

Program Notes
March 20, 2010
By Composer in Residence Bruce Brown

Verdi's Requiem

Giuseppe Fortunino Francesco Verdi (1813–1901) certainly ranks among the most important composers of all time, especially in the world of opera. When his third opera, *Nabucco*, was performed on March 9, 1842, the twenty-nine year old composer was hailed as a hero throughout Italy. In the next decade or so he became the most famous composer of operas in the world. When Verdi died, at the dawn of the twentieth century, musicians and the general public gathered in huge numbers to pay tribute. His state funeral in Milan has been cited as the largest public event of any kind ever held in Italy!

Music critics often despised Verdi's music as much as the public loved it! Writers at the time condemned his *Requiem*, calling it sensational and irreligious, but Verdi seemed oblivious to their diatribes. "As for the newspapers," he once wrote, "does anybody force you to read them? ... The day of justice will come, and it is a great pleasure for the artist, a supreme pleasure, to be able to say: 'Imbeciles, you were wrong!'"

In 1869, when Verdi was in his mid fifties, Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868) died. Verdi admired Rossini greatly and decided it would be a fitting tribute for several different composers to join forces and write a requiem mass in his honor. Verdi wrote one of the movements, "Libera me," and thirteen other composers set other segments of the mass in their own style. The combined requiem was to be performed on November 13, 1868, the first anniversary of Rossini's death. Unfortunately, the conductor, Angelo Mariani, wasn't very enthusiastic about the project, and the organizing committee cancelled the performance just nine days before it was scheduled to take place. Verdi was outraged and never forgave Mariani, who had been a close friend.

The Rossini requiem was forgotten until 1988, more than a century later, when it was first performed in Stuttgart, Germany.

Verdi, meanwhile, kept working on his "Libera me," and when the great Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni died in 1873, Verdi decided to write a complete requiem in his honor incorporating the movement he had already written.

Verdi idolized Manzoni, so much so that when he had an opportunity to meet him he respected his privacy and stayed away. Manzoni sent Verdi a photograph of himself with the inscription "To Giuseppe Verdi, a glory of Italy, from a decrepit Lombard writer." Verdi still kept his distance, but he hung the photograph on his bedroom wall, and he sent Manzoni a picture of himself on which he wrote "I esteem and admire you as much as one can esteem and admire anyone on this earth, both as a man and as a true honor of our country so continually troubled. You are a saint Don Alessandro!"

The two men didn't meet face to face until years later.

When Manzoni died, Verdi read the obituaries with disappointment. "Not one speaks the way it should," he said, "Many words, but none of them deeply felt."

Verdi didn't attend the funeral, saying he preferred to visit the grave "alone and unseen." But that night he wrote a letter to his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, saying he planned to write a requiem to be performed on the first anniversary of Manzoni's death. He was so serious about the project he offered to conduct himself and pay the copyists fees.

The music Verdi wrote is intense and powerful, so much so that many criticized it for being too theatrical and melodramatic. Verdi certainly uses his dramatic skill and vivid imagination to great effect. The *Dies irae* ("Day of Wrath") section is divided into ten segments, each of which is like a complete operatic scene. A choir of trumpets around the stage provides electrifying energy to the *Tuba mirum*. The vocal solos in the requiem come at perfect moments for maximum expressive impact.

The famous conductor Hans von Bülow, a champion of Wagner's music, made an offhand remark about the requiem being "Verdi's latest opera, though in ecclesiastical robes" and chose to skip the concert. Eighteen years later von Bülow finally heard the requiem and was moved to tears. He wrote Verdi to apologize, and Verdi wryly said von Bülow may have been right the first time.

Posterity has tended to agree with Johannes Brahms, who heard the requiem and said "only a genius could have written such a work."