Antonín Dvořák
"Stabat Mater," Opus 58

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK was born in Nelahozeves (Mühlhausen), Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), near Prague, on September 8, 1841, and died in Prague on May 1, 1904. He sketched his “Stabat Mater” between February 19 and May 7, 1876, worked out the full score in the autumn of 1877, and completed the orchestration on November 13, 1877. The first performance took place in Prague on December 23, 1880, at a concert of the Association of Musical Artists; Adolf Čech conducted, the solo parts being taken by Eleanora Ehrenberg, Betty Fibič, Antonín Vávra, and Karel Čech.

IN ADDITION TO THE FOUR VOCAL SOLOISTS AND FOUR-PART MIXED CHORUS, the score of the “Stabat Mater” calls for an orchestra of two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, organ, and strings.

THE BACKGROUND
Like Haydn, Dvořák was blessed with a simple and unshakeable faith. He was not markedly devout, but the Catholic church played its traditional part at the crucial moments of his life, and like Haydn he wrote “Thanks be to God” (“Bohu díky!” in Czech) at the end of most of his manuscripts. Writing three large sacred works, a Stabat Mater, a Requiem, and a Te Deum, does not itself prove his commitment to faith, but these works presented no obstacle of conscience and, in the case of the Stabat Mater, served as consolation and inspiration. His choral music also included some psalm settings and an oratorio on St. Ludmila. Even so, in the latter part of his life Dvořák was more absorbed by folk culture and the traditional stories of Bohemia than in religion, and his music seemed, to pious Victorians, for example, more distinctive for its exotic color than for any obvious sacred flavor.

The Stabat Mater was sketched early in 1876, soon after the composition of the Fifth Symphony and the Serenade for Strings. The previous September, the composer’s daughter Josefa had died two days after being born; pertinent to Dvořák’s returning to his sketches a year later were the deaths of two older children: his eleven-month-old daughter Růžena (Josefa’s twin) in August 1876, due to accidental poisoning, and his three-and-a-half-year-old son Otakar, a month later, of smallpox. (Happily, the Dvořáks went on to have six more children, who survived.) Dvořák was already famous beyond the borders of Bohemia thanks to his friendship with Brahms and to his having a German publisher, Simrock of Berlin. His Slavonic Dances and Moravian Duets were hugely enjoyed, and the rhythms of Czech music were heard on countless German and (soon) English pianos. His motivation for composing a Stabat Mater rested partly on the thinking that a large sacred work would consolidate his international reputation in a style that was not obviously Czech and which set Latin words. He was not wrong, for after its first performance in Prague in 1880 it was quickly taken up in other Czech cities and abroad, reaching Budapest in 1882 and London on March 10, 1883. Its success in London led to an immediate invitation to Dvořák to come in person to conduct it himself, which he did, the first of many visits to England, and the essential prelude to his celebrated engagement in the United States in 1892. Its success also led to commissions for several works composed for performance in England: the oratorio The Spectre’s Bride for the Birmingham Choral Festival, St. Ludmila for the Leeds Festival, and the Symphony No. 7 for the Royal Philharmonic Society.

The poem depicts Mary at the foot of the cross witnessing the death of her son Jesus. Written by an unknown Franciscan monk in the 13th century, it has been set to music innumerable times, its pathos and poetry setting it above most other medieval texts. The short lines and tidy rhyme scheme are attractive to musicians, and the four trochees that make up the first two lines of each verse (a trochee being a metrical unit comprising an accented syllable followed by an unaccented one: long-short) generate, in Dvořák’s case, patterns of four or eight notes that tend to be heard many times in the course of each movement. Dvořák had for precedent a well-known Stabat Mater by Pergolesi and a more recent setting by Rossini, written for concert performance in Paris. Dvořák’s Stabat mater was followed by a powerful setting by Verdi, one of the latter’s last works.

THE MUSIC

Today Dvořák’s Stabat Mater is less frequently performed, perhaps for the very reason that it displays few of the obviously Bohemian traits familiar from his later work. By that standard it is an austere work, mostly moving at a slow pace, mostly in a minor key, not at all operatic in character (unlike Rossini’s setting), and, except at the concluding “Amen,” not the least like Handel’s oratorios, the benchmark of popular choral music.

I. Stabat mater dolorosa. The opening movement, however, is one of the most beautiful and most inspired pieces Dvořák ever wrote, with its long falling phrase at the opening which matches both the rhythm and the pathos of the words “Stabat mater dolorosa” to perfection. It is a long movement, rising at regular intervals to a colossal chord on a diminished seventh, but infused throughout, even at the resigned close, with a depth of sorrow that perhaps only music can express.

Stabat mater dolorosa
juxta Crucem lacrimosa,
dum pendebat Filius.

The mother stood sorrowing
by the cross, weeping
while her Son hung there;

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juxta Crucem lacrimosa,
dum pendebat Filius.

The mother stood sorrowing
by the cross, weeping
while her Son hung there;
Cuius animam gementem, Whose soul, lamenting,
contristatam et dolentem sorrowing and grieving,
pertransivit gladius. has been pierced by the sword.
O quam tristis et afflicta O how sad and afflicted
fuit illa benedicta, was that blessed
mater Unigeniti! Mother of her only-begotten Son
Quae mèrebat et dolebat, Who wept and grieved
pia Mater, dum videbat and trembled to behold
nati pœnas inclyti. the torment of her glorious child.

II. Quis est homo. Here once again the syllables of the opening words dictate the phrase with which the alto soloist begins. Her long phrase is taken up in turn by the tenor, then the bass, then the soprano, while each voice continues, forming a thickening counterpoint. The mood of this movement is intense abjection, in contemplation of the suffering Jesus, with occasional very brief moments of warmth.

Quis est homo qui non fleret, What man would not weep
matrem Christi si videret if he saw the Mother of Christ
in tanto supplicio? in such torment?
Quis non posset contristari Who could not be sorrowful
Christi Matrem contemplari to behold the pious mother
dolentem cum Filio? grieving with her Son?
Pro peccatis suæ gentis For the sins of His people
vidit Iesum in tormentis, she saw Jesus in torment
et flagellis subditum. and subjected to the whip.
Vidit suum dulcem Natum She saw her sweet Son
moriendo desolatum, dying, forsaken
dum emiss spiritum. as He gave up the spirit.

III. Eia, mater. The chorus “Eia, Mater” is built on a steady, not brisk, march tempo, and its main section is repeated almost exactly, with a brief link before the return to the beginning.

Eia, Mater, fons amoris Ah Mother, fount of love,
me sentire vim doloris let me feel the force of grief,
fac, ut tecum lugeam. that I may grieve with you.

IV. Fac ut ardeat. The bass solo pronounces the beginning of “Fac, ut ardeat” with considerable force, and with brass in support. Clarinets, then flutes, weaving in and out, offer a second section, and the women’s chorus takes charge of the second of the two verses, supported by the organ. The process is repeated with the men this time joining the women, and the bass takes the movement to its conclusion over the orchestra reiterating his opening phrase.

Fac, ut ardeat cor meum Make my heart burn
in amando Christum Deum with the love of Christ, the God,
ut sibi complacem. that I may be pleasing to Him.
Sancta Mater, istud agas, Holy Mother, bring this to pass,
crucifixi fige plagas transfix the wounds of Him who is crucified
cordi meo valide. firmly onto my heart.

V. Tui nati vulnerati. Only the word “pœnas” interrupts the smooth flow of lines in “Tui nati vulnerati.” Then Dvořák unexpectedly decides to move the tempo forward and offer a much more positive setting of the opening words, with a strong climax. The inner flow is never stemmed, however, and the opening section returns as serene as before.

Tui nati vulnerati, Of your wounded Son,
tam dignati pro me pati, who deigns to suffer for my sake,
pœnas mecum divide. let me share the pains.

VI. Fac me vere tecum flere. The sixth movement is given to the tenor soloist in close dialogue with the chorus. The second section, short but speedy, is much more dramatic, and the whole process is repeated, with a strong conclusion when both soloist and chorus voice their passionate longing.

Fac me vere tecum flere, Make me truly weep with you,
crucifixo condolere, grieving with Him who is crucified
donec ego vixero. so that I may live.
Juxta Crucem tecum stare, To stand by the cross with you,
et me tibi sociare to be freely joined with you
in planctu desidero. in lamentation is what I desire.

VII. Virgo, virginum præclara. The choral writing of “Virgo virginum” is of a type all Victorian composers loved to emulate, even if they could not equal Dvořák’s tasteful ingenuity. Restrained, devout, shapely—these are the qualities they admired most.

Virgo virginum præclara, Virgin of virgins, resplendent,
mihi iam non sis amara, do not now be harsh towards me,
fac me tecum plangere. let me weep with you.

VIII. Fac ut portem. “Fac, ut portem” is a dialogue for soprano and tenor soloists. The tenor’s entry sets up a chug-chug accompaniment that continues through the central section and then gives way to a coda that comes to rest on a long tonic pedal.

Fac ut portem Christi mortem, Let me carry Christ’s death,
passionis fac consortem, the destiny of his passion,
et plagas recolere. and meditate upon his wounds.
Fac me plagis vulnerari, Let me suffer the wounds
fac me Cruce inebriari, of that cross, steeped
et cruore Filii. in the blood of your Son.

IX. Inflammatus et accensus. This movement for alto solo disguises its broad tempo with a Baroque walking bass line. The second section is more passionate and chromatic. The soloist has this entire, very satisfying movement to herself.

Inflammatus et accensus Fired and excited
per te, Virgo, sim defensus by you, O Virgin, let me be defended
in die iudicii. on the day of judgement
Fac me cruce custodiri, Let me be shielded by the cross,
Morte Christi præmuniri, protected by Christ’s death,
confoveri gratia. cherished by grace.

X. Quando corpus morietur. For the close, Dvořák returns to the opening movement, although its outstanding falling phrase is not heard until the full three-line verse has been sung, including a phrase for “paradisi gloria” that rises not to the colossal diminished-seventh that was heard five times in the opening movement, but to a blazing chord of G major, followed swiftly by another higher one, on A major. No clearer expression of the glory of Paradise could be imagined. The falling phrase immediately recurs, in the major key, and soon the traditional treatment of “Amen” as a double fugue brings the work to a conclusion at a speed and a level of energy that has been heard nowhere up to this point in the whole work.

Quando corpus morietur, When my body dies,
fac, ut animæ donetur let my soul be given
paradisi gloria. the glory of paradise.

Hugh Macdonald

Hugh Macdonald, general editor of the New Berlioz Edition, was for many years Avis Blewett Professor of Music at Washington University in St. Louis. A frequent guest annotator for the BSO, he has written extensively on music from Mozart to Shostakovich, including biographies of Berlioz, Bizet, and Scriabin, and is currently writing a book on the operas of Saint-Saëns.

THE FIRST COMPLETE AMERICAN PERFORMANCE OF DVOŘÁK’S “STABAT MATER” was conducted by Theodore Thomas on April 3, 1884, at New York’s Steinway Hall with the “Chorus Society” and soloists Emma Juch, Emily Winant, Jacob Graff, and Max Heinrich, five movements of the piece having already been performed in Boston on January 24, 1884, with Benjamin J. Lang conducting the Cecilia Society. (B.J. Lang led the Cecilia Society in the first complete Boston performance on January 15, 1885.)

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCE OF DVOŘÁK’S “STABAT MATER” was an out-of-town performance on May 13, 1891, at the Amphitheatre Auditorium in Louisville, Kentucky, as part of the orchestra’s participation in that year’s Louisville May Festival, with Arthur Nikisch leading the BSO, the “Festival Chorus,” and
soloists Clémentine De Vere, Gertrude Edmands, Whitney Mockridge, and William Ludwig. (Following intermission, the second half of the concert included Berlioz’s “Benvenuto Cellini” Overture and Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7.) The only other BSO performances of Dvořák’s complete “Stabat Mater” were led by Seiji Ozawa in January 1981 at Symphony Hall and then at New York’s Carnegie Hall with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, John Oliver, conductor, and soloists Phyllis Bryn-Julson, Jan DeGaetani, Kenneth Riegel, and Benjamin Luxon. In October 1904, William Gericke led two sections of the work—“Inflammatus et accensus” (for solo alto and orchestra) and “Quis est homo” (for solo quartet and orchestra) as part of the opening program of the BSO’s 1904-05 season, with soloists Grace B. Williams, Louise Homer, Theodore Van Yorx, and L.B. Merrill.

To Read and Hear More...


Currently available recordings of Dvořák’s Stabat Mater include, among others (and listed alphabetically by conductor, with soloists specified only where they might be known to American audiences), Jiří Bělohlávek’s with the Czech Philharmonic and Prague Philharmonic Choir (Decca), Philippe Herreweghe’s with the Royal Flemish Philharmonic and the Collegium Vocale Gent (Phil), Mariss Jansons’s with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus (BR Klassik), Neeme Järvi’s with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir (LPO), Rafael Kubelik’s with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and Chorus (Deutsche Grammophon, with Edith Mathis, Anna Reynolds, Wieslaw Ochman, and John Shirley-Quirk), Helmuth Rilling’s with the Oregon Bach Festival Orchestra and Chorus (Hänssler Classic, with Thomas Quasthoff among the soloists), Robert Shafer’s with the Washington Chorus and Orchestra (budget-priced Naxos, with Christine Brewer, Marietta Simpson, and John Aler among the soloists), Wolfgang Sawallisch’s with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus (Supraphon, with Gabriela Benáčková, Ortrun Wenkel, Peter Dvorský, and Jan-Hendrik Rootering), and Robert Shaw’s with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus (Telarc, with Christine Goerke, Marietta Simpson, Stanford Olsen, and Nathan Berg). Worth seeking is Václav Talich’s pioneering 1952 recording with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus (for a while available in a CD reissue on Supraphon).

Marc Mandel