

Puccini *Messa di Gloria* programme notes

As the fourth in a line of generations of esteemed *Maestri di Capella*, the young Giacomo Puccini (born in 1858) was destined for a career as a church musician. At the funeral service of his father, when Giacomo was only five, the priest stared imperiously down from the pulpit and thunderously proclaimed something like, “soon, my son, you will fill your father’s shoes in this church, and take up the mantle of Master of the Chapel in our Cathedral”. As the only boy in a family of seven children, there was no doubt as to where Puccini’s future lay, and so off he went to the local music conservatory in his home town of Lucca, to be followed by studies at the renowned conservatory in Milan.

Giacomo was a true *cocco di mamma* – a mother’s boy, on whom the fortunes of the entire family rested. Undoubtedly spoiled within his family, he was an undisciplined, reluctant student, frequently absent from school. Said one instructor “He comes to school only to wear out the seat of his pants. He pays not attention to anything, never reading a book.” He was, however, good at music, and as a teenager played organ for Mass in the local villages around Lucca. Then lightning struck: at the age of 18, accompanied by a number of his friends, Giacomo walked to Pisa (of leaning tower fame) to hear a performance of Verdi’s opera *Aida*; “When I heard *Aida* in Pisa, I felt that a musical window had opened for me.” The young composer, destined for the church, was “lost” to the siren call of the secular world of opera.

Meanwhile, as a graduation exercise for his local music school in 1880, Puccini put the finishing touches to a *Messa a Quattro Voci* (a Mass in Four Voices). He had composed the Credo movement several years earlier at the age of 18, but finally completed the work at 22. A local newspaper reviewed the first performance of this “original work”, which had “much melodic charm, grandeur of conception and structure, strict adherence to the ‘philosophy of the text’, though the Sanctus was too short, and the Cum Sancto Spiritu fugue that closes the Gloria movement was over-ingenious for church use.” With the exception of a few liturgical solos, Puccini was never to write another note of sacred music, throwing all his energies thereafter into mostly operatic and occasionally symphonic works.

Indeed, Puccini essentially left the *Messa* in a drawer; 75 years later in 1951, a priest who had known Puccini as a child made an edition of the work, and published it under the erroneous title *Messa di Gloria*, probably so named because of the extraordinary length and exuberance of that particular movement of the Mass.

The *Messa di Gloria* is a patchwork of musical styles, for tenor and baritone soloists, mixed chorus, and orchestra. Moreover, it is the receptacle for all the musical and operatic styles that the young composer, filled with enthusiasm and wishing to make his mark, was familiar with in the musical life of Italy in the 1880’s. In this work you will hear

traditional imitative polyphony, inspired by the 16th century Catholic composer Palestrina, combined with Wagner-style orchestral passages, Bach-like fugues, Venetian gondola barcarolles, Strauss-like waltzes, Neapolitan folk-tunes, and, above all, Verdi-style melodies – big, big, melodies. You might even wonder, is this an operatic mass, or a sacred opera?

The first movement Kyrie eleison is a three part A-B-A musical structure built on two themes: a very sweet, major-key theme (A) is followed, at the words “Christe eleison” by a more austere minor key theme, before finishing with a restatement of the major-key theme. The texture is peaceful, flowing and imitative, with each of the voice parts entering in succession with the themes.

Then comes the Gloria, a massive movement taking up almost half of the entire length of the Mass (even though the Credo that follows has a significantly larger text). It opens with a folk-like, light-hearted and animated melody presented by the sopranos, accompanied by the altos, then sent to a new key and repeated by the tenors & basses. Images of Vespas darting busily through congested Roman traffic spring to mind (incidentally, Puccini loved fast cars, boats, and all the latest technology). But it’s not just about the melody: unexpected turns of harmony surprise and delight the listener. Youthful though the work may be, there is a very mature understanding of harmony and musical structure already at play here. A new section at the words “Et in terra, pax” (And on earth, peace” suddenly stops the driving motion dead in its tracks: a Mother Superior (think *Sound of Music*) in the guise of the soprano section blesses us with peace; the rest of the choir bows and nods their head in agreement with an answering set of chords. Then a new mood of magnificence, an eruption of Mount Vesuvius, occurs at the words “Laudamus te” (we praise thee). This passage is all about dynamics: either starting *forte* and getting gradually quieter, or starting *piano* and gradually crescendo-ing to a marvelous climax. The section closes with an entire choir of Mother Superiors gently intoning “Adoramus te” (we adore thee).

What next? Why a big, operatic tenor solo of course, in the lilting rhythms of a sicilliana, a dance from southern Italy, setting words of effusive thanks. This aria fades gently away into a surprise return of the opening “Gloria” music, this time sung by the full choir together. Darting Vespas are joined by Maseratis and Fiats as we return to the opening key of C major. Whom do we hear from next? Pretty much the entire string section, playing a single melody together. Why should all the great tunes be left with just the singers? Verdi, though generally approving of Puccini’s operas, did complain that they were too filled with “symphonic music”: “Opera is opera, symphony is symphony, and I don’t believe that in an opera it is good to write a section of symphonic music just to make the orchestra dance.” You are so wrong, Verdi. Just listen to the strings dance here (reminiscent of the rhythms of the preceding tenor solo), while the choir, just a group of Supremes to the strings’ Diana Ross, intones the text.

And then comes a Verdi-like, hyper-Italian, good old-fashioned earworm of a melody. A melody of noble proportions, somewhat serious, but unwinding inexorably to its bouncing conclusion. Why Puccini would set the words “Qui tollis peccata mundi” (who takes away the sins of the world) to such an incredible tune, defies explanation. Certainly every audience member in 19th century Italy would be more than familiar with the meaning of the Latin text of the Mass; perhaps it was a sign of the deep love for the Catholic Church, and an equally deep love for operatic melody that could be happily married together right there in church, with no one batting an eyelid. In any event, ours is not to question, simply to enjoy. Probably better if you don’t sing along, but it will be hard for you not to. Interestingly, the melody is first presented, quietly by the basses: you just know that, after intervening and appropriately demur sections of “Miserere mei” (have mercy on me), the full choir will present the melody together in unison. This is followed by a presentation of the tune by the sopranos in a new key, but more softly and ethereally, as if the composer is saying that a truly great tune can be interpreted in many different manners. Then, finally, the melody will be presented together by altos and basses, followed in canon by the sopranos and tenors, all singing *fortissimo*, at the top of their lungs.

This great, great melody could be a hard act to follow. Wisely, Puccini gives the next words over to a chordal, hymn-like section of full choir accompanied by wind instruments – the maximum contrast possible to the preceding earworm melody. Slow moving and grand, you just know this section is setting you up for a **fugue**, in the great tradition of Josquin, Palestrina, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, who all wrote fugues at this point at the end of the Gloria text. And here it comes: six measures of fugue theme, jumping and weaving around different harmonies. Building from the bottom up, it is successively presented by the basses, tenors, altos and sopranos, changing keys, speeding up, slowing down, presented loud/soft, high/low, diminuendo-ing and crescendo-ing, running its magnificent course in the fullness of time, and leading to the joyful return of the opening Gloria melody. Remember the opening Gloria melody? Here it is presented by all the voices together in octaves, with punctuating, syncopated orchestral chords as accompaniment. What a great climax. Bravo Puccini! He even uses the word “Amen”. Except that it’s not over – remember this composer is 22 and he’s going to leave nothing on the floor. Instead, he starts a **second** fugue, and better even than that, it is a **double fugue**, containing **two** melodies, and more remarkable yet, the second theme is none other than the **opening Gloria tune!** That means he knew all along he was going to bring that theme back at the end of the piece, and that it would need to be able to work together with the fugue theme itself. Incredible. We understand now why the Priest from his childhood was moved to call the work *Messa di Gloria*.

Phew, time for intermission folks.

Now for the Credo, actually the part of the Mass that Puccini completed first, when he was 18 years of age. It opens seriously, in the key of C minor, with a chordally based

unison melody answered by volcanic-like crescendos from the orchestra. The choir sings in the forthright, statement-of-belief rhythms of 4/4 time, while the orchestra plays a dance-like 6/8 rhythms in contrasting accompaniment. Imitative sections, working through the lengthy text of the Credo, unfold in a flowing manner, until we reach the words “Et incarnates est” (and was made Man). This section of the Credo, where God in the form of Christ, is unified with humanity, often receives special treatment by composers, and this is true as well of Puccini. He modulates the music to the quietly cheerful key of G major, strips away the orchestra, and has the tenor soloist lead the chorus in a mystical hymn. The section concludes with a crescendo and a terrific bang from the orchestra – not because of the text, but because he needed to separate this section out from the baritone solo that follows.

Slipping into the brooding key of G minor, accompanied by pulsing repeated notes in the strings, reminiscent of a Lord of the Rings-like pool of burbling lava, the baritone soloist intones the words “Crucifix” (was crucified), through two large crescendos, before fading away at the words “sepultus est” (and was buried). A tense, rising figure in the low strings build and builds, until the choir bursts forth with the words “Et resurrexit” (and was raised from the dead”, successively presented by the basses, tenors, altos and sopranos, and culminating in yet another magnificent unison melody. Further paragraphs of text move around in different keys and contrasting textures until the appearance of the final sentence of the Credo “Et vitam venturi” (and the life of the world to come). Traditionally this too is set as a fugue, but remember, Puccini was only 18 at the time, and just getting over the lightning bolt revelation of Verdian opera. So instead of a fugue he presents – a **waltz** (of course!) in 6/8 time. The women start first, followed dutifully by the men, accompanied by swirling figures in the string sections. What started in the serious key of C minor (remember Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony: dut dut dut duuuuuh) finishes in the lighthearted key of C major.

The fourth movement Sanctus is typically magnificent. It opens slowly and quietly, working its way up a triad to a wonderful climax at the words “Pleni sunt coeli” (heaven and earth are full of your glory). Ah, but do you know an Italian who can remain serious for long? Certainly Puccini couldn’t: the Sanctus ends in a baritone solo in the rhythm of a waltz, complete with oom-pah-pah orchestral accompaniment. The choir barks out a short “hosanna”, and Bob’s your uncle. Maybe the deadline for the completion of the Mass was hours away, or maybe, Puccini had shot his bolt on the Gloria and Credo. Either way, it is indeed an unusually short Sanctus.

And so to the final movement, the Agnus Dei. It, too, is in the 3/4 rhythm of a waltz, this time exchanging solos between the tenor and bass, with the choir dutifully presenting subdued “miserere nobis” (have mercy upon us) sections. And before you know it the work is done, finishing with quiet triplets in the winds. The curtain falls gently on this operatic Mass. Time for refreshments in the Church Hall – please join us!