

Verdi's Requiem

Cheltenham Town Hall

Sun 5 July

Eleanor Dennis *soprano*

Rebecca Afonwy-Jones *mezzo-soprano*

Thomas Elwin *tenor*

Julian Close *bass*

Cheltenham Bach Choir

David Crown *conductor*

Musical and Amicable Society (Lucy Russell, *leader*)

Giuseppe Verdi

Messa da Requiem

81'

About the Programme

Giuseppe Verdi – Requiem

Requiem and Kyrie (Solo Quartet, Chorus)

Dies irae

Dies irae (Chorus)

Tuba mirum (Chorus)

Mors stupebit (Bass)

Liber scriptus (Mezzo-Soprano, Chorus)

Quid sum miser (Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor)

Rex tremendae (Solo Quartet, Chorus)

Recordare (Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano)

Ingemisco (Tenor)
Confutatis (Bass, Chorus)
Lacrimosa (Solo Quartet, Chorus)
Offertorium (Solo Quartet)
Sanctus (Double Chorus)
Agnus Dei (Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Chorus)
Lux aeterna (Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Bass)
Libera me (Soprano, Chorus)

When Rossini died in 1868, Verdi proposed that a Requiem should be written in honour of the great man. Thirteen leading Italian composers, including himself, would each be invited to contribute a movement. Somewhat predictably, initial enthusiasm for the idea soon gave way to all sorts of professional rivalries, and when it also became clear that the piece would be little more than an unconvincing *pot-pourri*, the scheme had to be abandoned.

In 1873 the Italian poet, novelist and national hero Alessandro Manzoni died. Verdi had been a lifelong admirer and was deeply affected by his death. He decided to write a Requiem in Manzoni's memory and began by re-working the *Libera me*, which he had composed five years earlier for the ill-fated Rossini project. Though it is Verdi's only large-scale work not intended for the stage, the Requiem is unashamedly theatrical in style, with passages of great tenderness and simplicity contrasted with intensely dramatic sections. Writing at the time, the eminent conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow aptly described it as "Verdi's latest opera, in church vestments".

The first performance of the *Messa di Requiem* took place on 22 May 1874, the first anniversary of Manzoni's death, in St. Mark's Church, Milan. Special permission had to be obtained from the Archbishop for the inclusion of the female choristers, who were hidden behind a screen and clad in full-length black dresses and mourning veils. Though it was a successful performance, the restrained circumstances and prohibition against applause produced a somewhat muted reaction. In contrast, the second performance, three days later, at La Scala Opera House was received by the crowd with tumultuous enthusiasm. The Requiem became an overnight sensation and was equally ecstatically received at the many European performances that soon followed. Its British premiere took place in May 1875 at the Albert Hall, conducted by Verdi himself, with a chorus of over 1000 and an orchestra of 140. One journalist described the work as "the most beautiful music for the church that has been produced since the Requiem of Mozart" – a view that was echoed by most people. However, a significant minority found it offensive that Verdi, an agnostic, should be writing a Requiem. For them the very qualities which made his music so ideally suited to the theatre made it wholly unacceptable for the church. Today this difference between traditional sacred music and Verdi's operatic treatment of the Requiem text no longer presents a problem.

The work begins with a hushed and solemn falling phrase on the cellos, a motif that recurs later. After the opening *Requiem aeterna* (Rest eternal), the *Kyrie* follows, introduced by the four soloists. Here, the operatic nature of the piece is clearly revealed, with its expansive rising melody and wide dynamic contrast.

The lengthy second movement, *Dies irae* (Day of wrath, day of judgement), is a sequence of nine widely contrasting sections containing some of Verdi's most dramatic and emotional music, notably the terrifying *Dies irae* theme with doom-laden thunderclaps provided by the bass drum, the on- and off-stage trumpets representing the 'last trump' of Biblical prophecy and the tender pleading of the *Salva me* (Save me). The *Dies irae* motif is never far away, but eventually the terrors of the Last Judgement give way to the heartfelt *Lacrymosa dies illa* (That tearful day), and quiet final prayer, *Dona eis requiem* (Grant them peace).

For the *Offertory*, Verdi adopts a much more liturgical idiom, with a predominantly four-part vocal texture over a restrained accompaniment for the soloists' *Domine Jesu*. Trumpet fanfares announce the exhilarating *Sanctus & Benedictus*, an animated fugue for double chorus based on an inversion of the opening cello motif, with colourful, scurrying orchestral writing.

The *Agnus Dei* sounds, at first, as if it is from some remote region. After the rich romanticism of much of the earlier music, Verdi presents us with an austere, unaccompanied duet, in bare octaves. The chorus answers, also in

octaves but with the addition of a small group of instruments, and then, as the second and third statements of the *Agnus Dei* text progress, the music grows in richness and warmth. *Lux aeterna* (Light eternal) is a short movement for a trio of solo voices, sometimes unaccompanied and sometimes supported by shimmering strings.

After the chant-like opening of the final movement, *Libera me* (Deliver me), and a short arioso for the soprano soloist, Verdi returns to the original *Dies irae* and *Requiem aeternam* themes. The extended final section of the work is another energetic fugue, again loosely based on a version of the cello motto. After a tremendous climax the work gradually moves towards a quiet end, though the concluding prayer of supplication, surely reflecting Verdi's own uncertainty, noticeably lacks the final serenity and assurance of salvation found in most other Requiems.

Few choral works have captured the public imagination in the way that Verdi's Requiem has with the uncomplicated directness of his style, his soaring and lyrical melodies which lie perfectly for the human voice, and the scintillating orchestration. Most significantly, the work's extraordinary dramatic and emotional intensity all contribute to the Requiem's status as one of the great icons of Western music.

Programme Note by John Bawden

Artist Biographies

David Crown – Musical Director

Following his choral scholarship at King's College, Cambridge, David Crown went on to further study and then to work as an operatic soloist. Crown won many prestigious awards and scholarships, working and studying with some of the most eminent singers, conductors and coaches in the UK and beyond. Crown's career as a conductor has included several significant appointments, marked by innovative leadership and a dedication to vocal excellence and he has built a reputation as one of the best choral directors in the UK.

Since 2015, he has served as the Musical Director of the Cheltenham Bach Choir (CBC), one of the leading large choral societies in the UK. Under his direction, they have displayed consistent and increasing excellence.

In September 2018, Crown became the founding Musical Director of Opus 48, a virtuoso choral society serving Oxfordshire and its surrounding areas. In this role, he has led the choir through a diverse repertoire that spans traditional choral masterpieces as well as modern classics and contemporary choral works.

Crown is also the founder and Music Director of vOx Chamber Choir, Oxford, established in 2013. Known as one of the region's top chamber choirs, vOx released its second CD of works by Alexander Campkin in 2021 on the Naxos label.

For eight years Crown was Director of Chapel Music at Somerville College, Oxford, and led the prize-winning Reading Phoenix Choir for nearly a decade. In addition to his conducting roles, Crown has taught at many distinguished institutions and revived his passion for singing during the COVID-19 pandemic, balancing his choral leadership with solo performances as a bass-baritone.

For more information about David Crown, please visit his website: www.david-crown.com

Cheltenham Bach Choir

Cheltenham Bach Choir is recognised as one of the leading amateur choral societies in the Southwest of England.

Founded in 1946, the year after the end of World War II, the choir's repertoire includes the works of many composers from Britain, Europe and beyond, including J.S. Bach. Spanning over six centuries, their repertoire ranges from the Renaissance period of the 14th - 17th centuries to the present day. The choir performs with accompaniments from professional orchestras and soloists and particularly engages young soloists at the beginning of their musical careers.

With over 100 auditioned singing members, the choir performs four scheduled concerts per year (including a popular Christmas concert) in venues across Gloucestershire, including Cheltenham Town Hall, Tewkesbury Abbey and the parish church in Cirencester.

"Our strong reputation and increasing success brought forth the exciting invitation and prestigious opportunity to sing in the internationally recognised Cheltenham Music Festival in 2025 alongside an impressive array of professional musicians. In 2026 we will be celebrating our 80th Anniversary, which is an important milestone. We have planned a

wonderful programme of concerts and events, which reflect our long history, and we look forward to welcoming you to join us in celebrating our anniversary year.”

Cheltenham Bach Choir

Eleanor Dennis – Soprano

Winner of a Carole Rees Award from The Mastersingers, Eleanor Dennis is a graduate of the Royal College of Music's International Opera School and a former Harewood Artist at ENO where she has sung Penelope in *Gloriana*, Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Miss Jessel in *The Turn of the Screw*, Ofglen in *The Handmaid's Tale* and Countess Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro*.

She sang Miranda in Sir Malcolm Arnold's *The Dancing Master* at Buxton International Festival, and elsewhere engagements have included Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Aldeburgh and Grange Festivals; Miss Jessel in *The Turn of the Screw* for Opera North; Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*; Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer* for Opera Holland Park; Countess Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro*; Liù *Turandot* for Scottish Opera; *Salome* for Regents Opera; and Eva in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* for Saffron Opera Group. For Longborough Festival Opera, she sang Freia in *Das Rheingold* and Gerhilde in *Die Walküre*.

She made her BBC Proms debut singing Beethoven *Symphony No. 9* and has recorded extensively. Most recently released is Havergal Brian's *Agamemnon* on Hyperion.

Her current engagements include Elettra in *Idomeneo* for Chelsea Opera Group; Eva in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* for Longborough Festival Opera; Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* with Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Ulster Orchestra; and Mozart's *Requiem* with BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra.

Rebecca Afonwy-Jones – Mezzo-Soprano

Rebecca Afonwy-Jones began her career as a Scottish Opera Emerging Artist, subsequently joining Welsh National Opera as an Associate Artist. Other companies with whom she has worked include London's Royal Ballet & Opera, English Touring Opera, Grange Park Opera, If Opera, Longborough Festival Opera, Mid Wales Opera, Opera North, West Green House Opera and Festival Opera, New Zealand.

Regular concert engagements have included her BBC Proms debut singing Vaughan Williams *Serenade to Music* with BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. She was also mezzo-soprano with BBC National Orchestra of Wales for *Gareth Malone's Messiah*, broadcast across BBC 1 and BBC 2 at Easter 2025.

Her recordings include Handel's *Messiah* (Stian Aareskjold's arrangement for wind ensemble), Joseph Phibbs' *Juliana* and Hugh Wood's *Beginnings: Three Early Songs*, with the latter selected as a Sunday Times CD of the week and all available on Resonus Classics.

Recent and current engagements include the premiere performances of Ninfea Cruttwell-Reade's *Scenes from Under Milk Wood* with Nova Music Opera, Lola in *Cavalleria Rusticana* for Chelsea Opera Group, Marcellina in *The Marriage of Figaro* for Oxford Opera, Hatá in *The Bartered Bride* with Irish National Opera, Berio's *Folk Songs* with Hebrides Ensemble, both Dvorak's *Stabat Mater* and Handel's *Messiah* with Royal Choral Society, *Messiah* for Raymond Gubbay Live at London's Southbank Centre, Verdi's *Requiem* at Cheltenham Music Festival and *Cabaret (Britten, Berlin and Broadway)* for JAM on the Marsh. She also joins Ensemble Cymru to tour *The Music Room*, singing a repertoire including Brahms' *Two Songs for Voice, Viola and Piano*.

Thomas Elwin – Tenor

London-born tenor Thomas Elwin has built a distinguished career performing in opera houses and concert halls across Europe. Audiences are drawn to his warm lyric voice, expressive musicianship and engaging stage presence.

Elwin began his musical life as a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, London, where he frequently appeared as a treble soloist on BBC Radio 3, Classic FM, and at venues including the Royal Festival Hall and Tokyo Opera City as a member of the Boys Air Choir. While an undergraduate choral scholar at Royal Holloway, University of London, he co-founded the internationally renowned vocal ensemble VOCES8. A graduate of the Royal Academy of Music and the Solti Accademia Bel Canto, Elwin is a former Equilibrium Artist and Classical Opera Company Associate Artist and is now an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music.

Recent operatic highlights include Alfredo in *La Traviata* (Opera Glass Works, filmed production), Rodolfo in *La Bohème*, Gennaro in *Lucrezia Borgia*, Canio (cover) in *Pagliacci* with English Touring Opera, Borsa in *Rigoletto* at ENO and Opera North, and Arturo in Bellini's *La Straniera* with Chelsea Opera Group.

Previous performances of note include Lensky (*Eugene Onegin*) at Opera Holland Park and West Green House Opera, Oronte (*Alcina*) at Glyndebourne, Nemorino (*L'Elisir*) with Wild Arts, Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*) at English National Opera, Sam Kaplan (*Street Scene*) at Oper Köln, Belmonte (*Die Entführung*) and Jaquino (*Fidelio*) at the Vorarlberg Landestheater. Further performances include Ferrando (*Così Fan Tutte*) at Oper Stuttgart, with Mozart roles at Teatro Barocco (Vienna), and roles with Classical Opera Company. Crown has appeared as soloist with major ensembles including the Munich Philharmonic, City of London Sinfonia (BBC Proms), and in concert with Barbara Hannigan.

On the concert platform, Elwin's recent and upcoming engagements include The Dream of Gerontius (Sinfonia Smith Square), Mahler's Symphony No. 8 (Cheltenham Festival), Verdi's Requiem (St Albans, Ely, and Canterbury Cathedrals), an Opera Gala with Ermonela Jaho and the BBC Concert Orchestra, and Messiah with the Hallé.

In 2025, Elwin released his debut recital album *Le vase brisé* on VOCES8 Records. Future releases include discs of Strauss songs and Britten's Abraham and Isaac. Based in London, he combines his performing career with an active teaching practice. Away from music he enjoys most live sport, supports West Ham United, and has completed four marathons, raising over £20,000 for charity.

Julian Close – Bass

Julian Close began his career reading for his PhD in Applied Physics at University of Leeds, before studying at Royal Northern College of Music. He has since appeared with major companies throughout the UK including London's Royal Ballet & Opera, English National Opera, Garsington Opera at Wormsley, Longborough Festival Opera, Welsh National Opera and West Green House Opera.

His North American engagements have included projects at the Metropolitan Opera, Minnesota Opera, Opéra de Montréal, Pacific Symphony and Washington National Opera. He also appeared at Dutch National Opera and Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires. Recent engagements have included Arkel in *Pelléas et Mélisande* for Longborough Festival Opera; Indra in *Le Roi de Lahore* and Sparafucile in *Rigoletto* for Dorset Opera Festival; Talpa in *Il tabarro* and Simone in *Gianni Schicchi* for Scottish Opera; Don Basilio in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and The Grand Inquisitor in *Don Carlo* for Grange Park Opera; Mikain in *The Bartered Bride*, First Soldier in *Salome* and Sparafucile in *Rigoletto* for Irish National Opera; and a return to the Metropolitan Opera as Sparafucile. His future engagements include Timur in *Turandot* for the St Endellion Festival and a return to Grange Park Opera as Prince Gremin in *Eugene Onegin* and Hunding *Die Walküre*.

Musical and Amicable Society

The original Musical and Amicable Society was founded in 1762 by James Kempson, who directed the choir at St Bartholomew's Chapel, Birmingham. Together, with fellow musicians from St Philip's Church (now Birmingham Cathedral), Kempson and his singers gathered on a regular basis at Cooke's Tavern in the Cherry Orchard "for practice and recreation". In 2003, Kate Fawcett and Martin Perkins revived this historic society as a collective of professional period-instrument specialists, performing in combinations ranging from intimate ensembles to full orchestra.

"The society's presiding ethos is one of chamber music – however large or small the formation – where each and every musician has a significant role to play. We collaborate with choirs and choral societies in cathedrals and concert halls across the country, in performances of major works by composers ranging from Buxtehude to Beethoven and beyond. Highlights so far this year include Bach's Brandenburg Concertos and B Minor Mass; Handel's Samson; Mendelssohn's Elijah; and the release of our recording Fiddlers Three, featuring virtuosic music from the Restoration court. This summer we launch a new programme of Mozart chamber music for flute and strings. We are delighted to be returning to the Cheltenham Festival with the Cheltenham Bach Choir to perform Verdi's Requiem."

Music and Amicable Society

