

Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle*

by Nancy P. Fleming

The *Petite messe solennelle* was written in 1863, more than thirty years after the composer had abruptly quit the operatic scene and only five years before his death. It is one of a group of over one hundred and fifty pieces which Rossini produced during the last thirteen years of his life. Most of these compositions are vocal and instrumental chamber works which were performed by and for the intimate group of friends who gathered at the famous *samedi soirs* held by Rossini and his wife. Many of these pieces are humorous musical parodies, and Rossini referred to them as his *péchés de vieillesse*, his "sins of old age."

While the *Petite messe solennelle* dates from the same happy period as the *péchés de vieillesse* and shares with them a small-scale scoring (hence the adjective *petite* in the title), it differs from those pieces in several respects. First, it is a much longer work. Second, it was given three public performances during Rossini's lifetime. Finally, while the music is typically charming and ebullient, the mass seems to have sprung from much deeper feelings on the part of the composer.

Sacred music had not previously been a genre of great importance to Rossini. The *Petite messe* was preceded only by three youthful attempts at mass-setting¹ and by the *Stabat Mater*, a work produced on commission and completed under duress. Therefore, it is not immediately evident what stimulus

motivated Rossini to compose a full-scale mass so late in life. One biographer has suggested that he was inspired by hearing a performance of Liszt's *Missa solennis*, written for the cathedral at Gran.² Although this work was not actually performed in Paris until 1866, three years after the composition of the *Petite messe*, it is possible that Rossini borrowed a score

"I was born for opera buffa as you well know! Little technique, a little heart, that is all. So be Thou blessed and grant me Paradise."

from Liszt sometime in 1860.³ It is also possible that the *Petite messe* was commissioned by the family of the Comtesse Louise Pillet-Will. Rossini dedicated the mass to the Comtesse, and the first performance was given in her house. However, no evidence to this effect is extant, and the implication in early biographies is that the dedication came after the offer by the Comtesse to underwrite a performance of the mass in her private chapel.⁴

More compelling evidence of Rossini's motivation is found on the manuscript of the *Petite messe* itself. On the second page of the autograph is the following inscription:

Petite messe solennelle, in four parts with accompaniment of 2 pianos and harmonium, composed during my country sojourn at Passy. Twelve singers of three sexes — Men, Women and *Castrati* — will be sufficient

for its execution: that is, eight for the chorus, four for the solos, a total of twelve Cherubim. Dear God, forgive me the following comparison: Twelve also are the Apostles in the celebrated jaw-stroke [*coup-de-mâchoire*] painted in Fresco by Leonardo, called *The Last Supper*, who would believe it! Among thy Disciples are some who strike false notes! Lord, rest assured, I swear that there will be no Judas at my supper and that mine will sing properly and *con amore* your praises and this little composition which is, alas, the final mortal sin of my old age.

At the end of the manuscript is another note:

Dear God. There you have it, finished, this poor little mass. Is it really sacred music that I have created? [*Est-ce bien de la musique sacrée que je viens de faire ou bien de la sacrée musique?*] I was born for *opera buffa* as you well know! Little technique, a little heart, that is all. So be Thou blessed and grant me Paradise.

G. Rossini. Passy, 1863.

Apparently Rossini's sense of his own impending mortality compelled him to express himself in such an atypical manner. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the composer spent two full months at work on the mass, an unprecedented length of time for one whose compositional speed was legendary. (*The Barber of Seville*, for example, was composed in less than three weeks.) During those two

Fleming is Assistant Professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas. She has prepared a performing edition of the *Petite Messe Solennelle* which is scheduled to be published by Oxford University Press sometime in 1990-91.

summer months, the composer was reported to be unusually moody, even grumpy.⁵

The Music

Formally, the five movements of the Ordinary are treated in a traditional manner. The Kyrie is ternary: an *a cappella* Christe cast in Rossini's version of the *stile antico*, flanked by accompanied Kyries which share musical material. The Gloria is subdivided into seven movements in the manner of a Baroque cantata

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mass. It is unified through the use of modulating links between the predominantly third-related tonalities of the individual sections and by the reappearance of musical material from the opening "Gloria in excelsis," at the beginning and ending of the "Cum Sancto Spiritu" fugue. (This fugue, incidentally, was singled out as a supreme achievement by several reviewers at the first performances of the *Petite messe*.) The Credo hearkens to a later tradition; it is basically in a single movement, with contrasting music provided only for the "Crucifixus" and for the "Et vitam venturi" fugue. The main body is unified by rondo-like repetitions of "Credo in unum Deum," a technique which has precedents in works by Jommelli, Mozart, Beethoven, and others. The Sanctus is *a cappella* and freely through-composed, and the Agnus Dei is a contralto solo with choral responses, the only format which Rossini may have borrowed from operatic practice.

There are two additional movements in the *Petite messe*: a *Prelude religieux*, to be played during the Offertory, and a setting of *O salutaris hostia*, a text in honor of the Blessed Sacrament, for soprano solo. Both of these pieces predate the composition of the rest of the mass and were originally included in volumes of the *péchés de vieillesse*. Rossini's insertion of these two movements in the mass demonstrates his awareness of contemporary French liturgical practice; reviews of new mass settings in *La France musicale* during the years 1863-1869 frequently mention an instrumental *offertoire* and/or a motet, generally either *O salutaris hostia* or *Domine salvum fac*.

Not surprisingly the musical language of the mass is lyrical and

rhythmically vital, perennial trademarks of Rossini's style. Tuneful vocal melody predominates. The lines, however, are never florid. By comparison with the composer's operas (and his early masses), they are positively austere. Ornamentation is limited to occasional cadential turns and trills, and the most melismatic writing, found in the slow and sustained Agnus Dei, is quite restrained.

More unexpected, perhaps, is the composer's predilection for spicy harmonic twists. The work abounds with felicitous and idiosyncratic uses of chromatic chords (augmented and Neapolitan sixths, diminished sevenths) and modal interchange, and after the first performance of the *Petite messe*, critics commented especially on the manifestation of rich harmonic invention. Rossini's powers of observation had not been dormant during his retirement, and the mass, along with the other compositions of

"The composer of William Tell stands proudly before you in his eminence, and you realize with astonishment that neither time nor inactivity have caused any loss of the intelligence with which he is so marvelously endowed."

this late period, demonstrate his awareness of current musical developments.

In his last major work Rossini affirmed an optimistic and deeply felt faith. Critics who claim that the music of the *Petite messe* is "operatic" and only robs the text of meaning⁶ have failed to understand the mass in terms of the composer's own aesthetic vocabulary. The tenor solo, "Domine Deus," for example, is sometimes dismissed as a facile *aria di bravura*. Certainly it is vocally demanding and energetic, abounding in dotted rhythms, syncopations, and wide upward leaps. But it is these very musical qualities which make it such a superb description of the power, glory, and majesty appropriate to the "King of Heaven." Furthermore, not all is bravura in the *Petite messe*. The

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section preceding "Domine Deus," "Gratias," could not be more contrasting. Instead of the single, heroic, tenor voice, this movement is scored for a trio of soloists (contralto, tenor, bass), graphically illustrating the plurality implied in the text (i.e. "We give thanks," etc.). The simple vocal lines move within narrow ranges and are accompanied by a gently rocking ostinato figure. Occasional touches of *falso canone*, a procedure habitually reserved by Rossini for serious contexts, add a certain gravity. Nothing about this movement could be described as flashy; it is appropriately and humbly reverent.

A sympathetic examination of the music reveals numerous other examples of Rossini's sensitivity to the text. The mass must be evaluated, however, within the parameters of the composer's own musical aesthetic, which was based on tuneful melody and buoyant rhythm. To compare the *Petite messe* unfavorably with weightier and more learned mass settings is to unjustly accuse the composer of insincerity.

Performances and critical reaction

The *Petite messe solennelle* was performed for the first time on Sunday, March 14, 1864, in the Pillet-Will townhouse. Rossini involved himself eagerly in the preparations, and at the performance he stood by the first piano, nodding his head to set tempos and turning pages for Georges Mathias, the principal pianist. The audience that day was small but elite and included Daniel-François Auber, Giacomo Meyerbeer, and Ambroise Thomas. By all accounts, everyone present was delighted with Rossini's new masterpiece. Meyerbeer was especially ecstatic and reportedly remarked to his fellow listeners:

See, this man is the same as he always has been, the master of us all. He himself has never known and never will know the extent of his genius, because his genius has no limits! As soon as he puts his hand to a subject, whatever it is, see what is born under the powerful action of his inspiring breath, marvels which he himself could neither imagine nor glimpse. How many stupefying discoveries, how many unforeseen passages, obtained without effort or exertion! How much art in his

harmonies, how many new effects in the disposition of the parts in the vocal ensemble!⁷

The mass was repeated the next day for a much larger audience which included members of the press. Reviews echoed Meyerbeer's ecstasy; Rossini was compared to Dante (*L'Opinion nationale*), and it was declared that his genius had never been more powerful or more radiant (*Le Moniteur*). The critic for *L'Illustration* wrote:

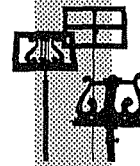
One could sense, from the first measures, the powerful spirit

which animated this great artist thirty years ago at the time when he chose to put a stop to his glorious career at its culminating point. The composer of *William Tell* stands proudly before you in his eminence, and you realize with astonishment that neither time nor inactivity have caused any loss of the intelligence with which he is so marvelously endowed. The same facility of invention, the same melodic abundance, the same nobility of style and the same elegance, the same novel twists,

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the same richness of harmony, the same audacity and happy choice of modulation, the same vigor of conception and of expression, the same ease of part-writing and disposition of the voices, the same masterful and authoritative skill in the overall scheme of the work, as well as in the structure of each movement. . . .⁸

Following this triumphant premiere, friends and journalists urged Rossini to orchestrate his mass in order that it might be performed in a large basilica. At first the composer resisted, claiming he had not kept abreast of the latest advances in orchestral practice. The notion of a performance in a cathedral did intrigue him, however, and in 1866-67, he rescored the instrumental parts for large orchestra, including ophicleide, harp, and organ.

The basilica performance never took place. Rossini had an aversion to the sound of boys' voices, which he considered harsh and unmusical. He therefore launched an energetic campaign to convince Pope Pius IX to grant a dispensation permitting a cathedral performance using female sopranos and altos. When his efforts

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proved in vain, Rossini locked the manuscript of the *Petite messe solennelle* away with his other *péchés de vieillesse*.⁹ The original version was heard once more before the composer's death, again at the Pillet-Will *hôtel*, on April 24, 1865.

Rossini died on Friday, November 13, 1868, and almost immediately his widow, Olimpe Pélissier, sold the rights to the mass to the impresario Maurice Strakosch for 100,000 francs. The orchestrated version of the *Petite*

messe was performed for the first time on February 28, 1869, at the Théâtre-Italien in Paris. This performance was extraordinarily successful — box office receipts totalled 26,000 francs — and was followed by fourteen more in Paris before the *Petite messe* was taken on tour to other parts of France, Holland, and Belgium. Strakosch was an energetic promoter, and by 1870 the mass had been heard as far away as New York, Moscow, and Sydney, Australia.

Despite such overwhelming box office success, critical reaction to the mass in its new orchestral guise was mixed. Reviewers were particularly uncomfortable with the orchestration, which they found to be weak and old-fashioned. Filippo Filippi, a friend of the composer's, wrote that it was

. . . without the variety of combinations which distinguishes the orchestration in the works of Meyerbeer, of Gounod, of Wagner, and the latest ones by Verdi. And it is for this reason that, if a few movements benefited greatly from the introduction of instruments, others by contrast had the same or greater effect with the original accompaniment of piano and harmonium.¹⁰

This opinion has been echoed by critics and scholars for more than a century, and the criticism is valid. Much of the charm of Rossini's original, *petite*, version of the mass lies in the delightful and thoroughly idiomatic writing for the two pianos and the piquant contrast provided by the harmonium. This intimate ensemble allows the voices to soar and dominate without forcing. The later orchestration is, by contrast, turgid and pedantic. Not only is the instrumentation large, but Rossini added more octave doublings in this version, creating a much thicker texture. The use of instrumental color is unimaginative, and the voices are less prominent. It is therefore easy to agree with the composer himself who reportedly told Barbara Marchisio, soprano soloist at the Pillet-Will performances, "I prefer it with the

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accompaniment of . . . piano and harmonium, as we performed it . . ."¹¹

Editions of the *Petite messe solennelle*

Nonetheless, it was in the orchestral version which the *Petite messe* was first heard by the general public, and publishers were quick to take advantage of the publicity surrounding the premiere performances. Five editions as well as numerous excerpts and arrangements (e.g. the "Quoniam" for soprano or tenor instead of bass; the "Crucifixus" for contralto or bass instead of soprano) were produced during the decade following Rossini's death. Undoubtedly the first complete score to appear was published by the Parisian firm of Brandus & Dufour. It went on sale the very day of the first performance at the Théâtre-Italien.¹² The French publisher was promptly followed by Chappell in London, Ricordi in Milan, and Oliver Ditson in Boston. Somewhat later an edition was published by the German house of B. Schotts Söhne.¹³

All of these early editions are transcriptions for harmonium and only *one* piano, a format which is useless except as a curiosity to modern musicians for it is inaccurate as a representation of Rossini's original conception and cumbersome as a reduction of the orchestral version, for which a piano part alone would suffice. In the late nineteenth century, however, these scores would have found a large market among the newly affluent middle class. Most parlors contained at least a piano and often a harmonium as well. The latter, a type of reed organ, was especially prized for its ability to imitate orchestral sounds and to swell expressively from silence to *fortissimo*. Many duets for the two instruments were written, and the combination can be found in works by Liszt, Saint Saëns, and others, as well as in earlier compositions by Rossini. Liszt was so entranced by the mixture of timbres, he had a special "pianoforte-harmonium" built for his own use. This instrument had two manuals: the upper one controlled a piano action, and the lower one was connected to a blower which activated a number of harmonium stops.¹⁴

Unfortunately for posterity, none of the early editions acknowledges the existence of a second piano part. Furthermore, each contains the

implicit or explicit suggestion that the harmonium part is optional, "having been written more especially to support the voices" (Chappell). No accurate edition of the *Petite messe* was published until 1980, more than a century after the composer's death. Consequently the five early editions have been responsible for perpetuating a number of misconceptions about the original scoring of the mass well into the twentieth century.

In general, scholars have assumed that these early editions were all prepared as reductions of the orchestrated version. This assumption is logical given the immense publicity enjoyed by the later version. However, an examination of the instrumental parts in the Brandus & Dufour edition reveals that the French editors must have worked from Rossini's original keyboard parts; the correspondences are too close to have resulted from a retranslation back from the orchestral version. Curiously, in 1878, when the Parisian publishing house issued a second, "corrected" edition of the mass, the "corrections" were apparently based on the orchestral score. This approach is most obvious in portions of music omitted

from the first edition and reinstated in the second. Also, the keyboard parts in these sections do not match the original ones by Rossini.

The editions published by Chappell and Ditson are clearly based on the first Brandus score. While each one exhibits certain idiosyncracies, they share enough characteristics to make their relationship unquestionable. For example, all of them include significant omissions: a bar at the end of the "Domine Deus," the first seven measures and one at the end of the "Qui tollis," nineteen bars of postlude to the "Quoniam." (It is noteworthy that several of these cuts involve modulatory material between sections of the Gloria. Such amputation must have facilitated excerpting the movements to sell as individual numbers.) The Schott edition is clearly derived from the second Brandus issue, and therefore contains fewer of these cuts. In all four of the editions, however, the inserted movement *O salutaris hostia* appears in E major instead of G. (When Rossini originally composed the aria for the *péchés de vieillesse*, he did indeed choose the key of E major. When he later appropriated it for the *Petite messe*,

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he transposed it to G, presumably to prevent monotony with the succeeding *Agnus Dei*, also a contralto solo in E.) Finally, scattered throughout all four editions are miscellaneous mistakes and unidentified editorial changes which are shared in common.

Alone among the five early editions, Ricordi's is truly an orchestral reduction. The instrumental parts do not resemble Rossini's original keyboard parts in figuration or chord disposition, and furthermore, there are certain changes in musical detail made by the composer for the orchestrated version. For example, in the "Domine Deus," Rossini added bits of melodic material to the otherwise rather simple accompaniment between vocal phrases. In addition, he changed the

rhythm ♪♪♪ to ♪♪♪ in measures 37, 41, and 45. These alterations are reflected in the Ricordi score.

Although copies can still be found in American libraries, the Brandus & Dufour, Chappell, Ditson, and Schott editions are now out of print. The Ricordi edition, on the other hand, has enjoyed an extremely long publication life. Between 1888 and 1941 it was reprinted 22 times. In 1954 the old plates were restored ("*ripristinata*"), and the mass was issued four more times before 1970. During the 1960's it was appropriated by Kalmus.

In 1968, Ricordi's London branch published a new edition intended to supersede all its previous publications. Except for new typesetting and

adjusting certain expressive markings to match the orchestral score, however, no major changes were made. Only the most glaring errors in the old edition (such as the omission of three bars between "Qui tollis" and "Quoniam") were rectified.

Unfortunately, ambivalences and misconceptions are perpetuated by this score. The ersatz harmonium part is inexplicably retained although the edition states that it "is intended as a practical one for choirs who propose to give performances with orchestra." The preface further states that

[t]he original performance . . . was indeed it seems given with accompaniment for harmonium and two pianos, but the second

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piano was a *ripieno* part, only reinforcing, the first piano at suitable places. The first part appears, with the original dynamics and phrasing, in the Milan edition, which is still available for hire.

To supplement this part in the older edition, Ricordi now also rents a separate second piano part. Unlike the first piano part, which is, of course, an orchestral reduction, the second part is quite faithful to Rossini's original. The combination of the two in performance produces a bizarre hybrid, the incongruity of which is

No accurate edition of the Petite messe was published until 1980, more than a century after the composer's death.

particularly noticeable in the two fugues. Throughout the greater part of these movements, unlike anywhere else in the mass, the composer intended for the pianos to double each other exactly.

Rossini's charming "final sin" is currently regaining some of its earlier popularity. Certainly it deserves the opportunity to be heard more widely in the original guise preferred by the composer himself as well as by most others who know both versions. Fortunately for modern conductors a viable solution to the thorny problem of editions is now available. In 1980 a beautiful, minimally edited transcription of the *Petite messe*, lovingly prepared by Angelo Coan, was published by Edizioni musicali Otos in Florence. While the score is too large and expensive to be purchased by most institutions in multiple copies, Coan's Urtext edition can be used for conductor and instrumentalists in conjunction with Ricordi's vocal parts, which are for the most part complete and accurate. This solution is the only acceptable one until an accurate performing edition is published. CJ

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Notes

¹For a full discussion of the early mass-settings by Rossini, see Nancy Fleming, "Rossini's *Petite messe solennelle*" (D.M.A. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1986), pp. 41-76.

²Giuseppe Radiciotti, *Gioacchino Rossini; vita documentata ed influenza su l'arte* (Tivoli, 1927-1929), vol. II, p. 436.

³Edmond Michotte, "Richard Wagner's Visit to Rossini," quoted in Herbert Weinstock, *Rossini: A Biography* (New York, 1968), p. 299.

⁴Cf. Radiciotti II, 437.

⁵Radiciotti II, 436.

⁶Elwyn A. Wienandt, *Choral Music of the Church* (New York, 1965), p. 415.

⁷Radiciotti II, 438-439.

⁸Review by G. Héquet, reprinted in *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, XXXI, 12 (20 March, 1864): 90-91.

⁹For a discussion of this episode and transcriptions of the documents involved, see Stefano Alberici, "Rossini e Pio IX: Alla luce di documenti dell' Archivio Segreto Vaticano," *Bollettino del Centro rossiniano di studi*, n. 1-2 (1977): 25-26.

¹⁰Filippo Filippi, *Musica e musicisti* (Milan, 1867), p. 138, quoted in Radiciotti II, 463.

¹¹Radiciotti II, 463n.

¹²Radiciotti II, 467.

¹³For a detailed discussion of all the editions, see: Fleming, 143-175.

¹⁴Sandor Margittay, ed., *Ferenc Liszt: Complete Organ Works* (Budapest, 1971), vol. II, p. vi.

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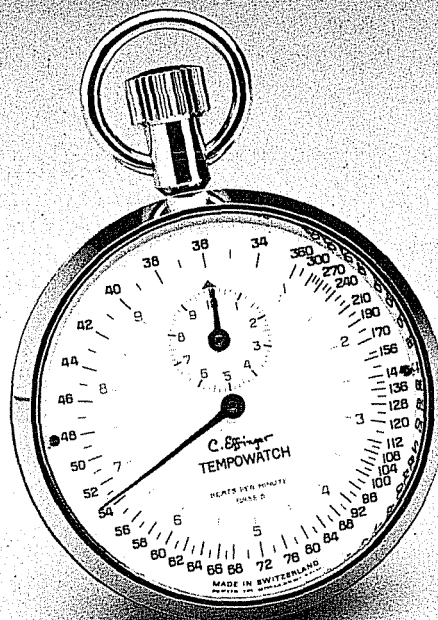
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