

For the ASO Chorus:

“The Fear of the Lord”
Verdi’s REQUIEM – Influences and Innovations
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Verdi’s 1874 musical setting of the Requiem came late in life, in the years after *Aïda*’s composition. In many ways it represents both a historical culmination of centuries-worth of musical contributions and a personal summation of Verdi’s gifts as a composer (even though in the two and a half more decades of his “retirement” that followed he produced the supreme masterworks of *Otello*, *Falstaff* and the *Four Sacred Pieces*).

The musical influences (and influence-ers) that preceded Verdi are proudly on display and ingeniously integrated into his masterful Requiem setting. It is a path paved by history to a uniquely single masterwork, where technique and spirit are melded into one.

LOOKING BACK IN TIME – HISTORIC MUSICAL INFLUENCES

Once Verdi decided to expand his “Liberate me” movement (his contribution to a multi-composer Requiem Mass in honor of Rossini) into a full-fledged Requiem setting, he made use of many models – most notably, Berlioz and his *Grande Messe des Morts*.

Berlioz

No two composers could have been more different in their approach to a Requiem setting – Berlioz’ French mysticism *versus* Verdi’s heart-on-sleeve operatic style – but the musical evidence in Verdi’s setting shows that he was quite taken with Berlioz’s. He incorporated a few similar techniques and approaches, such as:

1. The offstage brass, calling all to Judgment at “tuba mirum.” While Berlioz used entire brass bands in all four corners of the room (along with 13 or so timpani), Verdi opted for three sets of trumpets (two offstage, and one onstage). The effect was similarly spectacular, but in its driving *animando*, uniquely Verdian.

2. Extremes of dynamics. Like Berlioz, Verdi painted in broad strokes by employing an extreme of dynamic ranges, from markings of *pppp* to *ffff*, from a whimper to a shout.

3. Orchestration. Berlioz was *the* great innovator in writing for instruments in the early 19th century. Verdi definitely learned from (or maybe intuitively arrived at) certain specific techniques Berlioz employed in his Requiem, in particular the sinister low doubling of bassoons with the choral bass voices. Verdi uses this in the *forte* passage at the beginning of the “Rex tremendae” and in *piano* at the end of the “Agnus Dei” at ms. 67-68.

Cherubini

Well known to Verdi would have been the Requiem setting of Cherubini. Luigi Cherubini was an Italian-born composer who spent most of his working life in France. His popular but rather second rate 1816 Requiem setting has even been championed in recent times by the likes of Toscanini and Riccardo Muti. One of its tackier features is a melodramatic

gong-stroke in the “Dies irae.” Verdi’s famous thundering bass drum blows in his “Dies irae” may have been inspired by Cherubini. The difference: Verdi’s sense of timing, drama (and taste) were superior.

Rome and Venice – Palestrina and Gabrieli

In setting this old Latin text Verdi made a point to evoke not only the music of the early Roman church but the glory of Italy’s musical past.

1. Gregorian Chant. The single line monophonic sound of 5th century chant is dramatically evoked in the first entrance (and final statement) of the soprano soloist in the “Libera me,” marked *senza misura* [unmeasured]. Its later, 15th century version, *falso bordone*, or harmonized chant, is heard when the chorus answers her in hushed tones, like a choir of hermits (at ms. 7-10). Also, modal harmony and chant-like inflections are evoked in the single “Amen” at the very end of the Sequence (the multi movement “Dies irae” section). The voices move up one whole tone – like many a Gregorian chant that has wandered around the tonal center. Verdi makes it “modern” by harmonizing it with a third related key: a striking, unexpected appearance of G-Major in B-flat Major. It is a masterstroke because it sounds old and new at the same time and, most importantly, it generates for a fleeting moment a sense of hope or potential in the midst of mourning.


2. Palestrina. Verdi’s evocation of the Italian Renaissance master’s *a cappella* vocal and contrapuntal purity is heard in the choral setting of the “Te decet hymnus.” Its blend of ancient modal harmony and Romantic-era chromaticism sounds effortless and natural in Verdi’s gifted hands. It lends the effect at that moment – a moment of interrupted thought, with its sudden deceptive cadence – of a reflection on an ancient hymn by contemporary worshipers.

3. Gabrieli. The *tour de force* double-choir writing of the “Santus,” especially at “pleni sunt coeli,” evokes the late 16th century *cori spezzati* [separated choirs] tradition of Venice as exemplified by the works of Giovanni Gabrieli.

Mozart

While we are not sure Verdi knew of Mozart’s famous unfinished Requiem, he surely knew of the great operas penned by Amadeus. It is well known that D-minor was a special key for Mozart, and Verdi seems to have “channeled” that in two spots in his Requiem:

1. Mozart’s Requiem. Verdi’s D-minor writing at “solvet saeculum” at ms. 21-23 sure looks a lot like Mozart’s “Dies irae,” 4/4 Allegro D-minor... Verdi’s choral bass line even resembles Mozart’s soprano “melody.”

2. *Don Giovanni*. The famous D-minor overture and its dramatic recapitulation in the “Stone Guest” scene near the end of the opera were well known to all Romantic-era artists. In addition to its tonality, Mozart gave this music a strong, foreboding repeated rhythmic figure of a dotted quarter followed by an accented eighth  Verdi uses this figure (on a D, just like Mozart) to chilling effect in the “Liber scriptus” at ms. 214-218 where the mezzo sings “Judex ergo cum sedebit...” [When therefore the Judge is seated, whatever

lies hidden shall be revealed]. Verdi also closes the “Lacrimosa” with the same figure, this time for the bass at ms. 691-693, singing “dona eis requiem” [grant them rest]. It evokes music for a burial, or a solemn funeral procession.

Beethoven

Beethoven was God to the Romantic-era artists. No 19th century artist, especially a composer, could escape his influence. Verdi borrowed two techniques from two of Beethoven’s greatest works when writing his Requiem:

1. *Missa solemnis*. Beethoven’s total integration of solo and choral voices in this grand mass setting is evidenced in Verdi’s supreme mastery of the same technique in many of his operas and in the Requiem. Most notable is the dramatic alternations of solo *versus* choral voices in the cries of “Salve me!” [save me], and we also hear it in the very first section of solo music, the “Kyrie.” -But what a difference in mood, Beethoven’s manic “KY-RY-e” and Verdi’s melodic, blazing ray-of-hope “Kyrie” in A-major.

2. *Leonora Overture No. 3*. The brazen off-beat syncopations that lead to the *allegro* in Beethoven’s famous *Fidelio* “tone-poem” inspired Verdi to do the same in the ascending orchestral figure that leads to the close of his wild and crazy “Sanctus,” at ms. 131-133. The orchestra is so jolly at this point, they sound like they are on the wrong beat!

Haydn

While it is not known to what degree Verdi was aware of Haydn’s vast output as a symphonic and choral composer, he certainly hit upon one of the very same solutions that Haydn came to time and time again at key moments in his late symphonies, masses and oratorios: the dramatic character-shift to a monophonic texture (strong unison writing). Verdi employs unison writing to great dramatic effect at many moments in the Requiem. Here are four very different ones:

1. “Quantus tremor est futurus” [How great the trembling will be] in the “Dies irae.” Verdi not only writes unison (always a strong statement), but separates the syllables with rests. The effect is one of frozen-with-fear and not being able to speak the frightening words.

2. “Dies irae,” in the measures leading up to the “Quid sum miser” trio (ms. 256-266). This frightening statement is not only unison, but also set in a dark low register for all voices. The effect is that of a collective shudder.

3. “Amen” at the end of the Sequence. As mentioned earlier, this evokes the monophonic texture and melodic contour of the ancient songs of the Roman Church, Gregorian chant.

4. “Agnus Dei.” Verdi’s hymn to the “Lamb of God” opens simply with the soprano and alto solo voices unaccompanied, in a unison C-major. They are echoed, like a congregational call and response, by the chorus and orchestra in absolutely clean unison lines (or as Robert Spano described it, “the ideal Catholic congregation”).



LOOKING BACK IN THE MIRROR – VERDI’S OWN MUSICAL INFLUENCES

Verdi’s vast experience as a successfully gifted operatic composer allowed him to draw upon the many lessons he had learned from setting human drama to music. Much of the great music in the Requiem is inspired by similar “solutions” Verdi arrived at in his own operas.

“Rossini” Mass

Though not an opera, it was here that the Requiem was “born.” As mentioned earlier, Verdi contributed the “Libera me” movement in honor of Italy’s great operatic composer, Rossini. In it was almost all of what he needed to flesh-out a full Requiem setting. Naturally, he could re-use the “Dies irae” music where that text occurs earlier in the liturgy, and the same (with three small changes) for the “Requiem aeternam” text. It was in these three small changes that we witness Verdi’s consummate artistic skill and sense of drama: he took the *a cappella* B-flat minor section in the original “Libera me” and transposed it to A-minor (so he could follow it with the brilliant A-major “Kyrie”). He then gave the choral parts over to muted strings, prefacing it all with a solemn, solitary descending cello-line. The final touch was where to sing the text, “Requiem.” Rather than repeat what he had already composed (and would use in the final movement), he had the choral voices intone the words in a hushed, hollow open fifth – first by the men, then the women. It perfectly set the stage for everything that would unfold.

Aïda

Since it was the most recent, closest relative to the 1874 Requiem, *Aïda* (composed a few years earlier in 1871) exhibits the strongest and most obvious influences – not only musical but also topical. The opera’s concern with organized religion and the conflicts that arise in a church-state elicited some powerful music from Verdi. Echoes of it are heard in the Requiem.

1. Amneris. Almost all of the mezzo’s music in the Requiem recalls the character Amneris, but especially in two places: the “Lux aeterna” and “Liber scriptus.” Both movements recall the kind of writing Verdi employed in *Aïda*’s Act IV Judgment scene. The Requiem’s D-natural unison chant of “Dies irae” that punctuate the mezzo’s music recalls the priests in *Aïda* who are judging Radamès guilty with their unison interjections of “Discolpati!” [Defend yourself!] and “Traditor!” [Traitor!]. Amneris in her rage screams at the priests, calling them vengeful, bloodthirsty tigers. Much of this rage is transferred to the mezzo’s strong vocal lines in the “Liber scriptus” and even in the strange low-pitched crescendo in the “Lux aeterna” at ms. 63 (“in aeter----num”). Verdi’s rage, depicted in *Aïda*, becomes a more personal cry of anguish at the harsh realities of life and death in the Requiem. Some may argue that while Brahms’ unique “German Requiem” has been

dubbed a “human Requiem,” it is Verdi’s setting that may more accurately portray humanity’s fear and loathing of the uncertainty in the face of death.

2. Priests. The powerful male chorus music of the Requiem’s “Rex tremendae” recalls almost every snarling, rigorous moment that the priests in *Aïda* sing, especially in the Act IV Judgment scene and the famous Act II Triumphal scene.

3. Orchestral Details. Much of the intricate, colorful orchestral techniques of *Aïda* find their way into the Requiem, such as the brilliant flute writing. Verdi uses the flute lower register in a novel way. It accompanies Radamès in “Celeste Aïda” and, in a very different context provides accompaniment for the soprano at “tremens factus” in the “Liberate me.” The gentle oboe solo that evokes the countryside of Aïda’s homeland in “O patria mia” becomes the pipe of the Good Shepherd when the Requiem’s tenor sings in the “Ingemisco” of his desire to be placed at the right hand of God among the sheep – and not the goats (“Inter oves locum praesta”).

4. Overture. The tender, halting beginning of the orchestral prelude to *Aïda* is evoked in the high string writing of the final measures of the Requiem’s “Offertorio,” after the quartet has sung “fac eas de morte transire ad vitam” [make them to pass from death to life]. Interestingly, some of the final words of the opera are “O terra addio” [farewell, O Earth] and “pace” [peace].

Aïda / La Traviata / Don Carlo

One of Verdi’s supreme compositional talents was his ability to build tension and momentum in the drama, especially in crowd scenes at the end of acts – the *finale*, or choral *concertato*. His unique contribution was to integrate all the emotions of each character (and chorus of characters) into one multi layered musical moment. The liturgical text, like his operatic *libretti*, inspired Verdi to employ this technique in the Requiem. The antiphonal cries of “Salva me” in the “Rex tremendae” and the alternation and integration of solo and choral voices in the “Lacrimosa” all have their roots in Verdi’s great operatic crowd scenes, such as the brilliant Act II finale of *La Traviata*, the Triumphal scene of *Aïda* (multi character and multi choral!), as well as the famous *auto da fe* execution scene in *Don Carlo*. The difference is that in the Requiem all are singing the same text: it is the musical shaping of each line that suggests different meanings, or subtexts. The “Lacrimosa” is a masterful example of this.

Don Carlo

Don Carlo represents the one instance where Verdi, in his Requiem, reworked and recycled an actual melody from one of his operas. It is found in the main tune of the “Lacrimosa,” heard first at measure 625. The sorrowful melody is taken from the (discarded) duet of Carlos and King Phillip who together mourn the death of their friend, Rodrigo, in Act IV.

Perhaps even more evident to Verdi’s contemporary listeners was the influence of the Italian *Banda* tradition on this “Lacrimosa” setting – Norman has mentioned it in rehearsal. Verdi here evokes the sound of the Italian brass band, those groups of devoted amateur

players whose main function in a village was to play in the annual solemn processions of Holy Week or in funeral processions.

Rigoletto

Verdi's great 1851 operatic hit exerted a powerful influence on Verdi when he came to compose his Requiem. Two moments in *Rigoletto* may be sensed in the Requiem.

1. Storm. The agitated storm music that climaxes in the character Gilda's murder is echoed in the maelstrom of "Confutatis maledictis" [when the accursed are confounded], specifically at ms. 529-531.

2. Gilda. Gilda's final moments on earth – like many of Verdi's dying heroines – are depicted with delicate writing for high strings and flute, often accompanying a vision of a heavenly afterlife. The mood and orchestration of Gilda's Act IV "lassù in cielo" [there, in heaven] is recalled in the Requiem's evocation of the archangel Michael, "Sed signifier sanctus Michael," at ms. 63-75 of the "Offertorio." A similar instance – in tone and instrumentation – is at ms. 54 of the "Lux aeterna" movement, at "et lux perpetua" [and light eternal].

Il Trovatore

Parts of the essence of Verdi's great 1853 melodrama also found their way into the composition of the Requiem, specifically:

1. Woodwinds. The hollow, hooty sound of the woodwind quartet of two bassoons and two low-pitched clarinets evokes Leonora's fear outside the dungeon in Act IV ("Timor di me...d'amor sull'ali rosee"). This finds itself transformed to a quartet of bassoons in the "Liberate me" that conjure the same mood at ms. 15-20, "tremens factus sum ego" [I am seized by trembling].

2. "Fate" Motiv. In that same Act IV *scena* for Leonora, a male chorus of monks is heard intoning a doleful *Miserere* for the soul of the condemned, while Manrico (the tenor) sings farewell from inside the bastion. Leonora resolves to save him. Verdi here utilizes a rhythmic motif that he used many times in many similar situations in his operas. Some have called it a "fate" motif:



As expected, a version of it appears in the Requiem at m. 16 of the "Lux aeterna" to accompany the dirge-like melody of "Requiem aeternam." It also is found embedded in the woodwinds and timpani in ms. 4-5 of the ominous "Liberate me."

3. Nuns. Earlier, in Act II of *Trovatore*, Leonora, being taken to a convent, is led in by a procession of nuns. This mood of this lyric female chorus music is recalled in the Requiem's female chorus (and soprano solo) music at ms. 641-645 of the "Lacrimosa." The *Trovatore* nuns sing "Presso a morir, vedrai / Che un'ombra, un sogno fu" [as death

nears you'll see that it was a shadow, a dream]. The text at this point in the Requiem is “Huic ergo parce Deus” [spare them then, O God].



LOOKING AHEAD – VERDI'S INNOVATIONS

Though Verdi built his masterwork on the innovations and influences from the historic musical past (also drawing from his own personal wealth of experience as a composer), he crafted some completely original, even daring, ideas as a technical means to his expressive end – devices and ideas that would influence generations of composers after him and his own post-Requiem compositional activities.

Orchestration

The general richness and variety of Verdi's orchestration proves to be more than just color. It gives character and even subtext. Here are but a few examples.

1. Valved Trumpets. Verdi's use of trumpets that could play more than just the bugle-like fanfares were put to great effect in the trills at the opening pages of the “Dies irae,” ms. 5-8. With these instruments, Verdi could now command the entire orchestra to shake in terror on the same note. –And he could command a belly-laugh of a chromatic scale towards the end of the “Sanctus” (as he would later employ in *Falstaff*). The traditional sound of trumpet fanfares that he used in the offstage brass of the “Tuba mirum” would be used to a very different dramatic end in *Otello's* Act III *concertato* finale.

2. Flutes. As mentioned above, he made an innovative use of the flute's lower register in “tremens factus sum ego.” This same effect would be evoked in the foreboding winds that blow into the final Act of *Otello*, where Desdemona sings her “Willow Song” and “Ave Maria.” Verdi even used a whole “choir” of flutes (a trio) as the sole accompaniment for one of the verses of the “Agnus Dei,” ms. 46-58.

3. Spiccato. The bouncing or spring bow off the string employed in the “Sanctus” to accompany “Pleni sunt coeli” would for Verdi later become the sparks that fly in the Act I bonfire-chorus, “Fuoco di gioia” in *Otello*.

4. Pizzicato. While not really new, Verdi use of a single *pizzicato* [plucked] string bass note may be one of the most impressive little details of the Requiem's orchestration. This single, hollow contrabass *pizzicato* (doubled by Bass drum) at ms. 43 of the “Lux aeterna” is the only instrument marked *forte*. It underpins the *piano* Requiem “dirge” sung above it, creating an effect of absolute desolation.

5. A Cappella. Verdi's audacity to ask a quartet of operatic solo voices to sing as one, with no instrumental support, was quite unprecedented in the Requiem. It also marks

some of the most compelling and personal moments in the piece. He rarely returned to this technique.

6. Unifying Rhythmic Device. Verdi's little dotted eighth-note woodwind punctuations in the "Recordare" recall the rhythm of "Salva me" in the "Rex tremendae" section that preceded it. Verdi's orchestra also can "sing" and be a character itself. –And it certainly would in the two Shakespeare settings that follow the Requiem's composition (*Otello* and *Falstaff*).

Harmony

Verdi, like Schubert, could crank out one beautiful melody after another (no small feat!). But one of Verdi's many innovations was the various interesting and unexpected ways in which he would harmonize a tune. There are three notable examples in the Requiem.

1. Diminished 7th. The musical 19th century of Queen Victoria was filled with a sentimentalized overuse of the diminished 7th chord (a chord built on a stack of minor thirds):



Throughout his career, Verdi not only used this unsettling chord in the traditional operatic sense to depict an unsettled mood, but masterfully used it to modulate out to unrelated and unexpected keys, often to a so-called six-four sonority (modulating out to a chord in second inversion, where the 5th is the lowest note):



He paved the way for none other than composer Richard Strauss who truly mined the expressive possibilities of this technique. One of the most spectacularly expressive places in the Requiem where Verdi creates tension with the diminished 7th chord and then modulates out of it occurs in the "Rex tremendae" at ms. 344-347. His modulation comes via a single suspended solo soprano note that descends down to what will be an enharmonic modulation. The modulatory effect (the same that Strauss would employ) is that of unexpected hope. The landing on a six-four chord (not in root position) gives the effect of suddenly floating on air. Hope blooms eternal for Verdi (and for us) at this moment in the "drama."

2. Third Relations. Schubert and Brahms were certainly masters of navigating through keys whose only relation was that they were a third apart, but Verdi takes it to a whole new level in his Requiem. The opening of his almost one-note melody in "Lux aeterna" is supported by an undulating harmony of third-related chords that give this piece an otherworldly character at the onset.

3. Modal/Tonal. As mentioned earlier, Verdi's acknowledgment of Italy's musical past is seen in the evocations of Palestrina and Gregorian chant. Verdi's innovation was the integration of this archaic sound into his own musical 19th century harmonic palette. He effortlessly blends modal and chromatic harmony to serve his expressive needs, as in the "Te decet hymnus," the "Lacrimosa's" final "Amen" and the opening and closing of the "Libera me."

Structure and Tone

Perhaps most innovative is the general structure and striking character of Verdi's Requiem setting. Some interesting innovations include:

1. The "Dies irae" interruptions. Verdi accentuates the "narrative" of the Sequence with two dramatic interruptions by his terrifying music of "Dies irae:"

- ┌ Dies irae (chorus)
- ├ Tuba mirum (chorus)
- ├ Mors stupebit (bass "aria")
- └ Liber scriptus (mezzo "aria" punctuated by choral unison chanting of text "Dies irae")

Dies irae INTERRUPTION #1

- ┌ Quid sum miser (S/A/T trio)
- ├ Rex Tremendae (chorus and quartet)
- ├ Recordare (S/A duet)
- ├ Ingemisco (tenor "aria")
- └ Confutatis (bass "aria")

Dies irae INTERRUPTION #2

-Lacrimosa (chorus and quartet)

By this musical interruption, Verdi shapes the long "Dies irae" text into three distinct sections, making a drama of his own:

- A. Vision of Apocalypse (mostly choral)
- B. Mercy sought at Final Judgment (mostly solo)
- C. Song of mourning and prayer for peace (combination of solo and choral voices)

2. Sanctus. Because of its extroverted character, Verdi's "Sanctus" setting stands in stark contrast to the mostly dark tone of the rest of the Requiem. It is of a raucous, peasant character – the kind of music he would employ in his great operatic version of Shakespeare's *Falstaff*.

3. Ending. Verdi's stark, nihilistic ending – with no beatific vision of a heavenly afterlife (he omits the traditional final Antiphon, "In paradisum") – leaves one with more questions than answers. Throughout his life, Verdi was known to others as devout but questioning, and more than anything his Requiem setting is a document of doubt *versus* faith and humanity's attempt to come to terms with its own mortality. His "Lux aeterna" is more dark than light, and the supposedly tonally "pure" key of C-major that ends the Requiem is probably the most unsettling use of a major key in history (he would come to a

similar unsettled ending in his “Te Deum” setting). Perhaps it was the biblical voice from the book of Proverbs that guided Verdi in this setting: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” [Proverbs 1:7].



Though severely criticized at the time for writing a sacred piece that was too operatic, Verdi’s compositional voice was true because his craft and his intuition were both on the highest possible levels. Like all masterworks the world of opposites are come together as one, and we are the better for it.

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