

Petite Messe Solennelle

Gioachino Rossini (1792 - 1868)

Kyrie
Gloria in excelsis Deo
Gratias agimus
Domine Deus
Qui tollis peccata mundi
Quoniam tu solus sanctus
Cum sancto spiritu
Credo in unum Deo
Crucifixus
Et resurrexit
Preludio religioso
Sanctus
Benedictus
O salutaris hostia
Agnus Dei

Rossini is justly celebrated for his immense contribution to the Italian operatic repertoire, but he also produced two important pieces of sacred music that are notable, amongst other things, for their overtly operatic style. This incorporation of the music of the opera house into the sacred repertoire may appear to have been a bold innovation, but in terms of dramatic content it was a well-established practice. Most composers who were familiar with the theatre as well as the church used elements of the operatic style in order to give their sacred compositions greater impact. A prime example is Handel, but the tradition goes back to Monteverdi, the first great opera composer, who even borrowed his own overture to *The Coronation of Poppea* for the opening movement of his 1610 *Vespers*. What is original about Rossini's sacred music is not so much its dramatic power, impressive though that is, as its unashamed romanticism.

Like so many of the great composers, Rossini was born into a musical family. His father was the town trumpeter in Pesaro and his mother was an opera singer. Both parents worked in various theatres in the region, and from an early age Gioachino went with them. As a talented boy soprano he was soon in great demand, and by the time he had reached his teens he could play the viola and the horn and was rapidly acquiring a reputation as a first-rate harpsichord-player and pianist. He went on to study at the Bologna Academy of Music, composing his first opera whilst still a student. From then on his rise to fame was meteoric. He received his first professional commission in 1810, which led to a string of further commissions. With the enormous success of his first full-length opera, *Tancredi* (1812), and the even greater triumph of *The Italian girl in Algiers* (1813), he became celebrated throughout Italy and his international reputation was firmly launched.

He was still only 23 when he was engaged as Musical Director of the two opera houses in Naples, for each of which he was required to compose a new opera annually, the ever-popular *Barber of Seville* being one of the happiest results. Rossini was always greatly attracted to a life of leisure, and as he was of a somewhat indolent nature he would frequently put off until the last possible moment the completion of his latest commission. He would then work at an incredible speed; several of his operas were written in under three weeks, an astonishing feat by any standards. He travelled widely throughout Europe, and in 1824 settled in Paris as Director of the Théâtre Italien. A string of new compositions followed, culminating in his acknowledged masterpiece, *William Tell*, completed in 1829 when he was still only 37.

At this point Rossini's life changed dramatically. For no apparent reason he gave up composing, and apart from two important religious works, the *Stabat Mater* (1842) and the *Petite Messe Solennelle* (1863), he wrote nothing of significance during the last forty years of his life. It may be that he had run out of energy and inspiration - *William Tell* had been his thirty-sixth opera in nineteen years - or perhaps simply that he was by now so immensely wealthy that he had no particular incentive to go on working. He retired to a luxurious villa specially built for him at Passy, on the outskirts of Paris, where he was able to live the life of idleness and self-indulgence that, as a renowned gourmet and *bon vivant*, he had always found so appealing. A visit to his villa was obligatory for every musician of importance visiting the capital, and here Rossini would hold court, entertaining everyone with his sparkling wit and good food, and revelling in the adulation of the constant stream of admirers and eminent visitors. These included Wagner, of whom he once wryly observed, '*His music has lovely moments but awful quarters of an hour!*'

In his latter years Rossini turned once again to composition, producing what he called his *Péchés de Vieillesse* (*Sins of Old Age*), a collection of light-hearted pieces for piano, some also with voices. Despite his withdrawal from the operatic world, he continued to be held in such enormous esteem that when he died

6,000 mourners, four military bands, a chorus of 400 singers and several of the finest opera soloists of the day attended his funeral.

The *Petite Messe Solennelle* is the most substantial of the works written during Rossini's indian summer of composition. It was composed in 1863 for private performance and is scored for four soloists and chorus, with harmonium and piano accompaniment. It was not heard in public until 1869, the year after his death, when it was performed in the composer's own orchestral version at the Théâtre Italien. The work's title is misleading, since the *Petite Messe Solennelle* is neither *petite* nor particularly solemn. It lasts well over an hour, and despite the religious text is unmistakably operatic in style, in common with the *Stabat Mater* of twenty years earlier. The music ranges from hushed intensity to boisterous high spirits, and abounds in the memorable tunes and rhythmic vitality for which Rossini became justly famous.

The quiet A minor opening of the Kyrie Eleison contrasts sustained choral writing with a running bass part in the piano accompaniment. This soon gives way to a brighter mood as the music moves into the major. For the Christe Eleison, Rossini adopted a deliberately archaic style, echoing the church music of Palestrina some 300 years earlier. As the second Kyrie unfolds, the movement returns to the serious mood in which it began. The Gloria begins with a short introduction for chorus and soloists, followed by four extended solo movements that are operatic arias in all but name. The chorus returns for the final section of the Gloria, an extended fugue to the words 'Cum sancto spiritu in gloria Dei Patris, Amen.' This is a real *tour de force* of musical craftsmanship, reflecting the thorough classical training in harmony and counterpoint that Rossini received all those years ago at the Bologna Academy.

In the Credo Rossini ingeniously uses the word 'credo' as a unifying motif to which he repeatedly returns. This section of the mass concludes with another brilliant fugue for the chorus, at the words 'Et vitam venturi saeculi, Amen.' There follows an extended piano solo, leading to a lyrical Sanctus and Benedictus, and the work ends with a moving Agnus Dei for the alto soloist and chorus.

There is a sense in which Rossini's extraordinary musical facility was one of his weaknesses as well as one of his strengths. He once remarked, '*Show me a laundry list and I will set it to music!*' and this neatly illustrates his complete confidence in his own ability to produce music to order, whatever the words. To some extent, this is what he has done in the *Petite Messe*. Of course, there are many sections which beautifully reflect the words, such as the Christe Eleison and the Agnus Dei, but in other places one feels that Rossini has paid little regard to the essential meaning and form of the text. The two extended choral fugues are good examples of this; they are disproportionately grand in relation to the rest of the Gloria and Credo. Yet at no point in the work does the music become remotely dull or routine. Such was Rossini's genius that even when the spirit of the music seems to depart from the spirit of the text one can't help but be captivated by the beautiful melodies and sheer *joie-de-vivre* of the piece. As he himself said, '*Delight must be the basis and aim of this art*', and that is what he has achieved – a work not of profound religious insight, but one that is a delightful, life-enhancing musical experience.

programme notes by John Bawden

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