Minnesota Orchestra

Edward Gardner, conductor
Ailyn Pérez, soprano | Elizabeth DeShong, mezzo
René Barbera, tenor | Eric Owens, bass
Minnesota Chorale, Kathy Saltzman Romey, artistic director

Friday, May 17, 2019, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall
Saturday, May 18, 2019, 8 pm | Orchestra Hall
Sunday, May 19, 2019, 2 pm | Orchestra Hall

Giuseppe Verdi

Requiem
Requiem and Kyrie
Sequence (Dies Irae)
Offertorio (Domine Jesu)
Sanctus
Agnus Dei
Lux aeterna
Libera me
Ailyn Pérez, soprano | Elizabeth DeShong, mezzo
René Barbera, tenor | Eric Owens, bass
Minnesota Chorale

ca. 83'

At these performances of Verdi’s Requiem, an English translation by Cori Ellison of the original Latin text will be projected as surtitles.

Concert Preview with Philip Gainsley and soloists
Friday, May 17, 7 pm, Auditorium
Saturday, May 18, 7 pm, Auditorium
Sunday, May 19, 1 pm, Auditorium

Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of Classical Minnesota Public Radio, including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.
Edward Gardner, conductor

Edward Gardner, chief conductor of the Bergen Philharmonic since 2015, has led that orchestra on multiple international tours, including performances in Berlin, Munich and Amsterdam, and at the BBC Proms and Edinburgh International Festival. During the 2018-19 season, he returns to the Chicago Symphony, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Orchestra del Teatro alla Scala and London Philharmonic Orchestra. In addition, he debuts with the WDR Symphony Orchestra Köln, Vienna Symphony, Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra and RAI National Symphony Orchestra, and leads a new production of Káťa Kabanová at the Royal Opera House. He also continues his longstanding collaborations with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and BBC Symphony Orchestra. He founded the Hallé Youth Orchestra in 2002 and regularly conducts the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, and he maintains a close relationship with the Juilliard School of Music and with the Royal Academy of Music, which in 2014 appointed him its inaugural Sir Charles Mackerras Conducting Chair. More: askonasholt.co.uk.

Ailyn Pérez, soprano

Ailyn Pérez, who makes her Minnesota Orchestra debut in these concerts, is a winner of both the Richard Tucker Award and the Plácido Domingo Award. Her career highlights include singing the role of Violetta in La Traviata for Opernhaus Zürich, Hamburgische Staatsoper, Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin, Bayerische Staatsoper, San Francisco Opera, Teatro alla Scala and Royal Opera House at Covent Garden. She has also performed in multiple productions with the Metropolitan Opera, Dallas Opera and Washington National Opera, among other companies. In concert she has performed Verdi's Requiem with the Orchestre Métropolitain in Montreal; Mozart's Requiem with the Accademia Santa Cecilia Orchestra in Rome; and Mahler's Symphony No. 2 with Essen Philharmoniker. Her notable engagements this season include her role debut as Elvira in Ernani for Teatro alla Scala; Mimi in La Bohème and Alice Ford in Falstaff, both at the Metropolitan Opera; Donna Anna in Don Giovanni for the Houston Grand Opera; and concert appearances with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. More: askonasholt.co.uk, ailyn.perez.com.

Elizabeth DeShong, mezzo

Mezzo Elizabeth DeShong has performed extensively throughout the world with symphony orchestras including the Cleveland Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra of St. Luke’s, Cincinnati Symphony, National Symphony Orchestra, Toronto Symphony and Royal Flemish Orchestra, and with opera companies worldwide. Her 2018-19 season engagements included performances as Adalgisa in Norma with North Carolina Opera, a recital for Vocal Arts, D.C., John Adams’ The Gospel According to the Other Mary with the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, and Handel’s Messiah with the San Francisco and Houston Symphonies. In addition, she made her debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra in Rossini’s Stabat Mater, portrayed Sesto in a new production of La Clemenza di Tito with Los Angeles Opera, and toured Europe and the U.S. with The English Concert. Her recording of Handel’s Messiah with the Toronto Symphony was nominated for two Grammy Awards in 2018. More: columbia-artists.com, elizabethdehson.com.

Verdi: Requiem

Verdi was primarily a composer of operas, and his theatrical bent is very present in this unusual Requiem mass. In place of quiet reverence, in place of grief expressed through ceremonial chants, this Requiem offers heart-rending drama that would be at home on the operatic stage. These qualities were intentional. Verdi wrote his Requiem in honor of a man he considered “one of the glories of Italy”—the poet, novelist and patriot Alessandro Manzoni, who died in 1873. To salute this beloved national hero, Verdi created a concert piece for the masses, with music that embraces the Latin mass for the dead not as ritual, but as poetry.
René Barbera, tenor

The recipient of all three Operalia awards, tenor René Barbera recently made his company and role debut as Elvino in La sonnambula with the Washington Concert Opera, followed by his debut at the Michigan Opera Theater as Almaviva in Il barbiere di Siviglia, and return appearances with the Lyric Opera of Chicago as Ernesto in Don Pasquale and Italian Tenor in Der Rosenkavalier. He also debuted with Seattle Opera and Los Angeles Opera, and was heard at the Stanislavsky Music Theatre in Moscow.

Eric Owens, bass

Eric Owens, who has performed with the Minnesota Orchestra multiple times since his debut in 1997, is an esteemed interpreter of classic works and a champion of new music. In the 2018-19 season, he returns to Lyric Opera of Chicago to make his role debut as the Wanderer in David Pountney's new production of Wagner's Siegfried. He also stars as Porgy in James Robinson's new production of Porgy and Bess at the Dutch National Opera and makes his role debut as Hagen in Götterdämmerung at the Metropolitan Opera conducted by Philippe Jordan. Concert appearances include the world premiere of David Lang’s prisoner of the people at the New York Philharmonic, the King in Aïda at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Mozart’s Requiem with Music of the Baroque. He has been recognized with multiple honors, including Musical America’s “Vocalist of the Year” in 2017. More: imgartists.com.
ne of the smartest and sharpest-tongued figures in 19th-century music, the pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, was in Milan the day of the premiere of Verdi's Requiem. He was able to sneak a look at the score, and on that basis he sent a report to a German newspaper. He was not present at “the show,” he wrote, at the unveiling of this “opera in ecclesiastical vestments...Our quick and illicit preview of this newest runoff from Trovatore and Traviata has done away with any desire to attend these festivities.” Eighteen years later, when he had actually heard the Requiem, he wrote to Verdi, recanting his “great journalistic imbecility.” Verdi, privately opining that “De Bülow” was “definitely crazy,” accepted the extravagantly worded apology with grace, adding a characteristically wry “Who knows? Maybe you were right the first time.”

Before the Requiem, Verdi had composed very little music that was not opera: a few songs, a potboiler for a 1862 world’s fair in London and an elegant string quartet. The Requiem was another matter: it was a public address by Verdi to his own people on an occasion of national mourning. The poet, novelist and patriot Alessandro Manzoni, an Italian hero, had died in Milan on May 22, 1873, and Verdi volunteered a Requiem Mass, to be sung on the first anniversary of Manzoni’s passing.

the glories of italy
The genesis of Verdi’s Requiem is curious and touching as well as more complicated than the last sentence suggests. The story begins with the death of Rossini in Paris in November 1868. Verdi, deeply affected, proposed that the city of Bologna, where Rossini had grown up, studied, produced his first opera, and served as honorary president of the Liceo musicale, should sponsor a composite Requiem Mass to which 13 Italian composers would each contribute one movement. The Rossini Requiem was written, with Verdi contributing the final section, the Libera me. But various jealousies diffused the energy behind the product, and the performance never took place.

When Rossini died, Verdi had called him “one of the glories of Italy.” Verdi went on to ask: “When the one other glory that is like unto it exists no longer, what will remain to us?” That one other was Manzoni.

When Manzoni died in 1873, he was the most revered figure in Italian public life. His reputation had been established by the poems he had written between 1812 and 1822, one of which Goethe declared to be the finest of all Europe’s literary responses to the death of Napoleon. Manzoni’s most famous work is I promessi sposi (The Betrothed), and aside from its considerable merits as a novel, it became, as Verdi’s biographer George Martin put it, “a primer and dictionary...in effect [creating] a serviceable, modern language for an emerging nation.”

A more essential part of the reverence accorded Manzoni had nothing to do with literature. The poet had long been an ardent, eloquent supporter of Italian independence and unification, and in 1861 he had been elected as one of the first senators of the newly founded Kingdom of Italy. Verdi, also elected to the Italian parliament in 1861, had likewise been committed to the Risorgimento for many years.

Verdi loved Manzoni the artist, whose work so beautifully embodied his own ideal of “inventing truth”; he loved the man who bore a lifetime of private sorrows with serenity and strength; he loved the committed public figure. Deeply grieved by the death of “our Great Man,” Verdi told his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, that he intended to stay away from the funeral but would soon visit the grave “alone and unseen.” Perhaps, he added, he would “after further reflection and after taking stock of my strength, suggest a way of honoring his memory.” He made his pilgrimage, and it was on that evening that he wrote to Ricordi with his offer to compose a Requiem for Manzoni.

without delay
In fact, as the American Verdi scholar David Rosen has established, Verdi had already retrieved the Libera me previously written for the Rossini Requiem and been at work on the Manzoni Requiem for more than a month. He himself would conduct the first performance and assume the cost of copying the parts. Might the city of Milan cover the other expenses and, if Ricordi thought this made sense, would he speak to the mayor about it? No doubt stimulated in part by the desire to be seen as doing the right thing where Bologna had fallen on its face so miserably in the matter of the Rossini Requiem, the municipality assented at once.

Nothing in Verdi’s career ever proceeded more urgently than the composition of the Requiem. Uppermost in his mind was the need to make a worthy monument to the man who represented “the purest, the holiest, the loftiest of our glories,” the man he refers to in his letters as “nostro Grande” and “nostro Santo.” “Nostro Santo”—our Saint, our Holy One—a surprising and moving phrase from the pen of so resolve a nonbeliever.
Verdi did conduct the premiere, which took place at Saint Mark’s, Milan, on May 22, 1874. Chorus and orchestra were specially assembled for the occasion, and the soloists were Teresa Stolz, Maria Waldmann, Giuseppe Capponi and Ormondo Maini. By February 1875, Verdi had written a new Liber scriptus, and the Requiem was first heard in its new and final version in the Royal Albert Hall, London, on May 15, 1875, again with Verdi conducting.

At its first performance, the Requiem was given as part of a service, the parish priest celebrating a so-called dry Mass, that is, one without an actual offering of bread and wine, and the movements of Verdi’s work were separated—or connected—by passages of plainchant sung by the church choir. Except for this one occasion, Verdi had no thought of a Requiem for liturgical use. What he offered his—and Manzoni’s—public was a concert piece, and it was as a concert piece that the Requiem was accepted and understood the moment it moved across the street to La Scala and from there to the halls and theaters of Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin and New York. Audiences understood the secular nature of this religious music. They applauded at every opportunity, even between the joined sections of the Dies irae, and at the early performances many movements were encor, most often the whole of the Offertorio, the brilliant Sanctus and the Agnus Dei. Verdi, who was as ironically amused by his acclaim as a composer of sacred music as he had been fervent in the writing of the Requiem, wrote to a friend that now, whenever he heard the word “opera,” he crossed himself.

**requiem and kyrie.** The opening of the Requiem does in fact sound “religious”—yet drama is present here. Like all Requiem Masses, Verdi’s opens with the sentence “Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine; et lux perpetua lucent eis—Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and let everlasting light shine upon them.” Requiem aeternam is ritual—these are words of an invisible crowd. With the plea of dona eis, Domine, individual human creatures become visible as four solo soprano voices detach themselves. Their prayer is like a sigh, and it is set against the still more intense entreaties of the violins. It is also the strings who carry the burden of et lux perpetua. The voices retreat once more, to step forward with greater force, but also in the most severe impersonality, for Te decet hymnus.

Next comes the prayer for mercy—Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison—and now single voices, assertive and full of character, are heard for the first time. Tenor, bass, soprano, and contralto—they present themselves formally, one by one, and not without a touch of competitiveness. It is a glorious moment, this presentation of the four praying and singing men and women in the Kyrie; moreover, when these first few bars have passed, we have a pretty good idea of what sort of evening we are in for. The chorus joins the soloists, and the music ends quietly, with some magical and at the same time simple turns of harmony.

**Dies irae.** It takes all available forces to set the scene for what comes next, the contemplation of the Day of Wrath, the Dies irae. Great opera composers are great scene painters, and the tremendous noise at the start of the Dies irae fixes the scale for the fresco. The trilling flutes, the skidding clarinets and bassoons, the percussive accents of drums and winds and plucked strings, the half-whispering of the chorus—all people the landscape with a crowd that gradually falls silent in terror. Near and far, the Last Trump is announced.

Now, with the scene set, individual men and women speak their hopes and fears and pleas at the moment of judgment. Haltingly, the bass sings of the astonishment of death and nature when creation defies science and experience, to rise again at the summons of the Judge. The contralto sternly describes the great book in which all things are contained. At the height of perplexed terror, the tenor and both women cling to one another for support. Their questions disintegrate into silence. Then the basses of the chorus hail the King of Awesome Majesty, the tenors timidly repeating the words of their invocation, and from this grow pleas, both piteous and fervent, for salvation.

The most touching, because the most personal, portion of the Dies irae is the prayer addressed directly to Jesus: “Recall that I am the cause of your journey... Let it not have been in vain” (Recordare, Jesu pie). Verdi sets it as a tender duet for soprano and mezzo, and for a single wondrous and unforgettable moment, at the poignant appeal to Juste judex, the just judge, their two voices join to become one. Then the tenor, fearing his prayer to be unworthy, speaks with utmost pathos. This is the Requiem’s most overtly operatic moment. Tenors are the authors and the victims of their passions; basses are fathers, kings, priests, sternly noble figures. This bass, even in all his humility, can firmly face the vision of the acrid flames in which the accursed are consumed. All voices unite in the summation that the Day will be one of tears.

**Offertorio.** The chorus is silent. The music begins with a great upward sweep by the cellos. For a long time we hear only the three lower solo voices: Verdi is saving the soprano for a special moment. That moment is the turn from dark to bright, from the bottomless pit, from the lion’s mouth, from Tartarus, to the appearance of Saint Michael, the standard-bearer who will lead the faithful into the holy light. As Verdi leaves the voices poised on a C-major chord on ne cadant in obscum, the soprano joins them, singing the word sed (but). For a second or two, her E hangs in the air alone; then ethereal violins, two muted solo instruments in the lead, reinterpret that note as part of the dominant of A major, a bright segment of the harmonic spectrum we have not visited since the first movement. It is but a momentary glimpse of transcendence, for almost at once the soprano slips down to E-flat and so returns us to the proper harmonic center—A-flat major—of the Offertorio. That single word sed—it is one of the most miraculous moments in all of Verdi.
Next, following tradition, Verdi sets the *Quam olim Abrahæ* as a fugato, a fugal beginning. The *Hostias*, set in the brightness of C major, brings another moment of mystic luminescence.

**sanctus.** Introduced by trumpeting and singing herald angels, this is at once an exultation and a virtuoso fugue.

**agnus dei.** This begins like plainsong, with 13 measures for solo soprano and contralto, in octaves, unaccompanied, and famously feared for the difficulty of getting it in tune. The melody has a remarkable shape, natural and strange at the same time: a first part of seven bars and a subtly compressed second part of six bars. What follows is a set of five variations, the odd-numbered ones drawing in of seven bars and a subtly compressed second part of six bars. What

**lux aeterna.** Against a softly glowing background of violins divided in six parts, the alto sings the entire text while the bass, in solemn declamation, reminds us of *Requiem aeternam*. At the evocation of the blessed dead lodged “with thy Saints for ever,” woodwinds and high violins set up an angel-wing flutter familiar from many a death scene in Verdi’s operas.

**libera me.** Before, in the *Offertorio*, when Verdi wrote a trio for three lower voices, it was to set in special relief the entrance of the highest voice on “sed signifer sanctus Michael.” In the *Lux aeterna*, Verdi does it to give the soprano a rest before the *Libera me*, for that taxing moment is hers alone. Here Verdi had an interesting challenge, since this Requiem’s *Libera me*, which brings back words from earlier parts of the text, was based on the movement he had earlier written for the Rossini Requiem. He had to extrapolate backwards, as it were, the settings of *Requiem aeternum* and *Dies irae* from the music he had already written for those words as they appear in the *Libera me*. He succeeded magnificently. One would never guess or imagine that the earliest movements quote the later, not the other way around!

In accents of terror—and the agitation in the orchestra reminds us in every bar why we should feel terror—the soprano declaims the text. The chorus, murmuring, echoes her words. The *Dies irae* returns and so, in a wonderful new scoring, does the opening music of the entire work, *Requiem aeternam*. The music disappears into silence, or at least into *pppp*. A harsh tremolo on what was, centuries ago, known as the Devil’s interval—the half-octave, here G and D-flat—recalls us to the world of terror. The soprano repeats her anguished plea for deliverance. This time the chorus joins her in a powerful fugue whose vigorous dominant-and-tonic punctuations at the entrance of each voice must have scandalized counterpoint professors all over Europe. The soprano’s re-entrance is superb, the theme now in notes that are double their original length and presented, *espressivo* against a *dolcissimo* backdrop, at a striking harmonic slant. The music rises to a white-hot climax, the soprano bestriding all with her high C, and then sinks to a moving close: quiet but intensely scored chords of C major, through which first the soprano, still *tremens factus*, then the chorus, reiterate their prayer: *Libera me*.

Verdi’s Requiem, even though distinct from opera—and Verdi did want a less dramatic style of singing here, and less rubato—is nourished by opera, unimaginable without opera, and ultimately unperformable by conductors and singers who do not understand and adore opera. Verdi spent most of his life in an often frustrating search for good texts. What he was looking for he summed up in a few words when he wrote to one of his librettists: “[I want] a beautiful subject, original, interesting, with fine situations, and impassioned—passions above all!”

Consider the words of the Requiem, formed from centuries of ritualistic response to the human drama of death, including death, as the necessary opening of the door to eternal bliss. It is fatuous to say, as some have done, that the Requiem is Verdi’s best opera, but still, none of his poets ever approached his ideal more nearly than the authors, most of them nameless to us, who contributed to the Roman Mass for the Dead.

**Instrumentation:** soprano, mezzo, tenor and bass soloists, 4-part mixed choir and orchestra comprising 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 4 bassoons, 4 horns, 4 trumpets (plus 4 offstage), 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum and strings

Program note excerpted from the late Michael Steinberg’s Choral Masterworks: A Listener’s Guide (Oxford University Press, 2005), used with permission.