

Grand Gestures

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There was nothing straightforward about the recent performance of Verdi's *Requiem* given by Daniel Barenboim and the Berlin Philharmonic. Whether one takes that as criticism or praise will depend largely on one's ideas of how the work should be played. Anyone who came looking for refinement and surface gloss, even-keel tempi, restrained dynamics, and the kind of well-rounded, meticulously-balanced performance of which both orchestra and conductor are capable may well have come away from the evening perplexed or even exasperated by what was, by any measure, a wilful reading of Verdi's score.

Yet Mr Barenboim did not seem interested in anything quite so obvious. His reading, full of grand gestures and sudden intrusions, strove for the highest possible levels of drama and had little room for tidy formalities. The music that emerged was full of raw, rough edges, unsanded and unpolished, but burning with fresh heat from the cut. This is not to suggest that the playing from the orchestra was anything below the usual high standard – indeed a less-disciplined orchestra might have struggled to meet Mr Barenboim's demands – but it was a performance in which everything was subordinate to its own perpetually heightened mood. It wasn't always successful, but it was certainly never dull; and in those moments where everything came together, it generated an excitement that seemed to offer new and unexpected vistas on a familiar work.

The tempi throughout the evening tended toward the slower side, yet the performance was neither overly long nor lacking in focus. In fact Mr Barenboim's approach to pace was both variable and flexible: rather than observing a consistent pulse, the performance was often dictated by its desire to explore the granular details of a certain moment, or the relationships connecting successive moments. That Mr Barenboim was able to dwell on particular passages – slowing some of them to the breaking point in order to divulge their contents – without losing sight of the movements as a whole was perhaps the evening's most remarkable quality.

Of course, not everything was equally successful: the stately 'Rex tremendae' seemed to work against the urgent requests of 'Salva Me' coming from the singers, and the

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**Berlin, viernes,
11 de marzo de
2022.**

Philharmonie
Berlin. Verdi:
Messa da
Requiem. Susanne

Bernhard, Soprano. Marina Prudenskaya,
Mezzosoprano. Michael Spyres, Tenor.
Tareq Nazmi, Bass. Rundfunkchor Berlin.
Berlin Philharmonic. Daniel Barenboim,
conductor



'Recordare' threatened to collapse under the strain of its exacting pace. Yet in some of the evening's most striking moments, the score was drawn out to the point where it became a kind of dialogue between the singers and orchestral sections: in the 'Agnus Dei' one was conscious of the back and forth between the (superbly played) flutes and the interlocking vocal lines; the 'Mors stupebit' section of the 'Tuba mirum' was reduced to a stand-off between the Bass and the strings, in which the tense silences between utterances played a crucial role; the unconcealed presence of the bassoon echoed the lament of the vocal trio in 'Quid sum miser'.

In addition to his command of time and detail, Mr Barenboim was also a master of the heightened contrast, and his reading often seemed designed to highlight the continual flux between quiet and loud, despair and euphoria, sound and silence. It would be difficult to imagine a more ferocious opening to the *Sequentia* – the string stabs were decisive, the timpani and bass drum thunderous – and there were numerous passages of similar weight throughout the evening. Yet the performance was notable as much for its moments of rapturous calm, and it was Mr Barenboim's ability to move convincingly, effortlessly and quickly between extremes that gave the *Requiem* so much of its dramatic force.

It should be mentioned that, in one of those strokes of extraordinarily bad luck, the concert had lost all four of its originally-scheduled vocal soloists to illness only two days earlier. However if there was any unease among the replacement quartet, it was not immediately apparent (or was, perhaps, subsumed within the general volatility of the performance). Marina Prudenskaya emerged as the dominant vocal force in the *Sequentia*: although the lower passages at the beginning of the Liber Scriptus sounded declamatory (and perhaps a touch forced), her tone became warmer and her delivery more lyrical as the section progressed. There was considerable variety in her approach to the different sections and if certain moments owed a debt to the experience of singing Verdi on stage – notably the hint of possessed madness that closed the 'Liber Scriptus' – her contributions to the 'Agnus Dei' and 'Lux Aeterna' were suitably devout.

Soprano Susanne Bernhard gave an introspective and curiously deferential performance that, for its technical merits, rarely drew attention to itself. Although the soprano is the only featured soloist in the 'Liber Me', Ms Bernhard seemed content to remain on equal terms with the choir and orchestra, crafting expressions of moderate anguish without attempting to dominate. Her lines in the ensemble passages – the 'Kyrie' or the 'Offertorium' – were elegant and certainly not reticent, but delivered in a spirit of great humility. A similar modesty could be found in bass Tareq Nazmi, whose clear tone and ease of projection nonetheless brought great distinction to the 'Confutatis', which sounded as though it could have originated from any one of Verdi's doomed-father characters.

In an evening that seemed to prize emotion over prettiness, Michael Spyres brought a more conventional beauty to the tenor part; if his engagement with the text seemed less overtly dramatic, he seemed incapable of delivering anything less than perfectly formed notes and exquisitely moulded lines. In some ways this set him at odds with the raw passions of the performance and his *Ingemisco* – one of Verdi's great tenor arias, despite its ecclesial disguise – was too carefully crafted to match the rising ecstasy of the orchestra; however his hushed 'Hostias' in the 'Offertorium' was magnificent.

In the work's opening section, Mr Barenboim's deliberate pace seemed to favour the choir, and the Rundfunkchor Berlin responded with reverence and splendour. Although they were at their most captivating in such quiet moments, they were equally attuned to the grand gestures of Mr Barenboim's interpretation and rose to the work's outbursts of terror and sadness – the 'Dies Irae', and a movingly grand 'Lacrymosa' – as well as propelling the 'Sanctus' from its animated opening to its triumphant conclusion.

Verdi's *Requiem* is often accused of being an opera in disguise, and while the performance on this evening remained firmly in the world of the concert hall, one left the auditorium with a feeling of elation similar to that produced by Verdi's finest dramatic works. At his best Verdi was able to isolate the emotions within his libretti and magnify them to the point where they become abstract, universal, and so vivid that they transcend the melodramatic action from which they arose. Verdi's approach to the Mass for the dead was not wholly dissimilar; its most powerful moments may not be especially subtle but they succeed nonetheless in giving musical form to the raw emotions distilled from the text. If the performance on this evening made few attempts to downplay or smooth over the immediacy of those emotions, its finest moments brought us remarkably close to the drama at the heart of the score.