



Awards issue



'Antonio Pappano and his Roman forces have produced another magnificent display of Verdian sophistication'

Malcolm Riley welcomes Pappano's advocacy of Verdi's late choral works

Verdi

'Sacred Verdi'

Quattro Pezzi sacri. Ave Maria (1880)³.

Messa per Rossini - Libera me²

³Maria Agresta *sop*

Chorus and Orchestra of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Rome /

Sir Antonio Pappano

Warner Classics © 984524-2 (57' • DDD)

Four years on from their award-winning recording of the Requiem (EMI, 10/09), Sir Antonio Pappano and his Roman forces have now produced an equally exciting companion disc, another magnificent display of Verdian sophistication, closely tied to their 'Viva Verdi!' appearance at the BBC Proms on July 20.

Despite being a rational freethinker (his devout second wife, Giuseppina, called him 'a very doubtful believer') and his oft-proclaimed antipathy towards the priesthood and the power of the Church, Verdi excelled when setting devotional texts, especially those which were as angst-ridden as the *Stabat mater*. Additionally, during his long opera-composing career he had developed his choral-writing skills, raising the status of

the chorus (both musically and dramatically) as an artistic vehicle. By generally favouring four pure parts in his choral textures, Verdi manages to hold in reserve extra contrast and richness for those moments dictated by the text. When he dictates unison singing, two lines doubled at the octave or the fullness of eight parts, Verdi's calculations are always elegantly spot-on.

The disc begins with the late, anthologised *Four Sacred Pieces*, composed between 1889 and 1898. Here Verdi contrasts two *a cappella* pieces with a pair of vivid large-scale tableaux. They are an astonishing achievement for a composer in his eighties. Based on an 'enigmatic scale' (sung initially by the basses) suggested by Adolfo Crescentini, the unaccompanied *Ave Maria's* hushed C major gives little hint of the difficulties of intonation which follow. Happily, the chorus cope perfectly, as well as with the vast dynamic range demanded in the succeeding *Stabat mater* – which, incidentally, must have been known to Elgar. Those initial 'yawning' open fifths on the lower strings could so easily have led into the Englishman's *Introduction and Allegro* for strings: Elgarian researchers

take note. Pappano draws out every colour of Verdi's orchestral accompaniment in this movement.

By way of welcome contrast, the *Laudi alla Vergine Maria* is scored for four-part ladies' voices only, the richly toned contraltos providing firm support throughout for their floatingly ethereal (though lightly vibrato-seasoned) soprano sisters. As with the *Ave Maria*, pitching is well-nigh perfect, to the relief of all.

Most striking of all is the astonishing concluding *Te Deum* setting for double chorus and large orchestra, the most harmonically advanced piece Verdi ever wrote. He said it was his favourite of the later works. From the perfectly blended basses' and tenors' hushed intonations at the beginning to the positively filmic ending, this is a masterly performance, enhanced by Donika Mataj's brief soprano solo.

The main soloist on this recording is Maria Agresta, who brings a warm intensity to a tender five-minute-long Italian setting of the second *Ave Maria* on this disc, composed (or at least published) in 1880 with a rather ghostly accompaniment for strings. Suffused with a dark chromaticism, its shifting