

## Performances

### *Messa di Requiem*

Donizetti: *Requiem per Bellini*. The Hanover Choir; Rosebery Orchestra cond. Natalie Seymour; Teresa Cahill (sop.); Margaret Cable (m-sop.); Maldwyn Davies (ten.); Anthony Cunningham (barit.); Ian Caddy (bass).

Queen Elizabeth Hall, London.  
24th June 1989.

Some people respond to Donizetti's *Requiem per Bellini* by saying that it is *operatic*, it is certainly dramatic, but whether this drama is that of the church or the opera house is another matter. The nineteenth-century Catholic church was dramatic, its emphasis was on stygian gloom, immense depths, high vaults, on awe and retribution. Donizetti himself envisaged his own setting for a Requiem mass - an altar moved to the centre of the church, walls covered with black drapery, an "immense gold cross" hanging from above, a hidden orchestra which the public heard but did not see, darkness, sadness, candlelight. Italian church music sought to illustrate religious texts, it was descriptive, and if - failing any genuine insight into the period - we consider the results to be *operatic*, so be it, but this judgement may simply be the result of our own limitations.

And then, how subjective is our response in a concert like this? A Requiem for the Dead performed before a fee-paying audience! Under these conditions both faith and piety risk a reduction to theatre.

Nor do we know a sufficient amount about the conditions under which he composed. We should not jump to conclusions. We can ask ourselves to what extent Verdi's *Dies irae*, the cataclysmal centrepiece of his *Requiem per Manzoni* (1874), a thunderbolting 'Fall from Heaven' succeeded by a series of off-beat thumps, could possibly owe to Donizetti's earlier *Dies irae* heard here (first performed 28 April 1870) when the older composer supplied 'Hammer blows of fate' and a disturbing harmonic progression. What do we really know of the then current church music? What do we know about Raimondi's interminable religious oeuvre, of Luigi Ricci's twenty masses, or of Mercadante's untouched liturgical mountain, to name three drops in an ocean of forsaken music? We do know that reforms were instituted under Gregory XVI, that the familiar borrowings from the opera house were banned (it was far from unusual before his reign to find 'bleeding-chunks' of, say, *Tancredi*, set to antiphonal use), by 1870 such flagrant cross-fertilisation had gone, but high drama remained an essential.

Thanks to Mayr, Donizetti's musical education had been far more extensive than the Italian norm, if we hear in his *Requiem per Bellini* a bar of Mozart or a hint of Haydn we should not go overboard, conversely, in claiming a polyglot genesis for this work. The programme note for the concert unwisely quotes the New Grove, inadequate and dismissive as it is: "...a coat of many colours - a Mozartian Introit, a severely fugal Kyrie...and an Offertory in the style of a Neapolitan folksong", the programme writer adding his own opinion that the *Judex ergo* could have "come from any of Donizetti's serious operas". Not to the ears of this listener. The *Judex ergo* is passionate but in a declamatory style quite foreign to stage delivery; the Introit owes its form to a tradition Mozart inherited from the Italians; the fugal section of the Kyrie is approximately half the section, the remainder of which is far from severe; as for the Offertory - song-like it certainly is (to call it Neapolitan is simply to attempt denigration), Quasimodo would have had the requisite ecclesiastical answer to this jibe. A shrewder ear would have heard that the *Graduale* owes something to Cherubini, who, for Italians, was a far more contemporary source. If, in looking for precedents, we find traces of many earlier composers in this work, all we are saying is that Catholic church music was dependent on received forms. Few composers (and Cherubini is something of an exception - not Mozart) were able to inject sufficient personal character to create a new mood. Where Donizetti is concerned, his music owes everything to his individual response to the text, to the tragedy of Bellini's death, and to his remarkable lyrical exordium. It also owes a considerable amount to romanticism in general. Here the operatic accusation has some truth. Donizetti viewed this music emotively, he wanted to move the listener, he underlined apposite words just as he did in his operas, with melismas, acciacature and so on; the component sections are introduced with a worldly pomp and often are terminated with a secular cadence. Like Verdi, he intended his audience to respond. How tragic it is that the other Requiem masses he is known to have composed have so far failed to surface. Then, indeed, we could have made some comparisons!

The Queen Elizabeth Hall concert was a successful hearing of this *Requiem* which is now being given a more frequent exposure. The orchestra coped well with a demanding evening (the Mendelssohn Psalm As the Hart Pants which had preceeded the *Requiem* had proved something of a hurdle): Natalie Seymour conducted with sensitivity and a firm beat. The male soloists were exemplary; Anthony Cunningham sang with force and grace, the *Judex ergo* was splendidly eloquent and found a rare unity in the voices of Ian Caddy and Maldwyn Davies. The chorus, as always alas, proved to be the Achilles heel, hollow in the middle and ragged at the ends. A small

price to pay for a fine performance. All the arch-lyrical moments were most beautifully sustained (the *Ingemisco* a heartstopping moment of great serenity). Not for the first time I wondered about the end of this *Requiem*, indeed, not until the very end is one conscious that this is an unfinished score. There ought to be repeat mark or an insertion mark surely somewhere in Donizetti's autograph, a repeat of the *Libera me* perhaps, or a sign to insert a suitable valedictory cadence such as exists elsewhere in the work. Donizetti's farewell to Bellini lacks a final flourish, such as neither maestro would have sanctioned in the days when it was an *aria-finale* which set the seal on success.

Alexander Weatherson