

## PROGRAM NOTES

From his humble origins as the eldest son of a butcher and innkeeper in a Czech village north of Prague, Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as his country's pre-eminent composer. Upon entering school at the age of six, Dvořák began taking violin lessons from a teacher who recognized the boy's musical aptitude. Dvořák's parents encouraged him as well, and when he was twelve they sent him to study piano, organ, and music theory with the church choirmaster in the town of Zlonice. By the fall of 1857, Dvořák was studying harmony, improvisation, counterpoint, and fugue at the Prague Organ School, and soon after he was playing viola in the orchestral concerts of the Cecilia Society, in repertoire that included works by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Wagner. In 1859 Dvořák joined a dance band that in 1862 became the nucleus of the orchestra of Prague's Provisional Theater. He remained with the theater's orchestra until 1871, and to all appearances he was simply a performing musician, but since 1862 Dvořák had been composing, and by 1865 he finished four string quartets, two symphonies, and the song cycle *Cypresses*. When he left the Provisional Theater to allow more time for composition, Dvořák was soon forced to support himself by giving piano lessons and teaching at a private music school. In 1874, soon after he had married, Dvořák was appointed as the organist at the Church of St. Vojtěch, but he nevertheless began applying for the Austrian State Stipend for artists (the Czech lands at that time being under Austrian rule). With each annual application, Dvořák submitted batches of his recently composed scores to a panel of judges. All of his four applications were successful, but—more importantly—the 1877 panel included Johannes Brahms, who fell in love with Dvořák's *Moravian Duets* for women's voices with piano and recommended them to his publisher Fritz Simrock. Simrock published the duets and commissioned the first book of *Slavonic Dances*, so that Dvořák's music soon became popular in German-speaking lands. 1877 was also the year that Dvořák met the young Leoš Janáček (1854-1928). Janáček also admired the *Moravian Duets*, so much so that he arranged six of them for four-part chorus and piano (three of the six are performed this afternoon). Janáček conducted those arrangements during his lifetime, but they were not published until 1939. The texts of these *Moravian Songs* tell stories of unhappy or hopeless love, often employing allegories of plant or animal life.

Dvořák wrote the first continuity draft of his *Stabat mater*—performed this afternoon with piano accompaniment—from February to May 1876. He turned to this, his first sacred work (apart from two lost masses from his time at the Prague Organ School), after the death of his infant daughter Josefa in August 1875. He suspended work on the *Stabat mater*, but returned to it in October 1877—after two more children had died—producing the full orchestral score within a few weeks. The premiere in Prague on 23 December 1880 received little attention, but after Simrock published both the full score and the piano-vocal score in 1881, on 2 April 1882 Leoš Janáček conducted a performance in Brno to great acclaim. A performance of the *Stabat mater* at London's Royal Albert Hall on 10 March 1883 created a sensation that led to a long association between Dvořák and English choirs. He later led the premieres of two of his works for chorus and orchestra at the Birmingham Festival, and one at the Leeds Festival.

The stark instrumental introduction to the *Stabat mater dolorosa*—in which unisons and octaves often stand in place of chordal harmony—almost resembles the spare textures of the introductions to some of Anton Bruckner's symphonies. Only in the fiftieth bar does a passionate melody—from deep within Dvořák's Bohemian soul—spring forth over pulsing chordal accompaniment. Of the work as a whole, D. Kern Holoman has written

This first movement, symphonic in scope and redolent with the scent of Schubert and the other Viennese, dwarfs all the others. Much shorter vignettes follow, each unveiling a new perspective through re-combinations of the vocal and orchestral constituents. In truth, we lose track of the details of the poem, hearing instead a series of reflections on death and grieving. All are relatively slow and in rudimentary ternary forms. Gradually, as these simple movements unfold, the sea of melancholy that has all but consumed us begins to recede. Dvořák now seeks threads of solace.

Klaus Döge gives us another perspective:

Similarities of setting and theme between the first and last sections give the work a cyclic form. It is profoundly meditative, with soft dynamics, slow tempos, melodies interspersed with sighing motifs, suspensions and chromaticism; its transparent orchestration suggests chamber music and avoids theatrical effects. The music does not so much interpret the words as provide realization of the subjects dominating the text: mourning, lamentation and hope.

While Dvořák's *Stabat mater* does not (yet?) enjoy the status it has achieved in England, no less a figure than Robert Shaw—the late dean of American choral conductors—embraced the work late in his career (his recording of it was his last). About the *Stabat mater*, Shaw said “people are deeply, deeply moved by it and without expecting it or even knowing exactly why. It just happens. Sometimes music expresses the inexpressible.”

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