

A Mass almost by Chance

Perhaps people want to be indulgent towards the "sins of my old age", or perhaps it seems inopportune to refer repeatedly to the occasional moment of tiredness – who does not suffer from them? – but it is certain that in general people prefer not to mention, or at least only to whisper, a quite widely held opinion...

Which is this. The orchestral version of the Petite messe solennelle is said to be nothing more than a transcription done as a mere duty. Perhaps Rossini might have avoided doing it. Why would he have wanted to orchestrate the original for two pianos and harmonium which had been so successful? That is the masterpiece, while this other – its arthritic symphonic expansion – looks like a bureaucratic homage to contemporary fashion, with no appeal today, other than curiosity about the operation. Certainly in recent years excellent performances of the orchestral version have appeared, but the impression remains that this has happened more for the sake of the singers than for the intrinsic merits of Rossini's score.

The recently published study of the two Rossini autographs, that of the "chamber" version and the following "orchestral" one, has allowed us to understand the motives behind this double publication and, at the same time, has revealed how far the performances that we are used to hearing might seem from Rossini's intentions, particularly those with

orchestra. The ample introductory volume to the recent critical edition promoted by the Fondazione Rossini of Pesaro, besides the usual philological restoration, effects what in our terminology we call a "genetic" examination of the score. In other words, on the basis of the state of the paper, of the handwriting, of the types of ink, of the weight of the pen-stroke, and above all of the continual modifications introduced during the course of the work, has succeeded in indentifying the layers of composition, and recognizing at least eight different moments spread over the six years of work on the Petite messe, the years preceding his death (1868). In the beginning Rossini had merely conceived an important sacred work for eight voices and piano, then, following a continuous process of expansion, additions to and re-organizations of the work, he put together the composition as we know it today, lasting nearly two hours, the orchestral version of which is its apotheosis.

The symphonic ideal that Rossini conceives for the Petite messe is far from the great masses of performers typical of sacred works in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is a choice going against all the tendency of expansion to which the symphonic works of that period were inclining. The phonic weight of the numerous body of wind instruments must, however, have sounded less invasive than they would when modern instruments are used, so that only a

moderate number of strings is necessary to balance them.

The unifying harmonic factor is assigned to the organ, which is not given a real solo rôle. To this rough and severe orchestration, that has no part in late Romantic symphonic opulence, Rossini adds a chorus of just a few voices in which the solos do not contrast with the full chorus but are an integral part of them. In fact, Rossini prescribes that the soloists must always sing along with the chorus, as though the Mass had been thought of just for four solo voices, supported, if you like, by a little choir useful for varying the body of sound and the timbric depth of the leading parts.

The full score of the *Petite messe* poses more problems than one on the performance level: the relationship between the soloists and the chorus, the balance between the sections of the orchestra, the balance between the orchestra and the chorus. The first performances of the orchestral version, all following the composer's death and all in theatres or concert halls, sought to compensate what was seen as a limited orchestration by expanding the weight of the instrumentation and of the chorus. The effect was to annihilate, under too many decibels of one sole colour, the expertly fine handiwork that Rossini had expended on the alternating use of the most differing types of wind instruments (trumpets with and without piston, chromatic cornets, an ophicleide) and also on the highly delicate rapport between soloists and instruments. A new line of interpretation could be opened by considering the *Petite messe* an intimate composition, to be performed in some sheltered and reverberant alcove in a church.

Besides the lack of understanding that Rossini's score aroused, from the beginning of the twentieth century there was an explicit campaign,

completely ideological, to push the version for two pianos and harmonium (more often limited to just one piano), the unusual scoring of which supported the eccentric image that people had of the composer. Worse: the chamber version encouraged the anti-catholic and modernist cause, the real reason for the success that was attributed to its miniature format. The embarrassment of ecclesiastical circles concerning the use of the piano – an instrument foreign to church use – together with a singing style occasionally too "operatic", made the "chamber" version beloved of the left-wing avant-garde: some among them discovered that the use of keyboard instruments anticipated such pieces as Stravinskij's *Les Noces*. In fact, the piano and harmonium, solo or together, were instruments often used for concerts in the houses of Second Empire aristocrats; and they were frequently used for domestic performances of sacred music, at least before the advent of the Cecilian reform that would destine sacred music to more severe styles.

In 1919, in a climate imbued with the affirmation of national identity, Vittorio Podrecca published an article in the periodical "*Il primato artistico italiano*" dedicated to Barbara Marchisio, one of the original interpreters of the Mass, who had recently died. Podrecca had the eighty-six year-old singer, whom he had met a few months earlier, say that Rossini had preferred the version "with only piano and harmonium, just as we sang it". The writer, who had met the eighty-six year-old singer in the preceding weeks, in an atmosphere of Rossinian nostalgia, was in fact promoting modern wishful thinking. It is, however, clear that Rossini could not "prefer" anything, for the simple reason that at the time of the episode recalled by Marchisio the Mass had not yet been orchestrated.

In the end the existence of two dif-

ferent scorings weighed against the orchestral version. People became more and more convinced that the transcription had been a narcissistic act of Rossini's, simply to prevent anyone else from getting his hands on it. The alibi was used to neglect the apparently more canonical version – but, on the contrary, it was precisely the orchestral version that presented itself as a really “revolutionary” contribution to music.

In fact, during the long period of time in which the *Petite messe* took form, the idea of realizing a Mass, even one sui generis, but with a symphonic scoring suitable for church use, got under way as early as 1864, if not earlier.

After he had retired from writing for the theatre after *Guillaume Tell* (1829), Rossini had returned to Paris in 1843 to undergo medical treatment. On that occasion he had declined the invitation of the Académie Royale de la Musique to dedicate himself to a pastiche that might turn into a new opera. Three years later the director of the Académie returned to the attack, sending the composer Louis Niedermeyer to Bologna to propose the project again. Perhaps because of the euphoria of the preparations for his marriage to Olympe Péllisier, perhaps because of his friendly feelings for his fellow-composer, the fact remains that Rossini convinced himself to accept. At the end of 1846 Paris saw the first night of *Robert Bruce*, a re-hash of *La donna del lago* with a new libretto and music interpolated from other operas: Niedermeyer had perpetrated the arrangement and had written the French recitatives. This younger colleague would subsequently restore life to the school of music founded by Alexandre Choron, making an active contribution to the revival of Gregorian chant and “classical” music, meaning Palestrina, the

Gabrielis, the Bach family. Niedermeyer would also publish, together with Joseph Louis d'Ortigue, a treaty on how to accompany plainchant, a text in some ways symbolic and a precursor; perhaps inadvertently, of that rather artificial “Cecilian” taste which would characterize church music for over a century.

Niedermeyer's premature death on the 14 March 1861 left a significant gap in Parisian cultural life, no less than in Rossini's. Perhaps even that summer – though the work is dated the following May – the composer occupied his days in his country villa at Passy in composing a Kyrie in memory of his friend. From Niedermeyer's Mass in B minor, his most successful work, Rossini extracted the *Et incarnatus*, the only a cappella [unaccompanied] section, changing the words to “Christe eleison”; finally he set it between two choral tableaux in which eight voices, accompanied by the piano, sing “Kyrie eleison”. In this curious in memoriam piece – perhaps conceived as one of the many *Péchés de vieillesse* [“Sins of my old age”] – the rapid and insistent rhythm of the piano stands out, almost making the immobility of the unaccompanied Christe to his colleague's notes even more unexpected and unreal.

We do not know the reasons why this Kyrie, in just a few months, from being an homage to a friend, had turned into the first part of a new Mass; not, however, the Mass as we know it today, but a first sketch without the Sanctus and Agnus Dei, like others that Rossini had composed in his youth, and as it was usual to write them in Italy. The date at the end of the Kyrie was cancelled, and in fact the fugal finale of the concluding Credo ends with a new inscription: “Passy, 10 Juin 1863”. In a year Rossini had realized a Mass in three parts, adding to the Kyrie six sections of the Gloria and the imposing

Nicene Creed. It is highly probable, however, that the sections without chorus (Gratias, Domine, Qui tollis, Quoniam) were pre-existing pieces: the Quoniam seems, in fact, to have been adapted from a piano piece, and the other numbers sound like independent vocal compositions. This hypothesis would explain the rapid way in which they were composed. In this phase a harmonium was added to the piano part in the accompaniment. The two fugal sections concluding the second and third numbers are too difficult for the voices to be left unsupported; the eight choristers are joined by the four soloists, as is revealed by the heading in Italian:

Piccola messa di Gloria.

Composta per la mia villeggiatura di Passy con accompagnamento di piano e harmonium da eseguirsi da otto sole voci di coro e quattro di solo, totale dodici cantori (tanti erano gli apostoli). È questo l'ultimo peccato venale di mia vecchiezza. G. Rossini. Passy, 1863

[Composed for my summer residence in Passy with accompaniment for piano and harmonium to be performed by eight solo chorus voices and four soloists, making a total of twelve singers (the same number as of the apostles). This is the last venal sin of my old age. G. Rossini. Passy, 1863.]

This frontispiece, now lost, was still attached to the autograph score in 1864 and was transcribed by an anonymous journalist of the "Journal de Toulouse" (20 March) who was able to see the score on the occasion of the first performance of the Mass.

In 1861 Count Alexis Pillet-Will (1805-1878), named régent, or member of the directive council of the Bank of France, had had built for himself a sumptuous town house in the Rue Moncey. The Count was one of Rossini's most intimate friends, as his father, Michel Frédéric (1781-

1860), one of the most respected bankers in France and an amateur violinist, had been before him. It was the young Count, who managed Rossini's finances, who obtained permission for the Mass to be performed as the inaugural concert of his new house. The celebration would take place on the 14 March 1864. The date was perhaps chosen deliberately, seeing that it was the day on which Niedermeyer had died. For this occasion the Mass was completed by the other two sections of the Ordinary of the Mass – Sanctus and Agnus Dei – and, to give the choir a rest, an instrumental Prélude was written, salvaged at the last minute from yet another piece from the Péchés de vieillesse.

Rossini dedicated a copy of the Mass to the Count's wife: from the heading, which has survived in the autograph, we see that, perhaps because of the development from three into five sections, the Mass has assumed the title of Petite messe solennelle. The numbers added for this occasion have all the directions in French, just as the new title of the Mass is in French.

Right from the time when he received this commission, the idea of orchestrating the Mass began to make headway in the composer's thoughts. If, in fact, the Sanctus is entirely unaccompanied, the accompaniment of the Agnus Dei is not as pianistic as some of the other pieces: the introduction reveals a style of writing that already suggests the colours of a suitable orchestration.

It was, however, only after the success he obtained at the Pillet-Will house, repeated the following year with the same singers, that Rossini began to attend to the orchestration. Camillo Capranica, son of the Roman impresario of the Teatro Apollo, bears witness in his letters that Rossini had begun the work in the summer of 1864. There is no doubt that the

composer was very satisfied with his Mass and, although in the beginning he had not perhaps planned to do so, the unanimous success of the two Pillet-Will performances must have convinced Rossini to make his own contribution, with his last "sin", to the renovation of sacred music in those years.

In June 1865, Rossini appealed to Liszt to convince the pope to remove the veto on women singing in church. Boys' voices would not have been appropriate for his Mass and castrati were out of fashion. Liszt had taken minor holy orders only the year before and in those months he was living in the Vatican.

The Throne of Peter was occupied by Pope Pius IX, a name invoked by the patriotic choruses of 1848, as well as inspiring two pieces by Rossini. The pope loved music – Rossini could boast of papal approval of his *Stabat Mater* – and Liszt believed that in the Holy Father he had found a listener with a mind to renewing religious music. In the autumn of 1865 there were even rumours that Liszt might become the new maestro di cappella in the Vatican. This was the moment when Rossini turned to the admired Hungarian composer asking him to intercede with the pope to abrogate the prohibition against women singing in church.

We do not know if there was any reply, but Liszt came to Paris in March 1866 on the occasion of the performance of his *Graner Messe*, and the two met several times. In the end Rossini was convinced that it would be better if he sent a personal letter to the pope, obtaining the intervention of the papal nunzio Flavio Chigi, an honoured guest at the first performance of the *Petite messe*.

Meanwhile Pius IX was beginning to think that Liszt's avant-garde position would not be able to help the cause of sacred music, perhaps

convincing himself that it would be unwise to be remembered as the pope who gave women back their voice in church; already too many revolutionary choruses had made his name disliked by the great monarchs of Europe. The pope's reply (14 May 1866) was complimentary and benevolent, but no mention was made of any possible solution to the problem. Fewer than two months later (28 June) there came also a letter from Liszt, who possibly already knew the pope's position, comforting Rossini's good intentions and reminding him that in the end the precepts of Rome were not rigorously applied outside Italy. That was all.

In the two following summers (1867-1868), Rossini's last, the *Petite messe solennelle* seems to have taken on its definitive form. The orchestration proceeded vigorously and the changes made to the work are important, involving some retouching all over: the introductions and instrumental postludes of all sections of the Gloria were corrected; in addition new ideas were adopted to give weight to the finales, above all in the fugue of the Credo. All the additions were intended to be orchestrated. Furthermore Rossini's meticulous care in carrying the new orchestral choices onto the manuscript of the chamber version – even adding or removing pages – shows his desire to make the first version with keyboard instruments not just a simple reduction, but a finished version, even though destined for a more private ambience.

The most significant change is the addition of the Eucharistic hymn *O salutaris hostia* which was not a new composition of Rossini's, but which he took from a piece for voice and piano already included in the *Péchés de vieillesse* under the title *O salutaris, de campagne* [a rustic *O salutaris*]. The number, originally

for contralto, was now transposed up for soprano, the better to differentiate it from the following *Agnus Dei*, which is also for contralto. The insertion follows the liturgical tradition of France, more particularly of Paris, where, from the end of the sixteenth century, the anthem at the elevation of the Host was an important moment: the great Masses, from Cherubini to Saint-Saëns, especially if connected with official celebrations, never lacked the *O salutaris*. As we have said, Rossini had begun to “think French”, as attested by the directions and frontispieces in that language.

It seems that Rossini confessed his predilection for the church of France even at the point of death. On the occasion of the centenary of his birth, a supplement to “*Le Figaro*” would dedicate to him a page edited by the writer André Maurel (1863-1943), who would subsequently make himself known for the chronicles of his travels in Italy. Maurel transcribed part of a memorial left by Rossini’s confessor, the Abbé Gallet de Saint-Roch, in which it seems that shortly before dying the composer said: “If I had only ever had to do with French priests I would have remained a Christian”.

The phase of orchestration went on until the last days of his life. If the commentators of the first Pillet-Will performance did not hesitate to accept the chamber orchestration as “provisional”, subsequently the opinion was spread around that orchestrating the Mass had been more of a duty than a creative impulse for Rossini. The substantially favorable review that Filippo Filippi wrote of the Mass was re-interpreted as negative, especially in the light of the lack of success of the first performances in Italy.

It was preferred to attribute the strangeness of Rossini’s orchestra-

tion not to a deliberate choice but rather to the composer’s loss of brilliance. The too often quoted letter from Rossini to Pacini of 1864 in which he declares that he has lost “power to compose and knowledge of the instruments” is obviously a hyperbole employed to avoid having to accept a commission that the composer did not at that time intend to accept. Similarly, his embarrassment at having to tell Edmond Michotte that he did not know how to “orchestrate in the modern manner” was mere coquetry. On the contrary, Rossini was always very up-to-date on modern techniques of composition and on the new instruments that amplified the sonority of the orchestra. Already in 1843 he managed to visit Adolphe Sax’s factory – only two years after the invention of the saxophone – and in a revision of 1868, *La corona d’Italia*, he did not hesitate to introduce the new reed instruments into the band scoring.

Unfortunately the vigorous orchestrations of many of the compositions of those years did not agree with the fundamentally “vocal” and, in great part, intimate nature of the Mass. The testimony of 1867 attributed to Rossini by Ernest Neumann in *Italianische Tondichter* (Berlin 1876, p. 542) must be understood in this sense:

A few years ago I had my modest Mass performed with pianoforte accompaniment; after my death Signor Sax with his saxophones or Signor Berlioz, or other giants of the modern orchestra might come forth to orchestrate it, and they would murder, with their noisy instruments, my poor singing voices and my poor self; car je ne suis rien qu’un pauvre mélodiste [for I am nothing more than a poor melodist]. This is why I have determined to place under my chorus and my arias as used to be done in the old days a quartet of string instruments with a pair of wind instruments of moderate effect that will allow my poor singers to make themselves heard.

In other words, that which has been judged an orchestration looking back to the past, turns out to be in reality a deliberate choice and intimately bound up with the special nature of the Petite messe.

After Rossini's death (1868), the widow Pélissier lost no time in selling the rights in the Mass to the impresario Maurice Strakosch, who ceded the printing rights to Brandus & Dufour, and the performing rights to Émile Bagier. The latter, director of the Théâtre-Italien, would give the first orchestral performance of the Mass in his theatre (28 February 1869) on Rossini's birthday. The first performance, thanks to the exceptional nature of the event and to the insistent publicity, seemed to be a success. Truth to tell the audience reaction was ambivalent: the music was beautiful, but the orchestration seemed inadequate. Few said it aloud. The general impression was that it was reactionary. Effectively, those were the years of the great symphonic combinations which in choral works had to shine in all their glory. Choruses could easily number 200 participants and consequently orchestras considerably increased the number of strings.

Unfortunately Rossini was no longer alive; perhaps he would have been able to explain that his Mass was aimed in quite another direction – a fundamentally intimate direction, whose play of timbres would be able to reveal all its elegance only by restricting the numbers of chorus and strings.

Strakosch sub-let the performing rights for Italy to Bernard Ullman: the former made a profit, the latter a decided loss. Tito Ricordi knew very well that there was no hope of enriching himself out of the rights in a Mass, even though it were Rossini's. In Italy there was no sale for sacred music. The publisher limited himself

to printing the score for voice and piano (with harmonium ad libitum), but avoided buying the performing rights. He was right: the performances in Bologna, Turin and above all Milan, were all disastrous failures. Apart from the ineffective approach adopted in Paris, there were too few rehearsals: the critics were able to find fault with the performance, but people were not lacking who suggested also that Rossini had grown old and had perhaps been wise to retire into private life. The truth is that the Messa solenne was always performed in theatres, where audiences went, above all, to be entertained. In Milan they thought of rescuing the flop by adding a descriptive ballet at the end of the Mass. The result was disaster: besides disappointing the world of fashion, this operation angered right-thinking people.

Meanwhile Strakosch went first to New York and then to London, here too with costly professional companies and nevertheless with scant success. Other performances were subcontracted in Europe, in little towns where – all things considered – the Mass was appreciated. In the end, Strakosch, to drum up some business, organized a touring miscellaneous concert with three superstars: the contralto Marietta Alboni, the double-bass player Giovanni Bottesini and the violinist Henri Vieuxtemps. Only a few parts of the Mass were performed and accompanied only by the piano: a whole orchestra would have cost too much. Perhaps because of the Franco-Prussian war (1870), in little less than a year all interest in Rossini's last masterpiece had completely died out. The Mass would begin to be performed again, and that with reluctance at first, only after the two World Wars. Little by little the chamber version would come to be viewed as a work ahead of its time and would be treasured by choral

societies, comforted by the alibi of the composer's specification of the less expensive keyboard accompaniment. Today the moment has perhaps come to recognize how the innovative element of the Mass, already recognized in its harmonic refinements, may also be found in the instrumental solutions adopted for the orchestral

version, an attempt, contrary to fashion, to sympathize with a religious authenticity in the music, far from the superficial exuberance and clamorous effects of those times.

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