

GIUSEPPE VERDI
REQUIEM – Libera me
Semantic and hermeneutic aspects

Raluca TONESCU (IRIMIA)¹

Abstract: *Giuseppe Verdi's Messa da Requiem is a profoundly religious work, although its composer was sceptical about the afterlife (like Johannes Brahms' German Requiem) – according to the notes of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for the interpretation of the Requiem. Starting from this statement, it is easy to identify the moments in Verdi's life which drove him to write such a work.*

Keywords: *Giuseppe Verdi, Requiem, Libera me.*

1. Introduction

In Hans von Bülow's (Baron Hans von Bulow was a German conductor, pianist, virtuoso and composer of the Romantic period. He was born on 8 January 1830, in Dresden, Germany, and died on 12 February 1894, in Cairo, Egypt) acid opinion, given before its interpretation, the *Requiem* is "the last of Verdi's works in religious habit". Johannes Brahms replied by saying that "only a genius can write such a composition", and years after Bülow apologized: "there is no trace of sin in you. And then, who knows? Perhaps you were right from the very beginning!" (<https://www.npr.org/programs/specials/verdi/verdiarticle.html>) Bülow's statement is obviously ironic, however, there is some truth in it when he talks about the *Requiem* as Verdi's last work. Unlike Mozart's *Requiem* which is frightful, close to the moment of death, Verdi's *Requiem* cannot be assimilated with previous works. As a composer, Verdi has a propensity for drama where characters based on real life people face their relentless destiny, and this work pays tribute to "the characters" in his life who struck a chord in his soul.

In 1868, when Gioachino Rossini died, visibly marked by the demise of a friend, a well-liked artist, as a sign of respect and a tribute to the great composer,

¹ Transilvania University of Braşov, raluca_irimia82@yahoo.com

Verdi proposed that Bologna, Rossini's town, should host a Requiem in his honour. The work was supposed to be written by various composers of the time, chosen randomly by a special committee, appointed by the editor Ricordi. Verdi's task was to compose the last part "Libera me", a grandiose conclusion. The project will not be finished, but for Verdi this episode represents the spark which will ignite in his soul a candle in memory of all those close to him, who had passed away. In 1874 this will light the ever-burning candle of Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem*.

2. Objectives

The *Requiem* is made up of seven parts (the number seven symbolizing perfection), and *Libera me*, the end of the *Requiem*, is structured in its turn in four sections. The prayer *Libera me* (free me or save me), *Dies irae* (the day of the judgement), *Requiem aeternam* (eternal rest) and again *Libera me*, a redemption prayer.

For the end of the *Requiem* Verdi chose the soprano voice and the chorus (as also indicated in the liturgical text). Considering that most feminine roles in Verdi's creations require a dramatic voice, this composition is also built on deep voices. We do not believe that there is any semantic reason for choosing a feminine voice to deliver the prayer for absolution (all souls, feminine and masculine, ask for forgiveness on judgement day). The reason may have to do with Verdi the man, who felt great admiration (and something more) for the soprano Tereza Stolz, who was preferred for all the main roles and who performed at the premiere of the *Requiem*. The tone was *A minor*, a sad tone, as well as woeful and deep, which is represented in colour by golden yellow. A colour very suited for this moment, a colour which corresponds to the light of open skies where the prayer for absolution is directed.

Libera me starts and ends with the text "God, set me free from eternal death on this terrible day", delivered as a prayer on one **A** sound on the same eighth notes *senza misura*. The climax moment of the prayer is represented by a single punctuated rhythm, on the word *Libera*.

Measure 1:

Musical notation for the first measure of the Soprano part. The tempo is *Moderato* and the performance instruction is *senza misura*. The notation shows a single eighth note on the note A in the soprano clef, followed by a series of eighth notes on the same pitch. The lyrics are "Li - bera me, Do - mi - ne, de - morte æ - ter - na, in di - e il - la - tre."

“When the sky and the earth move”, the rhythm increases, and the first melodic motion occurs on the word *movendi* (move). The ascending movement on *E* is prepared harmonically by the tension on the sounds *D-D#* and by the notation crescendo up to *F*. *Movendi sunt* – are trembling, they change the atmosphere of the accompaniment from long notes supporting the text harmonically to sixteenth notes with a tremolo effect, where the soloist part reaches half notes.

It is followed by the chorus invoking the same prayer with an identical rhythm presented *senza misura*, with a *pp* nuance on a **C flat** chord (the first line) and on a **B flat** chord (for the second line), both of them elliptic of the third. The prayer of the chorus is also without the support of the orchestra and it cannot receive a tone in the absence of a third. It reveals the composer's wish to create a state of meditation, a state which cannot be defined by a major or minor tone.

And again a general pause (recollection), three eight notes (the intention of a gesture), two notes of pause, and the whole gesture – the sign of the cross (the motif of the cross even if in the upper part there is the **G flat-F flat** tone).

A musical score snippet for piano accompaniment. It features three staves: a treble clef staff at the top, and a grand staff (bass and tenor clefs) below. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music consists of chords and arpeggiated figures. A dynamic marking 'P stacc.' is present in the lower staves.

After the motif is stabilized on the **F flat** full note, the composer introduces the chromatic descending motion (*passus duriusculus*) which corresponds to the pain of a heavy soul, very frequent during the entire ending. Most often the accompaniment has a hidden chromatic development: sometimes without a well-defined direction, other times it duplicates the soloist in the ascending motion specific for the composition. In measures 22-23, the soloist runs through the major sixth in an descending way as follows: chromatically, equal fourths in the interior of a fourth **A1-E1** (the lapse of time) and in a punctuated rhythm two tones **E-D-C flat** (last breath). The descending movement is written down in decrescendo, on the word *timeo*-, the image of the sand glass is suggestive of the passage of time until the end of time.

A musical score snippet showing a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in a treble clef with a key signature of two flats. It features the lyrics "e-go et ti - - - me - o,". The piano accompaniment is in a grand staff (bass and tenor clefs) with a key signature of two flats. The piano part includes a chromatic descending line in the right hand, highlighted in yellow, and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. Dynamic markings 'ff' and 'dim.' are present.

PASUS DURIUSCULUI/THE MUSETTE MOTIF OF / D-D#-E

Verdi distributes the first *dies* to the bass on the first movement, and the answer of the other three voices to the second syncopated half note. The 3+1 can be translated as One God and the Holy Trinity.

The initial recitative *senza misura* is resumed here preparing the fugue in *libera me*. The theme of the fugue has 7 measures (the number of perfection, frequently used in the Apocalypse). The successive inputs of the voices achieve a zig zag drawing on the vertical, similar to the sign of the Cross, namely: mezzo, soprano, bass, tenor. While the theme is presented by each voice, the orchestra punctuates each intervention through two chords. The sonorous material becomes concentrated all of the sudden at the moment when the interventions of each voice take place at a distance of two measures (subject and countersubject, in which the subject is iterative), and the orchestra duplicates the voices.

Measure 179

Musical score for Measure 179. The score is in 4/4 time and marked *All: risoluto* (♩ = 116). It features four staves. The top staff is a vocal line with the lyrics "- ra." below it. The second staff is a piano accompaniment line with the lyrics "Li - be - ra me, Do - mi - ne, de" below it. The third and fourth staves are piano accompaniment lines, with the third staff marked *All: risoluto* (♩ = 116). The piano accompaniment consists of two chords in each measure, punctuating the vocal lines.

VS

Measure 209

Musical score for Measure 209. The score is in 4/4 time and marked *ff*. It features four staves. The top staff is a vocal line with the lyrics "- gnem." below it. The second staff is a vocal line with the lyrics "- gnem. Li - be - ra" below it. The third staff is a vocal line with the lyrics "- da. Li -" below it. The fourth staff is a piano accompaniment line with the lyrics "Li - be - ra me, Do - mi -" below it. The piano accompaniment consists of two chords in each measure, punctuating the vocal lines.

The theme of the fugue is displayed for one last time but in a diminished manner. It presents only the first measure, out of the seven initially included, and automatically the inputs of the voices will be at a distance of one measure, which will hasten the development of the discourse, suggesting the image of the time glass which runs increasingly fast towards the end of the composition. Ex. Measure 311-315

The image shows a musical score for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The lyrics are: "Li - be.ra me Do.mi.ne de mor - te æ - ter - na in di - e". The music is in a key with two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The Soprano part starts with a whole note rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The Alto part starts with a whole note rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The Tenor part starts with a whole note rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The Bass part starts with a whole note rest, followed by a half note G3, a quarter note A3, and a quarter note B3. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables across notes.

Also, the last forceful movement gives a rhythmic unison to the entire ensemble in which *Domine* is repeated **three** times, the same as *Libera-me*. Until the end of the composition the absolution and the redemption are the only things asked from Divinity. The soprano intones it during 12 complete measures (12 is the number of the apostles; 3x4 the divine expression in the tangible world), starting from **A1**, gradually ascending until the highest note of the entire section **A2**, returning once again to **A1**. The picture of an entire life, a complete cycle concluded, not by chance, on A (the first musical note, the beginning of music). The vocal interventions are increasingly rare and rhythmically heightened. The prayer invoked *sensa misura* at the beginning of this analysis returns here to the central A. From a rhetoric point of view, this moment, which repeats the opening phrase in the conclusion, is called *complexio*.

Moderato $\text{♩} = 72$.
senza misura

Soprano

Li - be - ra me, Do - mine, de morte æterna, in di - e il - la tre.

senza tempo

Libe - ra me, Do - mine, de morte æterna, in di - e il - la tre - men - da

pppp *a tempo*

With its last resources, the prayer is said using formulas of exceptional divisions of the binary meter, the triolets in two measures, in the *pppp* nuance.

poco allarg. *morendo* *pppp*

Li - be - ra me Li - be - ra me.

Li - be - ra me Li - be - ra me.

Li - be - ra me Li - be - ra me.

Li - be - ra me Li - be - ra me.

Li - be - ra me Li - be - ra me.

Li - be - ra me Li - be - ra me.

3. Conclusions

In his creation, Verdi pours the pain of losing dear ones, accumulated in time, in an unprecedented musical composition; and the sorrowful words, uttered out loud only through his characters until that moment, find their meaning in the text of the funeral service. Verdi manages to create an original and convincing interpretation of the liturgy, focusing on the spiritual search and on the triumph more than on the divine grace. Verdi's *Requiem* is not meant for the divinity or for those who pray; it is not a solemn plea for the sinful soul praying, but a fight against sin itself.

Alternative Title	Messa da Requiem
Catalogue Number	IGV 24
	7 sections
	1. Introit – Kyrie (chorus, soloists)
	2. Sequence:
	<i>Dies irae</i> (chorus)
	<i>Tuba mirum</i> (chorus)
	<i>Mors stupebit</i> (bass)
	<i>Liber scriptus</i> (mezzo-soprano, chorus* - only in first version)
	<i>Quid sum miser</i> (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor)
	<i>Rex tremendae</i> (soloists, chorus)
	<i>Recordare</i> (soprano, mezzo-soprano)
	<i>Ingemisco</i> (tenor)
	<i>Confutatis</i> (bass, chorus)
	<i>Lacrimosa</i> (soloists, chorus)
	3. Offertory (soloists):
	<i>Domine Jesu Christe</i>
	<i>Hostias</i>
	4. Sanctus (double chorus)
	5. Agnus Dei (soprano, mezzo-soprano, chorus)
	6. Communion (mezzo-soprano, tenor, bass):
	<i>Lux aeterna</i>
	7. Libera me (soprano, chorus):
	<i>Libera me</i>
	<i>Dies irae</i>
	<i>Requiem aeternam</i>
	<i>Libera me</i>

References

Books

- Casale, Stefani A. 1983. *Catalogue of Letters from Verdi and Giuseppina Strepponi Verdi to the Escudiers*. PhD thesis. New York University .
- Constantinescu, Grigore. 2009. *Giuseppe Verdi*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.
- Gustavo, Marchezi. 1987. *Giuseppe Verdi*. București: Editura Muzicală.

- Mavrodin, Alice. 1970. *Verdi*. București: Editura Muzicală.
- Sabdu-Dediu, Valentina. 2013. *Alegeri, Atitudini, Afecte, Despre stil și retorică în muzică* [Choices, attitudes, feelings. About style and rhetoric in music]. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, R.A.
- Solovțova, Liubov. 1961. *Giuseppe Verdi, viața și opera* [Giuseppe Verdi, his life and creation]. București: Editura Muzicală. București.
- Walker, Frank. 1962. *The Man Verdi*. London /R. Printed in Great Britain by The Aldine Press

Dictionaries

- The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 2001. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bughici, Dumitru. 1978. *Dicționar de forme și genuri musicale* [Dictionary of musical forms and genres]. București: Editura Muzicală.
- Dicționar de termeni muzicali*. 2008. [Dictionary of musical terms]. Second edition, revised and complete. București: Editura Stiințifică și Enciclopedică.

Courses

- Pepelea, Roxana. 2017. *Curs Retorică. Proprietățile simbolice ale numerelor și proporțiilor* [Course in Rhetoric. The symbolic properties of number and proportions]. Brașov: Universitatea Transilvania, Facultatea de Muzică.

Webography

- Musical scores offered for the public domain by the website Petrucci Music Library.
<http://imslp.org/>
<https://www.npr.org/programs/specials/verdi/verdiarticle.html>
https://cso.org/uploadedFiles/1_Tickets_and_Events/Program_Notes/ProgramNotes_Verdi_Requiem.pdf