

Semantics and confession in the *stabat mater*

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Abstract: „*Stabat mater dolorosa*” is the complete title of this type of vocal symphonic work, a sequence or a hymn in the Roman Catholic liturgy referring to the wailing of the grieving Mother of God at the foot of the Cross on which her Son and Saviour, our Lord and God Jesus Christ, had been crucified. All the great composers have dealt with this very deep and delicate subject matter, offering humanity their own version on a moment that shows the power to endure the greatest suffering with faith, love, and an interiorised assumption of it. Only the Mother of God has lived such a pain and only she in the purity that offered her so much inner power, could offer such a valid universal example of living pain.

Keywords: *liturgy, music, pain, lent.*

1. Introduction

Stabat mater dolorosa is the complete title of this type of vocal symphonic work, a sequence or a hymn in the Roman Catholic liturgy referring to the wailing of the grieving Mother of God at the foot of the Cross on which her Son and Saviour, our Lord and God Jesus Christ, had been crucified.

“From earliest times, controversies abounded about the Blessed Virgin Mary, her Immaculate Conception or capacity for sin, and other issues. These controversies achieved particular intensity and expression in a debate about the *Mater Dolorosa*, the sorrowful Mother at the foot of the Cross, a debate that began with the patristic writers and came to intense new life in early modern English polemic. Like many before, Edmund Bunny argued that Mary's grief demonstrated culpable doubt in the divinity of her son. Defenders, contrarily, thought Mary's sorrow an exemplary response to the Passion, some even maintaining that Mary's grief constituted a co-passioy a sharing in the Passion of Christ and in his work of redemption” (Miola 2017).

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The poem and the music attached to it have origins in the Franciscan cult from the 13th and 14th Centuries when it didn't belong to the liturgical canon yet; at that time, it appeared beside three other types of texts and similar chants (Stabat mater speciosa, Stabat iuxta Christi crucem, and Stabat virgo mater Christi) that render the state of deep pain of the Mother of God at the moment spent upon the passions and the resurrection of the Lord.



Michelangelo – *La Pietà* (1552 version)

By becoming part of the holy liturgy, it was removed from this canon by the Council of Trent in the middle of the 16th Century, being then restored from this point of view in the 18th Century on the occasion of the special moments of the fifth week of Great Lent (a week that remains special from a liturgical point of view until today in Orthodoxy).

The interpretation of religious music has always been a real challenge for self-discovery, to find the true meaning of music and existence, as one of the great conductors of the world, Wilhelm Furtwängler: "Today we are no longer looking for ourselves, this Ours would not be too easy nor would it be too easy to find, but we look for the past and we believe that this way we are more honest" (Furtwängler 2005, 86).

2. The *stabat mater* in the history of music

All the great composers have dealt with this very deep and delicate subject matter, offering humanity their own version on a moment that shows the power to endure the greatest suffering with faith, love, and an interiorised assumption of it. Only the Mother of God has lived such a pain and only she in the purity that offered her so much inner power, could offer such a valid universal example of living pain.



Michelangelo – *La Pietà* (1448-1449 version)

Out of the earliest polyphonic versions (the ones that cover including the Renaissance and Baroque eras) we remind those composed by Josquin des Prez, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c.1590), Orlando di Lasso (a work with eight sections, which is part of his collection of *Sacrae cantiones*), Domenico Scarlatti (a work for ten voices - 1715) and Alessandro Scarlatti (a vast work in no less than 18 sections- 1723), Antonio Vivaldi (1712), Antonio Caldara (1725- who also uses two trombones in his work) and Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (whose masterpiece for soprano, alto two violins and continuo in 1736 was finished a little before his passing away).

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Stabat Mater

Giovanni Battista PERGOLESI
(1710-1736)

The image shows a musical score for the organ version of 'Stabat Mater' by G. B. Pergolesi. It is written in G minor (three flats) and 3/4 time. The score is divided into two systems. The first system is marked 'Grave' and 'p' (piano). The second system starts at measure 5 and includes markings 'espr.' (espressivo), 'p dolce espr.' (piano dolce espressivo), 'p dolce.' (piano dolce), 'f' (forte), and 'p' (piano). The score is for Piano or Organ.

G. B. Pergolesi – *Stabat Mater* (organ version)

Of course we cannot forget the hymn *Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden*, composed by Johann Sebastian Bach and referring directly to the masterpiece of Pergolesi in the middle of the 18th Century.

In the 18th Century, we discover multiple tonal masterpieces on the same theme that also use instrument accompaniment or more orchestral beside choral or solo voices often performing the end in fugato style (polyphonic). During the classical period, we have versions composed by Mozart (1766), Haydn (1767) and Luigi Boccherini (1781, 1801), as musical testimonies of the theme.

During the Romantic period, the liturgical use of the hymn declines with stage presence in concert halls gaining importance: Schubert uses a shorter version of the poetic text in his work from 1815, also having another genre of work a year later. In his impressive work from 1841, Rossini uses an approach specific to the opera (composed after his withdrawal from the creative level of the genre that brought him celebrity), with areas intoned on very extended and expressive intervals, with massive choral interventions and mobile modulatory level, specific to Romanticism; the strongly synthesised discourse shows a vast range of expression, but less religious of the theme. Phrases in a recitative style are often used, which introduce the main theme outlining an atmosphere of mystery and quest.

The image shows a musical score for G. Rossini's aria from *Stabat Mater*. It features five staves: Violini I, Violini II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabasso. The Violini parts are marked with *ff* and *4. Corda*. The Viola part has a *pp* marking and the instruction *(divise)*. The Violoncello and Contrabasso parts are marked with *ff*. The score is numbered E. E. 6074.

G. Rossini, aria from *Stabat Mater*

A. Dvořák offers his musical version of the hymn (1862-1866) after the death of his children, permeating his music with a unique dramatism. The qualities of the great orchestrator Dvořák always remain evident, but in this case, amplifications are well measured and placed in a very interiorised work of great dimensions.

The image shows a musical score for Antonin Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* (piano forte version). It features five staves: Flauti I. II., Oboi I. II., Clarinetti I. II. A., Fagotti I. II., and Corni I. II. F. III. IV. D. The tempo is marked *Andante con moto* with a metronome marking of $\text{♩} = 76$. The score includes dynamic markings like *pp* and *ff*, and performance instructions like *a2* and *10*.

Antonin Dvorak – *Stabat Mater* (piano forte version)

Fr. Liszt places the hymn as a section of his *Christus Oratory* (1862-7) belonging to the type *Stabat mater speciosa* that refers to the moment at the birth of our Saviour. He brings together paradoxical aspects of the writing (that we can also identify in his life), passing from an intimate expression of prayer chorally expressed to that vastness of some post-Romantic vocal symphonic sections.

Stabat Mater by Giuseppe Verdi is the most famous case of the Romantic period written, a little before 1900 as the second work of *Quattro pezzi sacri*, an expression of his last years of life and creation. Like in the *Requiem*, Verdi oscillated between the deeply interiorised style and the musical comedy that crowned him.

Every Note

Stabat Mater

G. Verdi

G. Verdi – *Stabat Mater*

In the 20th Century, Karol Szymanowski (1925–6) composes *Stabat mater dolorosa* in an especially intimate language that calls back from the memory of time and tonal-modal inflections. The culminating moment inscribes in the text that reminds one of the Last Judgement: *Flammis ne urar succensus, per te, Virgo, sim defensus in die iudicii* („Be to me, O Virgin, nigh, lest in flames I burn and die in His awful Judgment Day”). Penderecki (1962) entrusts the work of voices to three choirs, so that later he included his work in the Passions after Luke.

3. Conclusions, proposals

The power of prayer is propelled by musical expression; religious music has an extra force for the words of prayer, especially for the “dramatic religious repertoire of *Stabat Mater*” (Meyer-Wilmes 2017). The work was generally approached on its own, more rarely as part of a larger vocal symphonic creation, keeping the rigour and the gloomy tone of the greatest pain that a mother can bear - the loss of her child (in this supreme case God and Man). The expressions vary from the sober structures of the Renaissance to those relating to musical comedies of Romanticism.

References

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