



Gaetano Donizetti

Messa da Requiem (1835)

Notre Dame de Laeken 19 April 2002

A *world première* to all intents and purposes it should be said - in a most appropriate venue - the burial place of the Kings of Belgium - and if not quite conforming to Donizetti's blue-print ["*the altar in the middle of the church - the apse covered with black drapery on which hangs an immense golden cross - the orchestra and soloists invisible and the church dark except for candlelight*"] soaring and gothic and scented with flowers, absolutely thronged for this the most solemn envoi that music has to offer.

Of course everyone wants to know how one can compare this work with Verdi's triumphant offering. Well you can, and you can't. It is not just to deny Verdi (in contrast with Donizetti - a child of the church) a foundation in sacred music, but equally it can be said that his approach was from the outside, that of the Bergamasc from the inside. Parallels, not comparisons, only are in order. The music of both has its own paradoxical eternity.

Why was the score left incomplete? *Is it incomplete?* There is no way of telling. It must be supposed that the valedictory nature of such a composition always militates against the *mot-de-la-fin* - as though a contemplation of dissolution is too personal a task for any composer. Possibly the missing Sanctus and Benedictus were intended to be sung in plainchant? In any event the manuscript of this Requiem for Bellini remains, and the effect of its meticulous revision by Maestro De Vlam is predictable, the colours came up gleaming, accumulations of dull figuration swept away, a score longer, more contemplative, more anguished, less rhetorical, more fervent, richer. The dialogue between coro and soloists more subtle, the climactic pain less due to the stage than to the Theatre of Farewell with its own integral drama. Music on a pivot of resignation - all disputes spent - a watershed in the forging of an art drawn between worldly pomp and inward maturation.

In actual fact in Donizetti's day there were two traditions for the Requiem Mass. One purely liturgical, the other romantic, eloquent, public and commemorative. François-Joseph Gossec (1734-1829) was the real progenitor of the latter, his *Missa pro defunctis* "For all Men" established a mode - a thoroughly secular product of the French Revolutionary era - taken-up by Mozart and (in another world by Fauré) as well as by Verdi. Donizetti's 1835 Requiem falls between these stools, it is indeed a liturgical Mass but coloured by his cry of protest and desolation - fully romantic in word and deed - at the lonely departure of a fellow protagonist of the splendours and miseries of the Italian Stage. A Requiem that is heartfelt and (as a descant) autobiographical in essence. It is his philosophy and self-abnegation that dominates the score, as if he

is intoning the rite to and for himself.

We have never - maybe as a result of illegibility or caprice - ever been quite able to "place" this work properly, the curious effect of so much editing in the past has been to "date" the work, not to free it from a reproach of worldliness but to attempt to pair it with Verdi's gestural score of so very much later in the day. Stripping-off the veneer reveals a different preparation below, an end-to-end orchestral homogeneity we have never really known that is both generic as well as innovative and astonishing. And in the final analysis its dedication to Vincenzo Bellini is something of a red-herring. Apart from a recurring emphasis upon memory as a motif this Requiem shows no sign of personalisation. Donizetti was far too experienced in the composition of sacred music to insert sentiments alien to the rite, his *Messa* is representative of a devotional submission, not of portraiture, nor of anything like it.

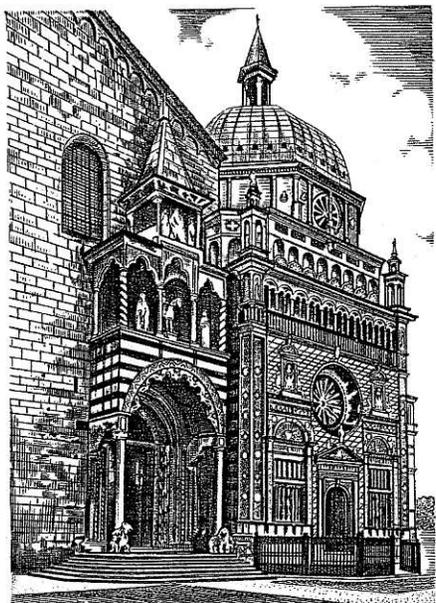
Those who would like to fancy that Verdi "based" (empathically one can only presume) his cataclysmic *Dies Irae* upon that of Donizetti are simply uncovering what little they know of the church music of this golden era. The *Sequencia* invariably began in a mood of noisy devastation in the primo Ottocento following the precedents, no doubt, of Cherubini (whose church music - almost uniquely - was freely available in print in Italy thanks to admirable Gallic publishers), as well as of others. So little attention has been paid to the piles of dusty manuscript in church archives that such comments are pitiful. Perhaps when scholars have taken the trouble to examine the music of Coccia, Luigi Ricci and dozens of others they will have a better idea what Verdi had in mind. Stylistically, in fact, the Requiem Mass of both composers is traditional, it is not the forms they used which have burned themselves into the minds of listeners, but the content they have poured into these forms. Thus, Donizetti must be heard for his poignancy, his eloquence and for his intimations of mortality - not for any extraneous supra-religious impact upon the listener.

The score was first published by Lucca in 1870 (organ/voice) following a first singing at Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo on 28 April that year, a brave resurrection conducted by the celebrated Alessandro Nini. If the latter had tailored the Requiem somewhat to conform to current tastes we are not entitled to complain, his only concern was the reputation of his predecessor. Today we prefer to discard the unauthentic additions that resulted - including of course the 41 bar Andante which forms an *Introduzione* - well-meant, but perfectly unnecessary, in preference to the slurred three-chord Maestoso with which Donizetti opened his Requiem (and not unreminiscent, ominously, of the four-chord opening of his *Canto XXXIII della Divina Commedia* of 1828). As brief and disturbing an exordium as any. In this urtext version there is an absolute instrumental fidelity to the composer's autograph, a precision in the articulation of the words and a meticulous observation of the few signs and dynamics that exist in the composer's hand. There are too many subtle differences to be noted here in any detail, but observe for example the orchestral/vocal tutti that opens the *Rex Tremendae*, longer, more

precisely scored, the bassoon/horn pianissimo underpinning the *Recordare*, and the muffled timpani of the close. Fidelity has been the key throughout this revision, and is in sharp contrast even with praiseworthy earlier editions where reference to the autograph has certainly been made.

It must be hoped that such a scrupulous *ripristinato* will now replace the often moving but flawed music which has appeared both in print and on disc, in accordance with the accurate and conscientious modern eye which has brought all sorts of composers back to real life throughout the repertoire, laying to rest the hopeful but ultimately abortive *Requiescat in pace* of the recent past.

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