

Stabat Mater

‘A mother stood, grief stricken....’
Grief? Do we think we know grief?

Imagine your life shattered by the tragedy of your losing your daughter at just two days old. Two years later, imagine the agony of losing your second daughter at just 11 months old and just one month later bearing the third blow of being delivered of your first son, stillborn. Consider where you would turn for the strength to ‘cope and carry on’.

These are the personal life tragedies that occurred over the period between 1875 and 1877 when the Czech composer Antonin Dvořák composed his *Stabat Mater*, one of the most beautiful and moving pieces of music ever to come out of the Czech lands. The text is a devotional poem written in Latin in the 13th century, and set to music by many composers from **Palestrina** (1590) to **Arvo Pärt** (1985). I quote from the translation in the ‘Novello’ score:-

*‘A mother stood griefstricken, by the cross, weeping, while her son was hanging there.
As she shared in his sorrow, and grieved, a sword pierced her groaning heart.
O, how sorrowful and afflicted was that blessed woman, the mother of the only-begotten one.
Devoted mother, who mourned and grieved while she saw, who trembled, seeing the punishment of
her glorious son.
Who is the man who would not weep if he saw the mother of Christ in such torment?
Who could not share in the sorrow were he to contemplate the mother of Christ grieving for her son?’*

These are just the first six movements, another 14 follow culminating with the rich, overwhelming confidence and ecstasy of the ‘*Quando corpus morietur*’, the ‘glorious paradise’. In the dying moments of the *Stabat Mater*, the orchestra goes silent and the choir breaks out unaccompanied into an amazing hymn of praise:

‘When my body dies, grant that to my soul be given the glory of paradise.’

The orchestra accompanies the choir for the final ‘Amen’.

On a happier note, Dvorak and his wife, Anna, were to produce another six healthy children who grew to adulthood. His ‘*Stabat Mater*’ premiered in Prague in 1880 and his performance in London in 1883 hailed an era of success in the UK and the USA.

Come and hear the St Albans Bach Choir in St Albans Cathedral on Saturday 1st April from 7.30pm in a performance of this work, full of emotion and passion, under the exacting standards of Music Director Andrew Lucas, accompanied by the Sinfonia Verdi and soloists Eleanor Dennis *soprano*, Alison Kettlewell *mezzo soprano*, Sam Furness *tenor*, Martin Robson *bass*.

Tickets are available from £30 to just £12 and can be booked in person at St Albans Cathedral gift shop, or by phoning 01727 890217, or online at <https://www.stalbanscathedral.org/whatson/music>.

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