

Verdi's Requiem: The Met Remembers 9/11

Saturday, September 11, 2021
7:45PM

Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Conductor
Ailyn Pérez, Soprano
Michelle DeYoung, Mezzo-Soprano
Matthew Polenzani, Tenor
Eric Owens, Bass-Baritone

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus

Donald Palumbo, Chorus Master
J. Knighten Smit, Stage Director
John Keenan and Jonathan C. Kelly, Musical Preparation
Joseph Lawson, Stage Band Conductor
Michael Panayos, Met Titles
John Froelich, Lighting Design
S. Katy Tucker, Projection Design

Costumes for the female choristers designed by **Isaac Mizrahi**
Chorus costumes executed by the **Metropolitan Opera Costume Department**
Hair and makeup executed by the **Metropolitan Opera Wig and Makeup Department**

This concert is presented in association with the National September 11 Memorial & Museum.

The Verdi Requiem concert and broadcast are made possible by a generous gift from C. Graham Berwind, III.

The Metropolitan Opera Chorus costumes were underwritten by a generous gift from Douglas Dockery Thomas.

The Program

Giuseppe Verdi
Messa da Requiem
(1874)

Requiem and Kyrie (Solo Quartet, Chorus)
Dies irae

Dies irae (Chorus)
Tuba mirum (Chorus)
Mors stupebit (Bass)
Liber scriptus (Mezzo-Soprano, Chorus)
Quid sum miser (Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor)
Rex tremendae (Solo Quartet, Chorus)
Recordare (Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano)
Ingemisco (Tenor)
Confutatis (Bass, Chorus)
Lacrimosa (Solo Quartet, Chorus)
Offertorium (Solo Quartet)
Sanctus (Double Chorus)
Agnus Dei (Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Chorus)
Lux aeterna (Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Bass)
Libera me (Soprano, Chorus)

About the Artists

View Met Music Director **Yannick Nézet-Séguin**'s complete bio [here](#).

Chicago-born soprano **Ailyn Pérez** has quickly become one of the most in-demand artists performing today. The 2016 recipient of the Met's Beverly Sills Artist Award, established by Agnes Varis and Karl Leichtman, she made her debut with the company in 2015 as Micaëla in *Carmen* and has since given memorable portrayals of Mimì and Musetta in *La Bohème*, Alice Ford in *Falstaff*, Juliette in *Roméo et Juliette*, the Countess in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and the title role of *Thaïs*. Last May, she joined soprano Nadine Sierra and mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard from the Royal Opera of Versailles as part of the celebrated *Met Stars Live in Concert* series, and during the 2021–22 season, she will return to the Met to make her role debut as Tatiana in *Eugene Onegin*. In recent years, she has sung Magda in *La Rondine* in Naples and Florence, the title role of *Manon* at the Vienna State Opera, Antonia in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* at the Paris Opera, Nedda in *Pagliacci* at Dutch National Opera, and Violetta in *La Traviata* at the Bavarian State Opera, Paris Opera, Staatsoper Berlin, and in Zurich. She has also appeared at Covent Garden, Houston Grand Opera, La Scala, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and the Santa Fe Opera, and in 2015, she starred as Tatyana Bakst in the world premiere of Jake Heggie's *Great Scott* at the Dallas Opera. In 2012, she was honored with the prestigious Richard Tucker Award.

A graduate of the Met's Lindemann Young Artist Development program, mezzo-soprano **Michelle DeYoung** made her debut in 1994 in *Death in Venice* and has since appeared in more than 100 performances with the company, including as Venus in *Tannhäuser*, Brangäne in *Tristan und Isolde*, the Shaman in the world premiere of Tan Dun's *The First Emperor*, Didon in *Les Troyens*, and Fricka in *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*. An avid concert singer, she has joined the Met Orchestra and Met Chamber Ensemble for numerous performances at Carnegie Hall, regularly appears in recital in the United States and Europe, and has collaborated with many of the world's leading orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Boston

Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Vienna Philharmonic, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, Berliner Staatskapelle, Sao Paulo Symphony, and the Concertgebouworkest. On the operatic stage, she has delighted audiences at La Scala, the Bayreuth Festival, Staatsoper Berlin, the Paris Opera, English National Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Houston Grand Opera, and Seattle Opera, among others.

An audience favorite at the Met for nearly 25 years, tenor **Matthew Polenzani** made his debut in 1997 as Boyar Khrushchov in *Boris Godunov*. Since then, he has sung nearly 400 performances of 40 roles, including the Italian Singer in *Der Rosenkavalier*, Macduff in *Macbeth*, Rodolfo in *La Bohème*, the Duke in *Rigoletto*, Tito in *La Clemenza di Tito*, Vaudémont in *Iolanta*, Nemorino in *L'Elisir d'Amore*, the title roles of *Idomeneo* and *Roberto Devereux*, Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni*, Nadir in *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, Hoffmann in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, Roberto in *Maria Stuarda*, and Alfredo in *La Traviata*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Met's Beverly Sills Artist Award and sang Tamino in *The Magic Flute* in the company's first-ever *Live in HD* transmission, going on to appear in another ten HD simulcasts. During the 2021–22 season, he will return to the Met in the title role in the company's new production of Verdi's original five-act French version of *Don Carlos*. In recent seasons, he has also appeared to great acclaim at the Bavarian State Opera, San Francisco Opera, Covent Garden, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and in Baden-Baden, Madrid, Palermo, and Zurich.

Hailing from Philadelphia, bass-baritone **Eric Owens** has sung nearly 100 performances of 11 roles at the Met, including Porgy in *Porgy and Bess*, Hagen in *Götterdämmerung*, Vodník in *Rusalka*, Jaufré Rudel in Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de Loin*, Orest in *Elektra*, Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*, Alberich in the *Ring* cycle, and General Leslie Groves in John Adams's *Doctor Atomic*. During the 2021–22 season, he will reprise his portrayal of Porgy and sing Philippe II in the company premiere of *Don Carlos*. Elsewhere, he has sung Porgy at Dutch National Opera, Wotan in *Siegfried* and *Die Walküre* at Lyric Opera of Chicago, Philip II in *Don Carlo* and Stephen Kumalo in *Lost in the Stars* at Washington National Opera, Don Basilio in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* at Houston Grand Opera, Méphistophélès in *La Damnation de Faust* in concert with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, and the title role of *Macbeth* at the Glimmerglass Festival. In 2017, he was appointed artistic advisor of the Glimmerglass Festival. He serves on the board of trustees of both the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts and Astral Artistic Services, and in 2019, he became co-chair of the Curtis Institute's opera department.

View the complete **Met Orchestra** roster [here](#).

View the complete **Met Chorus** roster [here](#).

Program Note

There is a unifying theme throughout Verdi's works: a profound and sympathetic understanding of individuals struggling within the larger, usually oppressive, society. The Requiem is perhaps the supreme example of this, extending those issues infinitely to explore the individual confronting the cosmos itself. A celebrated but often misunderstood masterpiece, the Requiem

and the implications of its magnificent music can only be fully understood within the context of its creation.

The great composer Gioachino Rossini died in 1868. A mere four days after Rossini's death, Verdi wrote to his publisher, Ricordi, to propose a collaboration of living Italian composers, each of whom would contribute one section of a Requiem Mass in honor of the late maestro. The idea of a confraternity of creators from a common motherland acknowledging the death of an august father figure had clear resonance at a pivotal moment in Italian history. In the late 1860s, the Kingdom of Italy existed after decades of toil to unite fractious regions and regain control of those occupied by foreign powers, but its borders were still being fought over, and Rome had not yet been absorbed from the Papacy.

Thirteen composers contributed to this Requiem, including Verdi, who penned the final segment, the "Libera me." (None of the other 12 composers—rightly or wrongly—is remembered today.) Problems arose with conductors, committees, and competing interests, however, and the work was not performed. Verdi was left with an unfinished project and a mass of resentments.

Soon, though, he had the opportunity to reboot the Requiem on his own terms when author Alessandro Manzoni died in 1873 at the age of 88. Manzoni was revered as a figure of the Risorgimento, the Italian movement of dawning national consciousness in the early 19th century, in which the young Verdi had also been an important player. Manzoni's writings, especially his massive novel *I Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*) presented a panorama of Italy and Italians, from the exalted to the common, both positive and negative. Furthermore, his prose was commanding enough to define the modern Italian language for a land long divided by mutually unintelligible dialects. Manzoni's funeral in Milan was a state occasion with tens of thousands of mourners, presaging Verdi's own funeral there 28 years later. Manzoni's death, even more than Rossini's, was a moment for national self-examination.

Much had changed in Italy in the five years between Rossini's and Manzoni's deaths. Rome was finally the national capital, and borders, recognizable today, were set. Yet there was still disappointment. Divisions remained, the economy continued to struggle, and the mass emigrations to the New World were beginning. If this Requiem were to be a Manzoni Requiem, then it would perforce be a Requiem for the Risorgimento, a eulogy for a nation's aspirations sung in the harsh daylight of contemporary political reality.

Verdi had already been working on his 1868 "Libera me" when he told Ricordi that he planned to write a Requiem for Manzoni shortly after visiting the author's grave. He began working on the remainder of the Requiem in earnest in June, finishing it the following April. Milan's Church of San Marco was chosen for the premiere, which Verdi conducted on the first anniversary of Manzoni's death, to great public acclaim. The work was repeated at La Scala three days later, with even louder demonstrations of rapture. Over the next few years, Verdi managed a sort of company that toured the Requiem throughout Europe.

But the reaction was not uniformly ecstatic. The pushback was not against the brilliant music ("which could only have been done by a genius," remarked Johannes Brahms after glancing at the score) but rather that it was insufficiently religious. Eduard Hanslick, Wagner's critical

nemesis, said “When a female singer appeals to Jesus, she shouldn’t sound as if she were pining for her lover.” (Exegetes on the Bible’s erotic Song of Solomon might disagree.) “Opera in church dress,” sniffed conductor Hans von Bülow in an extravagantly piqued denunciation. Such criticisms come close to providing insight but miss the point: Only when we consider this supposed “flaw” of the Requiem—its dramatic nature—can we understand its full greatness.

Listeners are rewarded for paying as much attention to the text of the Requiem as to that of the composer’s greatest operas—more, even. Verdi did exactly that, and he assumed his audience had an intimate familiarity with these words, memorized and permeating the subconscious. The modern listener needs to work harder, as the words (and the Latin language itself) are not a part of our lives as they were to Italians of 150 years ago.

The traditional Requiem Mass is a service in the Roman Catholic Church, usually given at funerals. It differs from the standard Mass form in important ways, most importantly in that, while almost all the words of the typical Catholic Mass are taken from the Bible, the Requiem Mass has addenda—most notably the “Dies irae” (“Day of Wrath”), a vivid poem about Judgment Day attributed to the 13th-century Franciscan brother Thomas of Celano, and the “Libera me,” another separate poem meant as a prayer after the funeral itself. The subject—that is, the person(s) speaking—changes throughout the Requiem. In the first movement, the subjects are mourners asking God for eternal rest for the deceased. In the long “Dies irae,” the perspective shifts to the first-person, one considering one’s own death. The “Sanctus” text captures Judgment Day from the angelic point of view, an experience quite different from that of us poor mortals. And in the final “Libera me,” the perspective returns to the first-person, with a subject who is very, very terrified by death. It is not frivolous to insist on these words as role-playing in the drama of life against death. Even the hardly frivolous *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1913 says that the changes in subject in the Requiem Mass should be understood as “dramatic substitutions.” In other words, the Requiem Mass is dramatic, and a drama that is sung is an opera. Both opera and the Catholic Church are essentially Italian creations, and Verdi’s Requiem can be understood as an opera, set in a traditional Catholic matrix, about the death of the idea of Italy and all other human aspirations.

When one considers the text as dialogue, the full Verdian humanity of the music leaps out. Once one realizes that the “Sanctus” is sung from the point of view of angels and saints, already blessed, the section’s fugal symmetry, like a cathedral’s rose window, makes perfect sense. Compare that to the fugue in the “Libera me,” which is jagged, irregular, and written with as many accidentals as can be found in many a modern score—a fugue like the “Sanctus,” but distorted by the terror of someone whose eternal life still hangs in the balance. The “Sanctus” is what religion tells us we should feel in that moment; the “Libera me” is what Verdi tells us we would actually feel.

This arresting final section recalls Verdi’s writing in *Otello*, premiered 13 years after the Requiem. The first five minutes of Verdi’s final tragedy—the famous storm scene—presents people in a similar situation as those in the “Libera me.” They face both personal and universal annihilation, and they turn on their Creator with something that sounds like anger, demanding salvation. In that moment, Verdi uses a pattern of six repeated notes, double triplets, at the mention of God, as in the “Tuba mirum” of the Requiem. He uses the same figure in Act III of

Otello for the Venetian emissary. It appears to stand for patriarchal authority—or, rather, to the human understanding of that authority, which is what interested the humanist Verdi more than the deity Himself. This preference explains the prominence of the soprano soloist throughout the “Liberate me” and especially her final ascent to a high C that slices through the fortissimo chorus. Now, think of the Triumphal Scene in *Aida*. Verdi does not take sides between the nations at war—he lets the soprano voice slice through that chorus to show us how the individual’s plight in this complex situation is more poignant to him than the war itself. In the Requiem, Verdi the humanist (if not agnostic or even outright atheist) does something analogous. He does not tell us what God will do when humans beg for salvation (unlike some other Requiems that include the “In Paradisum” prayer and other promises of ultimate consolation) or even if God exists. He tells us that the plight of the human who contemplates death is worthy of pathos and respect. *Aida*, *Otello*, and the Requiem all say the same thing: Nations may form and rage and dissolve, and higher powers may save us or will our destruction, but what we should concern ourselves with are human individuals and their plights.

—William Berger

William Berger is a Met staff writer, radio producer, and commentator and is the author of *Verdi with a Vengeance*, *Wagner Without Fear*, and *Puccini Without Excuses*.