

Program Notes

In late April 1855, Gioachino Antonio Rossini (1792-1868) and his wife Olympe (née Pélissier) left Italy, never to return. Turning his back on the land where his first thirty-five (of thirty-nine!) operas had been premiered, Rossini was also leaving behind nineteen years of illness and depression. Ironically, in seeking sanctuary in Paris, Rossini was returning to a city that had not treated him altogether kindly in the past. Back in 1829, negotiations for the staging of his last opera—*Guillaume Tell*—at the Paris Opéra included a provision for a lifetime annuity granted by the King, Charles X, along with a promise by Rossini to compose four more works for the Opéra. But after Charles was deposed in the Revolution of 1830, Rossini had to remain in Paris for six years, fighting for his annuity in the courts. By the time it was restored, Rossini was suffering from a chronic yet undiagnosed illness, and the cultural climate had so changed with Meyerbeer's triumphs at the Opéra that the Italian master hesitated to attempt another work for the stage. Returning to Italy late in 1836, Rossini spent almost nineteen years battling his illness and composing little beyond completing his *Stabat mater*. In desperation, feeling that Italian doctors could do no more for him, Rossini deferred to his wife's yearning to return to the city of her youth.

Arriving in Paris in 1855, it was almost as if Rossini suddenly became a Frenchman. He was welcomed by the cream of Parisian society, though visits soon after his return were limited to his closest old friends: Count Frédéric Pillet-Will and the composers Auber and Michele Carafa. And gradually Rossini's health improved. Pierangelo Fiorentino, a critic for *Le Moniteur universel*, wrote that Rossini

will only get stronger given the great joy of his friends and admirers, which is to say all intelligent beings who have had the happiness to hear one of his masterpieces.... He arrived among us from Italy sick, depressed, anguishing: [now] he is not only cured, but rejuvenated.

While Fiorentino exaggerated, a clear sign of Rossini's improvement was his return to composition in the spring of 1857, with the first group of what he called his *péchés de vieillesse* ("sins of old age"), six settings of Metastasio's lines beginning "Mi lagnerò tacendo." 18 December 1858 saw the first of the Rossinis' Saturday musical soirées, whose guests over the next few years included Auber, Gounod, Joseph Joachim, Liszt, Meyerbeer, Christine Nilsson, Adelina Patti, Saint-Saëns, and Pablo de Sarasate, among many other luminaries. The programs for these musical evenings

would typically feature works by Rossini—arias or ensembles from his operas along with newly composed péchés—alternating with works by contemporaries such as Verdi and F.B. Ricci.

This period of Rossini's renewed creative activity—resulting mostly in small instrumental and vocal pieces—was the incubator for a work of imposing length and grandeur, the *Petite messe solennelle*. The mass is “petite” only in that it shares with the péchés de vieillesse the preference for small instrumental forces, in this case piano and harmonium (a small reed organ commonly found in the music rooms of Parisian homes). Rossini nominally wrote the mass to consecrate the chapel in the new home of the Count and Countess Pillet-Will—the first performance took place there on 14 March 1864—but, despite moments of whimsy in the score, Rossini was clearly motivated by meditation upon mortality, both his own and that of departed friends. One such friend was Louis Niedermeyer (1802-1861), founder in Paris of a school of church music with a curriculum emphasizing revival of the singing of Gregorian chant and the polyphonic music of Renaissance masters. The predominant gravity of the mass may also have reflected a characteristic fundamental to Rossini's personality. In a 1983 interview, Claudio Scimone—an eminent conductor of the mass—said that

previously only [Rossini's] opere buffe were known, but the tendency today is to perform and record the serious works, which reveal, in fact, the true Rossini. When you look at them you can see that he was really a very reticent individual. It never showed during his life because he disguised his genuine and subtle sensitivity behind a very convincing portrait of himself as a joker. Yet inside he was a man of deep feelings and complexes, a very private individual, even in his own music.... One of the things that makes the 'Petite Messe' unique is this kind of blend between a very deep and mature religious and philosophical feeling and the subtle irony which was Rossini's way of disguising his profound inner self....

The *Petite messe solennelle* begins with no trace of whimsy; after reiteration of the pitch A in octaves, the piano and harmonium introduce the Kyrie with a minor-key prelude which is at once restless and inexorable. This music becomes the accompaniment to the choir's contrasting legato “Kyrie eleison” in gradually rising polyphony, evoking what Richard Osborne has called “a sense of bewilderment.”

The a cappella “Christe eleison” in stile antico is Rossini’s secret tribute to his late friend: it is actually a reworking of the “Et incarnatus” from one of Louis Niedermeyer’s masses.

The Gloria as a whole is framed by a fanfare in the keyboards and chorus, and is marked throughout by subtleties and surprises: the tentative piano interlude before the “et in Terra pax,” the chromatic piano writing in parts of the solo trio’s “Gratias agimus tibi” (Rossini obviously had been listening to Liszt), and the tender lyricism of the female soloist’s duet “Qui tollis.” The happy-go-lucky theme of the “Cum Sancto Spiritu” fugue cannot distract us from Rossini’s masterful counterpoint (he was a subscriber to the Bach Gesellschaft edition). An extended “Amen” coda concludes the Gloria.

Except for its interruption by the disconcertingly placid “Crucifixus,” the Credo is a single through-composed movement, organized around frequent repetitions of “Credo in unum Deum,” or just “credo,” much as were Beethoven’s Credo movements. The Credo closes with another brilliant fugue (“Et vitam venturi”) featuring a chromatically inflected descending subject against a rising diatonic countersubject.

As was common with French masses of this period, the *Petite messe solennelle* includes two non-liturgical pieces: a “Prelude Religieux” played by the pianist before the a cappella Sanctus, and the sacred song “O Salutaris” sung by the soprano soloist after the Sanctus. In its evocations of both Bach and Liszt, the prelude anticipates César Franck. Rossini had composed “O Salutaris” some years before, but transposed it from the key of E to the key of G for inclusion in the mass. The nervous pulsation of the accompaniment in the Agnus Dei recalls the opening of the mass. The chorus’s responses to the contralto’s anxious solo make this movement perhaps the most operatic of the mass.

At the end of his manuscript fair copy of the score of the *Petite messe solennelle*, Rossini made an inscription in French, which Richard Osborne translates as follows:

Dear God, here it is finished, this poor little Mass. Is this sacred music which I have written, or music of the devil? I was born for opera buffa, as you well know. A little science, a little heart, that’s all. Be blessed, then, and admit me to Paradise.

G. Rossini. Passy, 1863.

John Shepard
Head of the Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library
University of California, Berkeley