

Requiem

Luigi Cherubini (1760 – 1842)

In general, a composer's contemporary reputation is unlikely to remain constant in succeeding generations. Posterity sometimes has a habit of elevating the obscure and neglecting the famous, occasionally to an extreme degree. Cherubini was such a figure. No less a person than Beethoven called him '*Europe's foremost dramatic composer*', later going even further and hailing him as '*the greatest living composer*.' He was also much admired by Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms and Berlioz. An impressive set of testimonials by anyone's standards, yet by the end of the nineteenth century his compositions had been virtually forgotten, his dwindling reputation resting largely on his undisputed superiority as a writer and teacher of counterpoint.

Luigi Cherubini was born in Florence in 1760. After a brief period in London he settled in Paris at the age of twenty-seven, remaining there until his death in 1842. The first half of his career was spent as a teacher, administrator and highly successful operatic composer. He was undoubtedly the most influential figure in French musical life at that time. In 1789 he founded and directed an opera company under the patronage of the King's brother, the Comte de Provence, who was later to become Louis XVIII. The enormous success which Cherubini enjoyed may be judged by the fact that over two hundred successive performances of his opera *Lodoiska* were given. With revolution in the air, however, the opera company's royal affiliations were viewed with increasing hostility, and it was disbanded in 1792. Napoleon's disapproval and the widespread political upheavals, together with Parisian audiences' new-found fascination with Italian grand opera, resulted in the gradual waning of Cherubini's popularity. By the turn of the century his fortunes were at such a low ebb that it looked as if his composing career was finished. He became very depressed, withdrew from music completely and devoted his time to his lifelong interests of botany and painting.

In 1808 he was recuperating at the Princess of Chimay's country estate, where his health improved considerably. When asked to write a suitable piece for performance in the local church on the forthcoming St. Cecilia's day, he felt able to return to composition and responded with a *Kyrie* and *Gloria*, which were later to become part of his first Mass, completed in 1809. The new possibilities which this commission had unexpectedly opened up inspired Cherubini to begin composing seriously once more, this time for the church rather than the opera house. He eventually wrote five masses, a large number of Latin motets and other pieces, and two settings of the Requiem. His music was enthusiastically received and from virtual obscurity he once more emerged as a front-rank composer. It was a remarkable recovery from a seemingly hopeless situation.

Cherubini's success eventually earned him the prestigious position of *Surintendant de la musique du Roi*. In 1815, somewhat ironically, he was commissioned by the government to write a Requiem commemorating the anniversary of the execution of Louis XVI. The work had an immediate and long-lasting success. '*If I were to write a Requiem, Cherubini's would be my only model*' declared Beethoven, at whose funeral in 1827 it was performed. Schumann's opinion was that it was '*without equal in the world*' and Brahms thought it '*marvellous*.' Berlioz considered that '*the decrescendo in the Agnus Dei surpasses everything that has ever been written of the kind*.'

The first performance took place in the crypt of St. Denis before a large audience, and the work was then heard with increasing frequency in Paris and beyond. One of Cherubini's most successful pupils was the composer Boieldieu, and when he died in 1834 the C minor Requiem was appropriately chosen for performance at the funeral. However, the Archbishop of Paris was evidently offended by the participation of women in the service, thus prompting Cherubini to write a second Requiem for male-voice chorus and orchestra, completed in 1836 and specified by him for use at his own funeral.

The Requiem in C minor is scored for a standard orchestra apart from the omission of flutes and the addition of a tam-tam. Cherubini was particularly anxious to reflect the spirit as well as the meaning of the text and so, to avoid any unwelcome associations with the opera house, he decided to dispense altogether with soloists.

The work opens with a hushed *Introit and Kyrie*, whose dark tones rarely rise much above *piano*. This is followed by a short *Graduale*. Not surprisingly, Cherubini is at his most dramatic in the *Dies Irae*, which opens with a flourish from the brass in unison, interrupted by a single arresting stroke on the tam-tam. This highly unconventional gesture caused something of a stir at the time. Scurrying strings add to the tension and mood of foreboding before the brass section once more blazes forth. The *Offertorium* contains some beautiful three-part choral writing, accompanied by upper strings and woodwind, and ends with a vigorous fugue at the words '*Quam olim Abrahae*.' A short *Sanctus* is followed by the *Pie Jesu*, which is in the form of three simple verses. The powerful opening of the *Agnus Dei* eventually gives way to a quieter section, until sparsely-accompanied unison writing finally brings the Requiem to a resigned conclusion.

The work is full of attractive choral and orchestral writing, rhythmic invention and skilful

counterpoint, for which Cherubini was justly renowned, but in more recent times it has not fared well in the company of other more immediately appealing works. One has only to consider the intensity of Mozart's Requiem, the visionary quality of Brahms's, the dramatic impact of Verdi's and the poignancy of Faure's to understand why Cherubini's setting so rarely features in today's choral repertoire, yet it has many fine qualities and surely deserves to be heard more frequently.

programme notes by John Bawden

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