

Verdi's "Requiem"
October 16-17, 2026

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Notes on the Program
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Messa da Requiem [1874]

GIUSEPPE VERDI

Born October 10, 1813 in Le Roncole, Italy

Died January 27, 1901 in Milan, Italy

Giuseppe Verdi grew up in Busseto, a small town in Northern Italy, where he studied piano, organ and composition with a local church musician. His dream of continuing his studies at the prestigious Milan Conservatory was crushed when they rejected the 18-year-old for being too old and inadequately trained, but at least he was able to stay on in Milan to take private lessons and establish contacts in that epicenter of Italian opera.

He was freelancing back in his hometown when he finally got his big break at the age of 26, having convinced Milan's Teatro alla Scala to stage his first opera, *Oberto*. It proved to be a hit, earning him a contract to write more operas, but his next attempt was a flop, and the tragic deaths of his wife and two young children all in a short span had him ready to abandon music. He soon bounced back with the success of *Nabucco*, and from that point he was unstoppable, producing 16 operas in the next 11 years. His craft evolved from the witty style he inherited from Rossini to new heights of drama and lyricism, and by the time he presented his 28th and final work for the stage, *Falstaff*—in that same Milan theater that had launched his career 54 years earlier—he was the undisputed king of Italian opera.

After *Aida* in 1871, Verdi went into a hiatus from operas that ended up lasting 16 years. His first big project in that regenerative period was an anomaly that ended up being one of his great masterpieces: the Requiem Mass from 1874. The idea of a Requiem first came up in 1868 when Rossini died, and Verdi proposed that a number of Italian composers should all contribute sections to a composite mass in his honor. By the time that project fizzled, Verdi had already submitted his portion, *Libera me*. The committee managing the project sent Verdi's score back to him in 1873, and just a few weeks later he was saddened to learn that Alessandro Manzoni had died, a major Italian writer and friend of his. Verdi resolved to create a Requiem dedicated to Manzoni, incorporating the abandoned section he had already written.

Verdi conducted his *Messa da Requiem* on the anniversary of Manzoni's death in Milan's San Marco Church, and three days later he repeated it a few blocks away at the Teatro alla Scala. That quick jump from a sacred to secular venue was fitting for a liturgical work so steeped in Verdi's operatic craft—one that a major conductor of the day described as “an opera in church robes.” It was perfectly normal in a Requiem to augment the church choir with vocal soloists (as Mozart and many other composers had done), but Verdi went farther by designing solo parts that seem to carve out individual characters from the Latin text, written for the very same opera stars he knew from the stage, including the *prima donna* Teresa Stolz, fresh off singing the title role in *Aida*.

Maybe the more remarkable aspect of Verdi's Requiem is how effectively he used the traditional tools of church music that had been mostly dormant for him since he learned them as a teenager, like in the opening section, where *a cappella* counterpoint enlivens the switch to the line that begins “A hymn, O God.” In the *Dies irae* (“Day of Wrath”), the choir unleashes the full force of so many lungs expelling that much air at once, and it also demonstrates the chilling power of a collective whisper. The orchestra plays an oversized role in setting the emotional temperature and tone painting throughout, including eight trumpets (four of them echoing from offstage) in the *Tuba mirum*.

Still the defining feature of Verdi's Requiem is the abundance of gorgeous solos and ensemble numbers, as heard in the *Liber scriptus* featuring the mezzo-soprano (a movement rewritten for the London premiere to replace a choral setting) and the *Quid sum miser* that interweaves three of the soloists. If the opening duet for mezzo-soprano and bass in the *Lachrymosa* sounds especially operatic, that's probably because it was recycled from a number that Verdi cut out of *Don Carlos*.

The chorus rests for the entirety of the *Offertorium*, and then the soloists sit for the *Sanctus*, a wondrous choral fugue in the old style of the Baroque era. The *Agnus dei* brings yet another shift in texture, with the soprano and mezzo singing unaccompanied phrases in octaves that recall the even more distant past of medieval plainchant, answered by the chorus and orchestra joined in similar lockstep.

Lux aeterna holds a special place in the funeral mass, coming during the distribution of Holy Communion (the bread and wine that symbolize the body and blood of Christ). This setting shifts from tremulous to sparkling, with the atmosphere of “perpetual light” anchored by sweet arpeggios from the flute and clarinet.

Verdi composed *Libera me* as a showstopper featuring his favorite soprano, and it caps the Requiem with all the dramatic flair of a climactic operatic scene, including a frightening recap of the *Dies Irae* music. An otherworldly calm descends when the soprano and choir sing without orchestral accompaniment, ending with the soprano's angelic leap up an octave to a high B-flat, sustained at an impossibly quiet dynamic marked *pppp*. More formal counterpoint from the choir leads to the hushed closing passage that brings back the initial sound of the soprano's speech-like declamation on a single note, but now humbly voiced an octave lower in a final plea for deliverance.

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