

Columbia Pro Cantare Program Notes

Dvorák's *Stabat Mater*

Barbara A. Renton, Ph.D.,
Domus Musicae Slavicae, Bainbridge, NY

"Dvorák's religious music includes works that for the sheer beauty of their invention and the sincerity of their feeling and expression can bear comparison with the best of his instrumental music". So writes Mosco Carner, conductor and Dvorák biographer. Indeed, it is the expressive beauty of Dvorák's *Stabat Mater* that strikes the listener; the sheer gloriousness of color and movement that can be appreciated without the aid of analysis, interpretation, or program notes. It was this work that opened the international concert hall doors to the struggling Czech nationalist composer, Antonín Dvorák (1841-1904), enabling the man from a small village in the AustroHungarian Empire to come to worldwide affection and fame.

Dvorák's *Stabat Mater* was often sung in the late 19th century, the composer himself conducting many performances. Moreover, the work entered the repertory of innumerable amateur and church choirs, where its popularity persisted well into the 20th century. The alto solo "Inflammatum" became a great favorite on recital programs. After a lapse, the work has begun to be performed in greater frequency by large choirs during Passion Week, just before Easter. In a way then, analogous to its beginning role, the *Stabat Mater* may be a harbinger of a full-fledged Dvorák revival in our time.

The name, "Stabat Mater," refers to the first words of a Latin poem of disputed authorship, dating from the late 13th century. The translation which accompanies the text below reveals its emotional as well as its mystic-ecstatic aspects, centering on the anguished figure of Mary, standing at the foot of the cross watching Jesus' crucifixion. The poem and its plainchant melody, originating in a time of popular pietistic religious sentiment, rapidly became assimilated into Roman Catholic observances and practices; partly because its use at one time conferred indulgences (remission of sins) on the user, and partly because its passionate expression reflects and releases the extreme feelings of human piety and emotion. It was not until 1727 that the Roman Catholic Church assigned *Stabat Mater* a permanent place in the liturgy, where it appears in connection with occasions of penitence, sorrow and mourning.

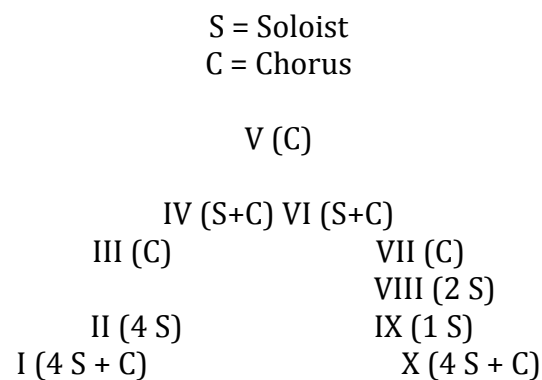
Even before that time, however, the expressivity and dramatic possibility of the text had attracted some of the best composers, among them Palestrina. Subsequent settings have been made by Pergolesi, Alessandro Scarlatti, Boccherini, Joseph Haydn, Schubert, Rossini, Verdi and Pendericki.

We know that Dvorák composed his own setting of *Stabat Mater* between February and May 1876, just after the death of his daughter Josefa. He then laid the work aside. In the next year tragedy again struck the household: the two remaining children died; Ruzena in August and Otakar in September. In October, Dvorák began to orchestrate the piece, finishing in November. The first performance took place in Prague at the Provisional Theatre (the interim Czech national theatre) on December 23, 1880; the first U.S. performance was in New York City's Steinway Hall more than 100 years ago on April 3, 1884.

From the beginning, the performance setting of Dvorák's *Stabat Mater* was not the church, nor should it be listened to as though it were. It is a concert piece based on a religious text in the same way that Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and Berlioz' *Requiem* are. This is not to imply that Dvorák used the text in an irreligious manner; we know from all witnesses that he was a sincere, devout Catholic whose faith was firm and unquestioning. His setting of *Stabat Mater* like that of his *Requiem*, reflects both his catholic (literally: Universal) outlook and the spirit of his time in which the concert hall often became the cultural setting for transmitting a "spirituality" of an unspecified Christian type.

Although Dvorák's personal feelings may have affected his choice of the *Stabat Mater* poem, it is only the first and last two movements which directly reflect the meaning of the text in the music. Some critics have been disconcerted by the composer's seeming disregard of the pathos and mourning throughout the whole and have blamed his naivete or lack of compositional skill. However, the listener can, with a simple outline of the structure of the piece, both enjoy the music as *music*, and perceive that Dvorák's craftsmanship was sound.

We can begin by thinking of the work as a whole, which is the way Dvorák and his contemporaries would have approached it: as a whole whose essential unity can be made apparent to the ear by the device of using the same or similar melodic material at the opening and close. In Dvorák's *Stabat Mater* we hear that the opening of movement X reminds of of movement I. The wholeness of the piece is built and balanced as much as an arch is with the "heaviest" or "densest" material at the two bases (I and X), and progressively "lighter" material above. The structural arch of the piece might look something like this:



One word of caution is needed: Dvorák's music is not simply melodic architecture: the work is dynamic, propelled forward by the tremendous force of melodic and rhythmic energy unleashed in movement I, which comes gradually to rest by movement X, in a kind of apotheosis. The principle of return can be discerned in all of the movements; we don't hear an exact repetition of the opening part but we hear a similar, more concise use of the same ideas.

But if such listening is not to one's personal taste, there are other rewarding points to notice: 1) The unabashed reliance on idiomatic opera writing, especially that of Verdi (III, IV), and Handel (IX); 2) The thorough understanding and sympathetic treatment of the chorus, which in the 19th century was a prominent type of musical institution. (The close harmony and sweet expressiveness of movement VII will especially appeal to any one-time or present choir member); 3) the skillful use of counterpoint, i.e., the weaving of similar and dissimilar vocal and instrumental lines, especially in movements I, II and VIII; 4) the orchestral colors, both in pleasing

instrumental combinations and in solo lines that flow out of, and back into, the fabric of sound.

At the close of the piece, we might find ourselves agreeing with Mosco Carner: that the place of Dvorák's *Stabat Mater* "is not on the shelves of a music library but in the live atmosphere of the concert hall. "