

Recordings

Gaetano Donizetti: *Messa di Requiem* (1835) Orfeo C172881A
(Studer/Muller-Molinari/Baldin/Rootering/Bogart) Cond. Miguel Angel
Gomez-Martinez/Bamberg Symphony Orchestra.

Giovanni Pacini: *Messa di Requiem* (1864) Bongiovanni
GB 2059-2 (Rossi/Cicogna/Giordani/Juvarra) Cond. Gianfranco Cosmi/
Orchestra of the Teatro del Giglio, Lucca.

These two Requiem Masses for Bellini have some features in common, quite apart from the rivalry both authors engendered in the heart of the defunct composer. Both failed to be performed as intended, except to commemorate the authors themselves, Donizetti's was first performed in Bergamo in 1870, thirty-five years after composition, Pacini's - composed for the proposed reburial of Bellini in Catania (an event which took place only in 1876) - was first performed thirty days after his own death in 1867. Neither is truly complete. Conceivably both maestri shrank from the task of laying to rest such a formidable and so mesmeric a competitor. Donizetti's Requiem has no real conclusion, and Pacini's whispered finale to the *Dies irae* sequence (his Requiem ends here) is a diminuendo in an unresolved key, desolate and deeply disturbing. No doubt it was an appropriate conclusion.

Though performed thus, in inverted order of composition, a stylistic comparison of the two scores is riveting. Pacini's score - composed so many years later - has moved on into a far more complex harmonic world. Both are highly emotional. Donizetti's is graver, more solidly founded in musical merit, more foursquare in essence, more obedient to church precedent, Pacini's - however waspish his antagonism to Bellini had been - more compassionate, more touching. Donizetti's honest frontal attack is contrasted with Pacini's more devious music-making, harmonically labile and insinuating, with his familiar profligate fleeting melodic beauties, rejecting tonal closure in many instances so that it conveys far more a continuous texture.

The contrasts are exposed in the opening bars. Donizetti's long-breathed arch of theme sets a serene basis for his argument, Pacini employs a ravishing pianissimo alternating with noisy interjections from the coro. Did it reflect his own jaundiced vision of relations between himself and the illustrious dead composer? The performances here recorded give unequal answers to this and other questions. The Orfeo disc is well-balanced if a little tame, it gives a slightly unexciting aura to Donizetti's fervent invention; the Bongiovanni disc records the orchestra and coro faithfully enough but the soloists are often too unemphatic (or too distant from the microphones) so that the *Kyrie* suffers mildly from a cruder dynamic spread, at once too subtle and too harsh. The *Dies irae* in both versions goes better. Donizetti's furious thumps are convincing and threatening, Pacini's earth and sea-quake has a cosmic significance well worthy of his volcanic operatic past. Donizetti's is a balanced score, a more truly philosophical farewell to this troublesome spirit, Pacini's more regretful, "All Passion Spent" might be appropriate except that all passion is not quite exhausted.

Both these Requiem Masses are overwhelmingly lyrical. Pacini's, perhaps, is the more surprising. He had got himself into the act when Bellini's reinterment in Sicily had first been mooted (Bellini, dying in Paris, had first been buried there), writing letters of support to influential people as was his wont. No one, I imagine, would have thought of him otherwise. True, he too was a *catanese*, but long resident elsewhere. Both these Requiems make compelling listening, neither even touches triviality, both contrast ethereal grace with pungently rhythmic passages.

There are some extraordinary coincidences, the theme of Donizetti's *Ingemisco* has almost a mirror-image in that of Pacini's *Oro supplex*, both for tenor solo (and both No.9 on the CD's). But Pacini could never have seen Donizetti's music. Or could he? It would have made a moving post-script to his contemporary's unfinished lament. Pacini could lay claim to performance experience rare in famous composers, he had even sung a *tenore primo* role himself (in 1834, in Vincenzo Capececiatro's *Messa a grande Orchestra ad otto voci reali con coro*). His Requiem is exceptionally well-ordered soloistically speaking, everyone is fully employed. The Pacini Requiem is not as unbalanced vocally as Donizetti's incomplete score where the *maschio* element overwhelms the female voices, something he would have rectified later had performance materialised. Nor is Pacini so addicted to eloquent solos, achieving a choral consistency throughout.

Those who regret the neglect of Italian sacred music of the nineteenth century will welcome the initiative that has led to these recordings. They will also want to lay their hands on the *Messa per Rossini* with music by no less than twelve virtually unknown contemporaries, which is now generally available on compact disc. (*Messa per Rossini*. Cond. Helmut Rilling. Hänssler Classic [2 CD's] 98.949)

Alexander Weatherson

.....