

Stabat Mater

Charles Stanford (1852 - 1924)

Prelude
Stabat Mater dolorosa
Intermezzo
Eja Mater, fons amoris
Virgo virginum praeclara

Following the death of Purcell in 1695, English music went into a long period of decline that lasted until the late 19th century. Of the many musicians who helped to bring about the long-awaited English musical renaissance it was Charles Stanford, Hubert Parry and Charles Grove who were arguably the most influential. Thanks largely to their tireless efforts as composers, teachers and administrators, musical standards gradually improved and a firm foundation was established for a new tradition of English music. That musical revival reached its full flowering with the emergence of Elgar and continued with Vaughan Williams and a whole new generation of talented composers.

As a teacher of composition, Sir Charles Stanford was without equal. A list of his many pupils at the Royal College of Music reads like a *Who's Who* of early twentieth-century British music: Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Ireland, Gustav Holst, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, to name only a few of the most well-known. Stanford was a prolific composer and highly regarded in his day but, apart from his church music, which has always been central to the Anglican cathedral repertoire, most of his works fell into neglect after the First World War. New musical horizons had been opened up by Debussy, Stravinsky, Schoenberg and others. Stanford's music was firmly rooted in the formal Austro-German tradition of the nineteenth century, and no longer seemed relevant to a traumatised post-war world looking to the future, not the past, for hope.

The thirteenth century Stabat Mater text, which graphically portrays the sorrows of the Virgin Mary, has inspired more composers across the centuries than perhaps any other poem. Stanford's setting was commissioned by the Leeds Triennial Festival, of which he was the conductor, and first performed in 1907. It was one of his most successful works, and one of the few that continued to be performed after most of his other music had fallen out of favour. Its subtitle, 'A Symphonic Cantata', is an acknowledgement of the prominent role assigned to the orchestra. The first and third movements are purely orchestral; the Prelude could easily be the opening movement of a symphony, and the central Intermezzo occupies a pivotal role between the dramatic first two movements and the more contemplative last two.

The Prelude is a vivid musical depiction of the Passion. It opens with a short, slow introduction featuring a three-chord motif that will be heard again later, after which two contrasting principal themes are introduced. The first is a turbulent *allegro* and the second an expansive, flowing melody that plays an important part in the final movement. These two ideas, perhaps suggesting the agony of Christ's passion and the serene nature of Mary, mother of Jesus, are developed at some length. This movement leads without a break into the next, which begins with a plaintive soprano solo, 'Stabat Mater, dolorosa..'. The three-chord motif heard at the beginning reappears, and the music becomes more and more intense before it eventually subsides to a hushed ending with the soprano soloist reiterating her opening phrase.

The short orchestral Intermezzo develops the main ideas already heard, and prepares the way for the more reflective half of the work. In the fourth movement chorus and soloists alternate, the chorus singing the words 'Eja mater fons amoris..' as a repeated refrain, set to a striking, outward-spreading chord progression.

The final movement, the most substantial of the five, contains some of Stanford's finest and most compelling music. The 'Mary' theme first heard in the Prelude now returns in a modified version, and the music then builds to a huge climax at the Day of Judgement, '...in die judicii'. From here on the mood is gradually transformed. Using a modal variation of the 'Mary' theme, Stanford, in one of the most inspired passages that he ever wrote, repeatedly defers the anticipated final resolution, creating an unfolding vision of paradise as the cantata progresses to its serene conclusion.

programme notes by John Bawden

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