

Nantwich Choral Society

21st Anniversary Season

ROSSINI

PETITE MESSE SOLENNELLE



SATURDAY 18th JUNE 1994

**The Parish Church of St. Mary, Nantwich
at 7.30pm.**

NANTWICH CHORAL SOCIETY

Catrin Ley, *soprano*

Georgina West, *contralto*

Robin Green, *tenor*

Philip Ravenscroft, *bass*

Joy Roberts, *pianoforte*

Andrew Mildinhall, *organ*

Conducted by
Stephen Buckman



PETITE MESSE SOLENNELLE

Gioachino Rossini (1792 - 1868)

KYRIE ELEISON
GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO
GRATIAS AGIMUS TIBI
DOMINE DEUS
QUI TOLLIS PECCATA MUNDI
QUONIAM TU SOLUS SANCTUS
CUM SANCTO SPIRITU

Chorus
Quartet & Chorus
Contralto, Tenor & Bass
Tenor
Soprano & Contralto
Bass
Chorus

INTERVAL

CREDO IN UNUM DEUM
CRUCIFIXUS
ET RESURREXIT TERTIA DIE
PRELUDIO RELIGIOSO
SANCTUS
O SALUTARIS HOSTIA
AGNUS DEI

Quartet & Chorus
Soprano
Quartet & Chorus
Quartet & Chorus
Soprano
Contralto & Chorus

Rossini spent the last dozen or so years of his life in Paris, where he lived with his adoring and fiercely protective wife, Olympe, whom he had married ten years earlier, after the death of his estranged first wife. Olympe had nursed him through a long period of illness and depression during which the composer had been practically unable to listen to or talk about music, much less write any, and it was for her that he broke his silence with a set of songs entitled "Musique Anodine" ("Soothing Music"), which he gave to her on her birthday in April 1857.

During the years that followed he wrote literally hundreds of little pieces for singers and piano or a few instruments which he collected together under the title "Péchés de Vieillesse" ("Sins of Old Age"). These often quirky but always elegant miniatures - often with Satie-like titles such as "Ouf! les petits pois", "Mon prélude hygienique du matin" or "Etude asthmatique" were performed at weekly parties held at the Rossini's new apartment, to which only the brightest and best of the city's musical and social elite were invited. But even though he had returned to music-making and composition with all the facility and wit that had made the operas of his youth so successful (so successful that he had made his fortune and retired by the time he was forty) he still wrote almost nothing for performance outside his own apartment. The only exception of note also happens to be Rossini's last large-scale composition and an undoubted masterpiece, The *Petite Messe Solennelle* of 1863.

At the front of his autograph score of the Mass, Rossini wrote a note (intended for God's eyes only) in which he calls the piece "the last mortal sin of my old age", and on the face of it this "small solemn mass" might look like another of Rossini's jokes, neither small (it lasts about eighty minutes) nor particularly solemn (just wait for the Domine Deus), but in another sense the title is entirely accurate: "petite" referring to the intimacy of the first performance in a private chapel by only twelve singers, two pianists and an harmonium player, while "solennelle" simply means that it is a full setting of the mass rather than a missa brevis. No doubt Rossini intended the pun, but no doubt either that he intended the music to be (like Bach's B minor mass) a summing up of his art, and a sincere expression of his religious feeling. The ambivalence of Rossini's character, simultaneously generous and bitter, arrogant and insecure, witty and sad, can be felt in his note (again addressed to God) at the end of the score:

*Dear Lord, that's the end of it, this poor little mass.
I can't tell whether it's really sacred music or sacrilegious.
I was born for comic opera, as You know.
A little knowledge, a little heart, that's about all really.
Ah well, let me sing Your praise and come to Your Paradise.
G Rossini - Paris 1863.*

THE MUSIC

Not surprisingly, the multi-faceted Rossini chose to employ a wide range of compositional styles and techniques in his Mass and tried to get as much tonal variety as possible out of the rather limited resources available to him. Thus we find imitation Palestrina for unaccompanied chorus, fashionable salon music for the soloists, a keyboard solo that sounds like Bach re-composed by Liszt and a couple of rollicking fugues that Handel would have loved to have written. All of which give the lie to the notion that Rossini was only good for comic opera, even if some of it sounds a bit unconventional in the context of a liturgical mass.

The most unexceptional music is found in the two short sections for unaccompanied voices, the *Christe* and the *Sanctus*, although even here Rossini creates two quite distinct styles. The *Christe* is a beautiful and perfect example of strict counterpoint in the style of Palestrina, while the *Sanctus* contrasts soloists and chorus in a movement of great strength and intensity.

The soloists' movements are, as was usual in the 18th and 19th centuries, more modern and freer in style than the other parts of the mass. The Soprano, Tenor and Bass each get a piece in which they are accompanied by piano alone (*O Salutaris*, *Domine Deus* and *Quoniam tu solus Sanctus* respectively). This combination of solo voice with piano naturally gives rise to music which has more of the salon than the chapel about it, such as Rossini's friends might have expected to hear at one of his Saturday night soirees, and not even the addition of the harmonium manages to give a penitential veneer to the Soprano's wordly *Crucifixus*. The duet *Qui tollis peccata mundi*, beautiful and tragic, reminds us that Rossini's genius was always for opera, even though he had long since given up writing for its fickle audiences. At the first performance the Soprano and Contralto soloists were the Marchisio sisters, Carlotta and Barbara, whom Rossini once described as his "beloved friends, and incomparable interpreters... possessors of that song which is sensed in the soul." in the *terzetto Gratias agimus tibi*, Rossini writes for the soloists in a perfect synthesis of style which is genuinely sacred while yet being genuinely his own.

Originally, when the Mass was performed with a chorus of only eight singers, the four soloists were also required to augment the choir, but Rossini reserved the full ensemble of voices and instruments for the most important structural points of the Mass. In the opening *Kyrie* the choir try to dispel the unsettling atmosphere created by the instruments, but their lyrical warmth threatens to be undermined by the piano's obsessively repeated patterns. In the second *Kyrie*, after the *capella Christe*, the process continues, but this time the two sides seem to agree to an uneasy truce. By contrast, voices and instruments are in complete accord over the triumphant fanfares which begin the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. This movement continues in a much gentler mood, led by the four soloists. The rest of the *Gloria* is taken up by movements for soloists, but a return to the fanfares marks the reappearance of the choir in the *Cum Sancto Spiritu*, which quickly develops into a long but inspired and vigorous fugue.

The first section of the *Credo in Unum Deum* (marked, uniquely, *Allegro Cristiano*) is an impressively dramatic movement on a much larger scale than the corresponding part of the *Gloria*. The piano's strange staccato outbursts at the end lead into the *Crucifixus*, graphically depicting the nails being driven in. The music of the opening of the *Credo* returns after the choir sing (*Et Resurrexit tertia die*) and the grandest part of the whole work ends with another wonderfully invigorating fugue.

The unsettled mood of the *Kyrie* returns in the *Agnus Dei*, in which the Contralto finally gets her moment of glory - and Rossini's last gift to Barbara Marchisio is well worth the wait. The soloist's increasingly impassioned pleas are answered three times by the choir's hushed and unchanging "*Dona nobis pacem*", before soloist and choir together screw the tension up even further until it breaks at the climactic cries of "*miserere*". After such drama, Rossini brings the piece to a swift and resonant conclusion, but not without a last reference to that disconcerting idea from the introduction: the faith of a man like Rossini was never an unquestioning one.

Colin Bromelow

NOTE: Sadly, the harmonium is now an endangered species and will not be taking part in tonight's performance. Nantwich Choral Society is, however, grateful to the organ of St Mary's for agreeing to stand in at short notice.