

Stabat Mater

Stabat Mater dolorosa
Cujus animam
Quis est homo
Pro peccatis
Eja Mater
Sancta Mater
Fac ut portem
Inflammatum
Quando corpus morietur
In sempiterna saecula, Amen

Gioachino Rossini (1792 - 1868)

Rossini is justly celebrated for his immense contribution to the Italian operatic repertoire, but he also produced two important pieces of sacred music that are notable, amongst other things, for their overtly operatic style. This incorporation of the music of the opera house into the sacred repertoire may appear to have been a bold innovation, but in terms of dramatic content it was a well-established practice. Most composers who were familiar with the theatre as well as the church used elements of the operatic style in order to give their sacred compositions greater impact. A prime example is Handel, but the tradition goes back to Monteverdi, the first great opera composer, who even borrowed his own overture to *The Coronation of Poppea* for the opening movement of his 1610 *Vespers*. What is original about Rossini's sacred music is not so much its dramatic power, impressive though that is, as its unashamed romanticism.

Like so many of the great composers, Rossini was born into a musical family. His father was the town trumpeter in Pesaro and his mother was an opera singer. Both parents worked in various theatres in the region, and from an early age Gioachino went with them. As a talented boy soprano he was soon in great demand, and by the time he had reached his teens he could play the viola and the horn and was rapidly acquiring a reputation as a first-rate harpsichord-player and pianist. He went on to study at the Bologna Academy of Music, composing his first opera whilst still a student. From then on his rise to fame was meteoric. He received his first professional commission in 1810, which led to a string of further commissions. With the enormous success of his first full-length opera, *Tancredi* (1812), and the even greater triumph of *The Italian girl in Algiers* (1813), he became celebrated throughout Italy and his international reputation was firmly launched.

He was still only 23 when he was engaged as Musical Director of the two opera houses in Naples, for each of which he was required to compose a new opera annually, the ever-popular *Barber of Seville* being one of the happiest results. Rossini was always greatly attracted to a life of leisure, and as he was of a somewhat indolent nature he would frequently put off until the last possible moment the completion of his latest commission. He would then work at an incredible speed; several of his operas were written in under three weeks, an astonishing feat by any standards. He travelled widely throughout Europe, and in 1824 settled in Paris as Director of the Théâtre Italien. A string of new compositions followed, culminating in his acknowledged masterpiece, *William Tell*, completed in 1829 when he was still only 37.

At this point Rossini's life changed dramatically. For no apparent reason he gave up composing, and apart from two important religious works, the *Stabat Mater* (1842) and the *Petite Messe Solennelle* (1863), he wrote nothing of significance during the last forty years of his life. It may be that he had run out of energy and inspiration - *William Tell* had been his thirty-sixth opera in nineteen years - or perhaps simply that he was by now so immensely wealthy that he had no particular incentive to go on working. He retired to a luxurious villa specially built for him at Passy, on the outskirts of Paris, where he was able to live the life of idleness and self-indulgence that, as a renowned gourmet and *bon vivant*, he had always found so appealing. A visit to his villa was obligatory for every musician of importance visiting the capital, and here Rossini would hold court, entertaining everyone with his sparkling wit and good food, and revelling in the adulation of the constant stream of admirers and eminent visitors. These included Wagner, of whom he once wryly observed, '*His music has lovely moments but awful quarters of an hour!*'

The story behind the composition of the *Stabat Mater* is as involved as one of Rossini's own libretti. In 1832 he was invited to compose a setting of this text by one, Don Francisco Fernandez Varela, Knight of the Grand Cross of the Order of Charles III, whom Rossini had met on a previous visit to Spain. After some initial reluctance, Rossini agreed, on the understanding that the work would be for private use only, and never published. He originally planned twelve movements, but having written Nos. 1 and 5 - 9, a severe attack of lumbago prevented him from continuing. An old friend and fellow-composer, Giovanni Tadolini, agreed to compose the remaining six movements. The collaboration was kept a closely-guarded

secret, the work being passed off as entirely Rossini's, and he was duly rewarded with a handsome present. Don Varela died in 1837, and immediately a Parisian music publisher successfully bid for the manuscript. Rossini was furious that the agreement had been broken, and no doubt fearful that his secret would be revealed, with dire consequences for his reputation. He successfully prevented the publication of the original version, and in 1841 removed Tadolini's contributions and wrote four more sections of his own, bringing the total number of movements to ten. This final version was first heard in January 1842, and the work was an enormous success, with no less than twenty-nine performances in its first year.

The extreme solemnity of the thirteenth-century text, a devotional poem about the Virgin Mary's grief-stricken vigil at the foot of the Cross, could not be in greater contrast to the prevailing mood of much of the music, which at times seems completely incongruous. Rossini brushed aside any such criticism, referring to himself as 'a musical simpleton', and casting doubt on music's ability to communicate any specific emotion. Most important of all, he declared, was that the music should be of the finest quality. In that he must surely be judged successful, for the *Stabat Mater* is full of glorious music.

programme notes by John Bawden

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