano-chorus ensemble in the *Libera Me* is “so dynamic and insistent that one seems to sense the clamor of a multitude intent on achieving salvation by violence.”⁴⁷

And then the music subsides. The soprano once again quietly but urgently declaims the

desperate plea of “*libera me*” – “deliver me, o Lord, from eternal death on that awful day.” And thus the *Requiem* quietly and ambiguously ends, without the terrifying cries of the earlier iterations, all emotion totally spent. Frances Toye says of the ending: “Force has failed, only the appeal to mercy remains, and now so abject that it is spoken rather than sung.”⁴⁸ There is no assurance of redemption, no promise of salvation. Is it resignation or despair? We are only certain of the brave nobility of the eternal human struggle.

The dark undertone of the *Requiem* reflects Verdi’s own tragic world view, in which individuals are trapped by forces and events that they cannot control.

Verdi had a profound devotion to Shakespeare, on whose plays he based three of his operas: *Macbeth*, the greatest work of his youth, and *Otello* and *Falstaff*, the supreme masterpieces of his old age.

But there was one Shakespeare play above all which he longed to set to music – yet never dared attempt - *King Lear*. Shortly before his death, Verdi offered the proposed libretto for *Il Re Lear* to the young Pietro Mascagni, who recently had composed the enormously successful *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Mascagni asked Verdi why he had never composed an opera with this libretto. Verdi’s answer reveals his profound understanding and deep feeling for the dark world of *King Lear*: “That scene when Lear is alone on the heath terrified me.”⁴⁹

Verdi found in Shakespeare a kindred tragic view of the human condition. He deeply felt and was drawn to *King Lear* because it is the bleakest and least Christian of all the plays, without hope or a glimmer of redemption.

King Lear is a cruel vision of a world where “as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport.”⁵⁰ In the *Requiem* we are in a similar world. In *King Lear*, Albany

exclaims when he learns of the plot to kill Cordelia: “The gods defend her!” Seconds later we see Lear bearing Cordelia’s lifeless body, heartbreakingly crying: “Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones.”⁵¹ So too, in the *Requiem* the prayers of the soloists are answered with the implacable “*Dies Irae*.”

In the merciless world of *King Lear* redemption comes not from the gods but Lear’s own human growth in pity and empathy; so too, in the *Requiem* we see individuals gaining strength and nobility through endurance and suffering even while, in Shakespeare’s words, they “trouble deaf heaven” with “bootless cries.”⁵²

In Verdi’s tragic operas, and above all in the *Requiem*, we encounter human beings struggling against harsh circumstances beyond their power to control, men and women doomed and desperate. Verdi shows how they confront their destiny with courageous dignity. In all of Verdi’s works we hear profoundly human voices. The soloists of the *Requiem* – like Rigoletto, Violetta, the Leonoras of *Il Trovatore* and *La Forza del Destino*, as well as Simon Boccanegra, Aida, Desdemona and Otello – all reflect our uncertain common human condition. In his operas, Verdi gave voice to our shared suffering, fears and frustrated hopes. So too, in the *Requiem*. It is the requiem of a humanist non-believer.

Verdi was the profoundly compassionate composer whose works, and especially the *Requiem*, depict the tragic circumstances of all humanity. The words of the ode that the Italian poet, Gabrielle d’Annunzio, wrote after Verdi’s death, which are inscribed on his tomb in Milan, ring true:

“Diede una voce alle speranze e ai lutti.
Pianse ed amò per tutti.”⁵³

“He gave voice to our hopes and our grief.
He wept and loved for us all.”

ENDNOTES

1. While in the 19th century this jibe was usually a criticism asserting a lack of true religious feeling, calling the *Requiem* Verdi's greatest opera sometimes constitutes high praise. James Conlon, a Verdi expert who has conducted many Verdi operas, was quoted in the July, 2019 issue of *Opera News* as saying "It's really Verdi's greatest opera."
2. Julian Budden, Verdi (Master Musicians Series), Schirmer Books, 1985 at 115, 136, hereafter Budden A. By contrast, the composer Johannes Brahms immediately recognized the greatness of the *Requiem* and wrote that "Bülow has made an almighty fool of himself. Only a genius could have written such a work." *Id.* at 136.
3. Frances Toye, Verdi: His Life and Works, Vintage Books, 1959, at 141.
4. The best-known older contemporaries of Verdi who were still alive in 1868, Saverio Mercadante and Enrico Petrella, were invited to participate in the effort but declined because of health issues or other obligations.
5. When I was in Milan in 2018, I saw a poster announcing that the composite *Requiem for Rossini* was scheduled for performance that summer.
6. Budden A at 114
7. Julian Budden, The Operas of Verdi, Volume II, Oxford University Press, 1978 at 440, hereafter Budden B.
8. Charles Osborne, Verdi, A Life in the Theatre, Fromm International Publishing, 1987 at 231
9. Budden A at 97-98
10. Mary Jane Phillips-Matz, Verdi, A Biography, Oxford University Press, 1993 at 601
11. Osborne, *op. cit.* at 233
12. Budden A at 318
13. Phillips-Matz, *op. cit.* at 607
14. Wikipedia, Requiem (Verdi), 2019
15. *Id.*
16. In November, 2019 I saw a performance of the Verdi *Requiem* in Zürich, staged with a ballet. Unlike the Berlin or Köln productions, this did not attempt to superimpose a new story-line or characters onto the work. Rather, the dance was an effort to express the emotions generated by the work. There is a modern trend for religious works to be staged, *e.g.*, Bach's *Passion*

According to St. John and Handel's *Messiah* and *Theodora*. Unlike the *Requiem*, these are pieces that narrate a dramatic story. The Berlin and Köln productions differ because they invent characters and/or a new plot line nowhere evident in Verdi's work.

17. David Rosen, *Verdi Requiem*, Cambridge University Press, 1985 at 92

18. As noted, the initial performance was in a church, San Marco in Milan. It was sung as part of an actual liturgical ceremony, with the music of the *Requiem* alternating with plainchant. This was how traditional *Requiem*s were – and often still are – often performed. A few years ago I went to a performance of the Mozart *Requiem* where Mozart's music was interspersed amid the liturgical ceremony and plainchant. Still, even the initial church performance of the *Requiem* was interrupted by applause and encores. Moreover, after its *prima* in a church, the subsequent performances of the Verdi *Requiem* were conducted by Verdi and then Franco Faccio in the La Scala opera house. Verdi never again conducted the *Requiem* in a church. Ever since then, the normal venue for performances of the Verdi *Requiem* has been the opera house or concert hall.

19. Rosen, *op. cit.* at 92-93

20. *Id.* at 97

21. At first glance, Verdi's revised ending for *La Forza del Destino* seems to refute the concept that the operas preceding the composition of the *Requiem* manifest strong anti-clerical values. In the original version of *Forza*, the hero, embittered by the cruelty of fate, throws himself off a cliff, cursing the world. It has been said that "[t]he stark atheism of the original made it popular in the Communist bloc prior to 1989." Budden A at 259.

But in the revised version the saintly Padre Guardiano reconciles Alvaro to his fate and perhaps to heaven, and the opera ends with beautiful trio.

Despite the apparent religiosity of the ending, various critics have concluded that the revision merely represented Verdi's dramatic sense that the opera required a less horrific ending, as well as the impulse to write that beautiful final trio. Budden adds that "that the revised ending can be seen as a compromise – a concession to the religious susceptibilities of nineteenth century audiences." Budden A at 259. Indeed, the critics suggest that Verdi's lack of religious faith was the reason why it took him so long to decide to revise the ending on these lines. "Presumably Verdi's agnosticism had prevented him from arriving at this solution earlier." Osborne, *op. cit.* at 260; *cf.* Budden B at 440.

22. The composer Arrigo Boito was on the Milan City Council and strongly supported Verdi's intention to have the initial performance in the church of San Marco. This was one of the initial steps that led the reconciliation between Verdi and Boito, who had seriously offended Verdi with a poem celebrating a "reform" opera by Boito's friend, Franco Faccio. Faccio, too, reconciled with Verdi and conducted performances of the *Requiem* at La Scala; he also was the conductor of the premiere of Verdi's *Otello*, with a libretto by Boito. As noted, *supra*, neither Boito nor Faccio, nor any other young composer from the *avant garde* "*scapigliatura*" movement, were selected to contribute to the collaborative project for a *Requiem* in honor of Rossini.

23. Almost every major Verdi scholar concludes that the evidence suggests that Verdi was an agnostic, if not an atheist. Budden A at 114; Budden B at 440; DeMan, *op. cit.* at 333-34; Walker, *op. cit.* at 280; Phillips-Matz, *op. cit.* at 601; Osborne, *op. cit.* at 206. Walker, in particular, decimates the “perverse attempts of Catholic apologists” who seek to claim Verdi as one of their own by selectively editing his wife’s letters. Walker, *op. cit.* at 280. Catholic advocates try to claim Verdi as one of their own by focusing on the fact that Verdi was personally friendly with the local clergy, and built a chapel on his estate at Sant’Agata, even though that chapel presumably was for the use of his more devout wife, and by asserting that the “sincerity” of the religious music found in various operas proves he was a believer. *See also* Gerd Reinäker, Verdi – ein gläubiger Ketzer?, Deutsche Oper Berlin program note, 2006; Jesse Rosenberg, Is Opera Secular by Definition? (draft chapter for the Oxford Handbook of Opera).

24. Budden A at 114

25. *Id*

26. Frank Walker, The Man Verdi, University of Chicago Press, 1982 at 280; Phillips-Matz, *op. cit.* at 601; Osborne, *op. cit.* at 206

27. Budden A at 147

28. Gilles de Van, Verdi’s Theater, University of Chicago Press, 1998 at 344

29. DeVan, *op. cit.* at 344

30. Wikipedia, Requiem (Fauré), 2019

31. Toye, *op. cit.* at 164, 438

32. Rosen, *op. cit.* at 25 *citing* Budden A at 322

33. Toye, *op. cit.* at 164, 438

34. Rosen, *op. cit.* at 64

35. *Id.* at 81

36. Toye, *op. cit.* at 438

37. Rosen, *op. cit.* at 30

38. *Id.* at 31

39. *Id.* at 33

40. Splendid though they may be, the “*tuba mirum*” fanfare and the “*rex tremendae*” music sound of an awesome power, rather than a loving divinity. The one section of the *Requiem* which arguably sings of the goodness of a deity without an authoritarian tinge is the “*Sanctus*,” a brilliant and sunny double fugue. Yet, for me, the *Sanctus* is the least persuasive movement in the entire *Requiem*. It is almost as if Verdi took a moment off to show his technical skills in counterpoint, to remind his critics that he was a proud and accomplished heir of the tradition of Palestrina. Indeed, his last word as an opera composer was the equally accomplished fugue that ends his comic masterpiece, *Falstaff*. But this fugue, in which every one on stage concedes that all of life is but a jest, is completely in tune with – and indeed encapsulates – the bright yet ironic mood of the entire work.

41. See also the prologue of *Simon Boccanegra*, where the protagonist vainly seeks forgiveness from the adamant Jacopo Fiesco for his illicit love affair with Fiesco’s daughter.

42. Rosen, *op. cit.* at 42

43. Budden A, *op. cit.* at 322

44. The *Libera Me* in the 1874 *Requiem* for Manzoni closely follows Verdi’s original version for Rossini. Many of the changes between the two versions, particularly those which intensify its dramatic effect, reflect Verdi’s anticipation that the soprano part would be sung by Teresa Stoltz, the highly dramatic soprano who had created the role of Leonora in the 1869 revision of *La Forza del Destino*, and who had been Verdi’s choice for the Italian premiere of *Aida* in 1872.

45. Budden writes that the “*Libera Me* ... comes closest to the world of opera... in the sense of personal anxiety conveyed by the soprano.” He finds parallels with Leonora’s fright and fear in the final scene of *La Forza del Destino*. Budden A at 344.

46. Rosen, *op. cit.* at 64

47. Toye, *op. cit.*, cited by Rosen, *op. cit.* at 69

48. *Id.*

49. Marcello Conati: Encounters With Verdi, Cornell University Press (1984) at 314

50. William Shakespeare, King Lear, New American Library, 1963, Act IV, Scene I

51. *Id.* at Act V, Scene III

52. William Shakespeare, Sonnet XXIX

53. Gabriele d’Annunzio, *Per la morte di Giuseppe Verdi* in Elettra, 1904



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