

A Mass for the Dead: Verdi's Requiem

Saturday, August 15, 2026 · 11:00 · Großes Festspielhaus

Riccardo Muti, conductor · Iwona Sobotka, soprano · Marianne Crebassa,
mezzo-soprano · Michael Spyres, tenor · Maharram Huseynov, bass · Konzer-
tvereinigung Wiener Staatsopernchor, chorus

approximately 85 minutes

Giuseppe Verdi

1813–1901

Messa da Requiem

THE COMPOSER

Giuseppe Verdi, born near Busseto in 1813, is the towering figure of Italian opera and, in his lifetime, a symbol of the Italian nation itself. The son of an innkeeper, he was famously rejected by the Milan Conservatory, yet he rose through grinding early labour, and a private tragedy (the deaths of his first wife and both children), to international fame with *Nabucco* (1842), whose chorus of Hebrew slaves became an unofficial anthem of the Risorgimento. The 'galley years' that followed produced a torrent of operas; the trio of *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata* (1851–53) secured his immortality. In maturity he deepened and refined his art in *Aida*, *Don Carlos*, and the Requiem. Then, after a long near-retirement, he crowned his career in old age with two Shakespearean masterpieces on librettos by Arrigo Boito: the tragedy *Otello* (1887) and, at nearly eighty, the comedy *Falstaff* (1893). He died in Milan in 1901, mourned as a national hero.

ABOUT THE WORK

Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* grew out of two deaths, and out of one great disappointment. The first death was Rossini's, in 1868. Verdi, who revered the older master, proposed that the leading Italian composers of the day each write a movement of a collective Requiem in his memory, to be performed on the first anniversary of his passing. Verdi himself supplied the final movement, the 'Libera me.' The project foundered in the petty politics of the musical world and the planned performance never took place; the assembled 'Messa per Rossini' was quietly shelved, and Verdi's contribution sat in a drawer. It is a piece of luck for posterity that he kept it.

The second death gave the work its true occasion. Alessandro Manzoni, novelist of 'I promessi sposi' (The Betrothed), poet, and one of the moral and patriotic touchstones of a newly unified Italy, died in

85 minutes

May 1873. For Verdi, Manzoni was a hero in the fullest sense; he had admired the writer all his adult life and had finally met him in 1868. Manzoni's death struck him as a national bereavement, and he resolved to honour it with a full Requiem of his own. He returned to the 'Libera me' he had written for Rossini, rebuilt and expanded it, and around it composed the rest of the Mass over the following year. The premiere was given on 22 May 1874, the first anniversary of Manzoni's death, in the church of San Marco in Milan, with Verdi conducting; it moved three days later to La Scala, and Verdi went on to conduct it in Paris, London and Vienna.

From the start the Requiem provoked an argument that has never entirely died down: is this sacred music at all, or is it an opera in ecclesiastical dress? The conductor Hans von Bülow dismissed the work in print as Verdi's latest opera 'in ecclesiastical dress', a verdict he had the grace to retract years later, asking Verdi's forgiveness. Brahms, characteristically shrewder, brushed the controversy aside: 'Bülow has made a fool of himself,' he is reported to have said; 'only a genius could have written such a work.' The dispute mistakes Verdi's idiom for his sincerity. He was the supreme dramatist of the nineteenth-century stage, and he set the Latin Mass for the dead with the same vivid human urgency he brought to his operas, but the urgency is real, and so is the terror, and so is the consolation. This is the religious imagination of a man not always sure of heaven, confronting death without the comfort of easy certainty, and the work is the more honest and the more shattering for it.

Verdi scores the Requiem for four solo voices (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and bass) together with a large mixed chorus and full orchestra, and shapes it across the traditional sections of the liturgy: the Requiem and Kyrie, the immense Dies irae sequence (itself subdivided into many movements), the Offertorio, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, Lux aeterna, and the concluding Libera me. The emotional range is vast. The opening is barely audible, a hushed prayer in the lowest strings; the Dies irae erupts into one of the most violent passages in all of choral music, the chorus crying out over hammered chords and a great bass drum, as the brass, some of it placed apart from the orchestra, summon the Last Judgment from the four corners. Between these extremes lie movements of intimate tenderness and of dazzling contrapuntal brilliance, including a double fugue in the Sanctus that throws the chorus into two competing choirs.

The Wiener Philharmoniker brings to this music a long Salzburg tradition, and in Riccardo Muti the work finds one of its foremost living interpreters. Muti, Italian to the marrow and a pupil of Antonino

Votto at the Milan Conservatory, has returned to the Requiem throughout his career (his recording of it won two Grammy Awards in 2010), and approaches it with a famous fidelity to Verdi's exact markings: refusing the cheap effect, weighting the great climaxes precisely, and finding in the quiet music a stillness that is the more devastating for its restraint. In his hands the Requiem is neither opera nor liturgy alone but both at once: the most human of all settings of the Mass for the dead.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

In the opening Requiem and Kyrie, listen for how quietly Verdi begins: the cellos murmur a hushed figure, almost too soft to hear, and the chorus enters in a whisper, as if afraid to disturb the dead. This is prayer, not display. Then the four soloists arrive one by one for the Kyrie, their pleas overlapping and entwining; mark how Verdi, even here, gives each voice its own human profile rather than blending them into anonymity.

The Dies irae that follows is the heart of the work and its great shock. Out of the calm the chorus erupts in terror: slashing descending figures over hammered orchestral chords and a thunderous bass drum, the music of the world's last day. Crucially, Verdi brings this music back: the hammering Dies irae returns several times across the long sequence, each time as a fresh convulsion of dread, framing the gentler movements between. Train your ear to recognise it, because its returns are the structural pillars of the whole. Listen, too, in the Tuba mirum, for the trumpets that call the dead to judgment: Verdi places a second group of four trumpets apart from the orchestra, offstage or in the gallery, so that the summons seems to come from every direction, answered by the players on the platform, an antiphonal blaze announcing the Last Trumpet.

In the Offertorio the storm lifts. The four soloists sing alone, without chorus, in music of flowing tenderness, the 'Domine Jesu' rising and falling in long lyrical lines, with a serene central section ('Hostias') for the tenor that is among the most beautiful things Verdi ever wrote.

The Sanctus brings the work's display of pure craft: after a fanfare, the chorus splits into two separate choirs and launches a brilliant double fugue, the voices chasing one another at speed in a glittering, almost dancing exuberance: joy expressed as sheer contrapuntal energy.

The *Agnus Dei* is quieter and stranger. Soprano and mezzo-soprano sing the same melody in bare octaves, unaccompanied at first, and the chorus answers; the melody returns in varied guises, growing in richness. Listen for the unusual purity of those two voices moving as one.

The *Lux aeterna*, for mezzo-soprano, tenor, and bass, asks for ‘eternal light’: hear the shimmer in the high strings depicting that light, set against the dark, low utterances of the bass, radiance and shadow held together.

The concluding *Libera me*, the movement Verdi wrote first, for Rossini, gathers up the whole work. The soprano pleads, half-spoken, for deliverance; the *Dies irae* storms back one final time in all its fury; the serene opening *Requiem* music returns as a memory of peace; and then Verdi unleashes a great fugue on ‘*Libera me, Domine.*’ At the very end the music subsides to the soprano and chorus murmuring the words almost without pitch, fading into silence: a question left hanging, deliverance asked for but not assured.

Tonight’s artists

Iwona Sobotka *soprano*

Soprano: leads the great pleading lines of the *Kyrie*, *Offertorio*, and the concluding *Libera me*.

Iwona Sobotka is a Polish soprano who first drew international notice by winning the Grand Prix of the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels in 2004. Trained in Warsaw and Madrid, she has built a wide-ranging career on the opera stage and the concert platform, admired for the warmth, evenness, and expressive sincerity of a lyric voice equally at home in Mozart, Szymanowski, and the great choral-symphonic works. Her clarity of line and long-breathed phrasing suit the soprano’s pleading role in Verdi’s *Requiem*.

Marianne Crebassa *mezzo-soprano*

Mezzo-soprano: voice of the Liber scriptus and a partner in the bare-octave duet of the Agnus Dei.

Marianne Crebassa is a French mezzo-soprano, born in Béziers and trained in Montpellier, celebrated for the dusky warmth and supple agility of her voice and for a stage presence of unusual elegance. Named Artiste Lyrique of the year at the Victoires de la Musique, she has become a favourite in Mozart's trouser roles, among them Cherubino and Sesto, at leading houses and festivals, and a sought-after recitalist. Her rich lower register and finely controlled line bring both gravity and lyric beauty to the mezzo writing of Verdi's Requiem.

Michael Spyres *tenor*

Tenor: carries the lyric heart of the Ingemisco and the serene Hostias of the Offertorio.

Michael Spyres is an American tenor from Missouri, one of the most versatile singers of his generation, whose unusually wide range has led him to describe himself as a 'baritenor.' Equally commanding in the high-flying bel canto of Rossini, the heroic French repertoire, and Mozart, he has won acclaim at the world's major houses for the freedom of his top, the richness of his lower voice, and his stylish musicianship. That breadth and security suit the demanding lyric and dramatic writing Verdi gives the tenor.

Maharram Huseynov *bass*

Bass: the dark voice of the Mors stupebit and the Confutatis, judgment's awe and dread.

Maharram Huseynov is an Azerbaijani bass-baritone who trained in his native Baku and in Italy, at the Accademia d'Arte Lirica in Osimo, before joining the Accademia Teatro alla Scala from 2017 to 2019. A prize-winner at the Sozvezdie Competition in Odessa and the Muslim Magomaev Competition in Moscow, he has sung roles such as Leporello, Philip II and Figaro, and is admired for the depth, focus and resonance of a voice well suited to Verdi and Mozart alike. He has already sung the Requiem under Riccardo Muti in Philadelphia, Chicago and Paris, and makes his Salzburg Festival debut in this work; his firm, dark tone gives weight and solemnity to the bass's awe-struck pronouncements in the Requiem's vision of judgment.

Konzertvereinigung Wiener Staatsopernchor *chorus*

The Vienna State Opera Chorus, a fixture of the Salzburg Festival, supplies the work's vast choral terror and its dazzling double fugue.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Life of Verdi**

John Rosselli, Cambridge University Press 2000

A short, clear-eyed life of Verdi by a historian of Italian opera, covering the years of the Requiem written in memory of Manzoni.

ACCESSIBLE **Verdi**

Julian Budden, Oxford University Press 2008

A single-volume life and survey of the works by a leading Verdi scholar, with a section on the Messa da Requiem.

DEEPER **Verdi: Requiem**

David Rosen, Cambridge University Press 1995

A short scholarly handbook devoted to the Requiem: its origins in the Messa per Rossini, its composition and its early performances.

SOURCES

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12. Michael Spyres, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Spyres
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