

# Verdi Requiem on the Grand Scale

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ROBIN GREGORY reviews performance by combined choirs on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012

When Verdi himself conducted his new Requiem at the Albert Hall, his chorus exceeded 1,000 singers, and his orchestra 140 players. Rather smaller forces packed All Saints Church, Eastbourne, but nonetheless the combined Eastbourne and Heathfield Choral Societies, four soloists and an orchestra of about 45 had the necessary “heft” for this mighty work. *Verdi’s* Requiem for Alessandro Manzoni is totally unlike (for example) *Fauré’s* Requiem, and has been described as his “finest opera”. It makes huge musical demands; and conductor John Hancorn’s performance successfully met them all.

From the whispered introduction, mainly on cellos, to the end of the final *Libera Me*, the packed audience (not a spare seat) was taken on the composer’s musical journey with hardly a blemish or wrong turning. (There was a slight loss of string tuning at one point, swiftly corrected.) Throughout, the combined choirs, numbering some 140 beautifully-turned-out singers, surmounted every hurdle, whether to produce a delicate extended pianissimo or a blazing forte; and the Eastbourne Players led by Jenny King were ever ready with the smooth string tone, the incisive woodwind, the blaring brass or (as in the terrifying *Dies Irae*) the shattering drumbeat.

For this Requiem four exceptionally talented soloists are not merely preferable, they are essential. Each has solo passages that are totally exposed, and in addition they must blend with one another *and* be aware of the conductor’s beat. Whoever sent out the invitations certainly knew his/her business, for this quartet was special. Young soprano Kishani Jayasinghe confirmed previous judgments, and indeed exceeded all expectations. In the final *Libera Me* she had that blend of power, beauty and range without which Verdi ultimately fails: hers was a performance to treasure. Mezzo Pippa Longworth’s experience showed whenever she sang alone, in duet, in trio or quartet. Fine in the upper register (she has sung as a soprano in the past), she certainly knew her Verdi. Tenor Adrian Thompson has made many distinguished solo recordings, and now makes a speciality of comic parts in opera, where his sense of fun always shines through. In the Requiem, he was suitably serious, with a rich tenor and supreme involvement. His *Ingemisco* was terrific. The fourth soloist’s demands are possibly the greatest: he must be both baritone and bass, and must know when to command an ensemble and when to step back and blend. Andrew Greenan was a revelation. Very still and composed, he produced a glorious sound without apparent effort, and without even holding a script. Full marks –plus !

Such quality does not come without fine teamwork at rehearsal. Pianists Peter Burge and Gavin Stevens must have been very busy while John Hancorn and Brian Newman (the Heathfield Musical Director) pulled every strand into shape. Great care was seen also in the printed programme: every name given, full biographies of the soloists, an excellent essay on the work itself, and a touching dedication to former choir-members Mike Pomroy and Doug Munson who died recently. This entire evening showed what the right blend of amateur and professional can achieve. The reviewer’s task is made easy when all one has to do is distribute compliments. [Heathfield give us “Songs from the Stage” on May 19<sup>th</sup>; and Eastbourne have “A Night at the Opera” on June 23<sup>rd</sup>.]