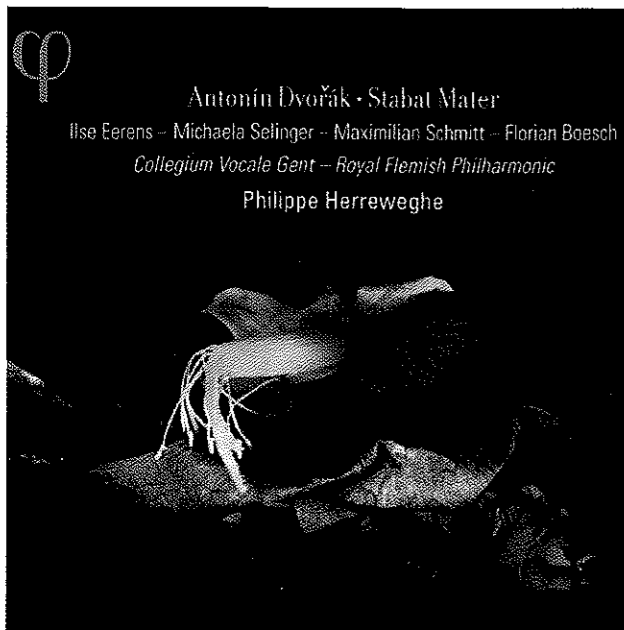


Recording of the Month



'All of Herreweghe's performers clearly love this ravishing music, relishing every detail of this beautifully nuanced score'

Malcolm Riley is moved by a new recording of Dvořák's powerful Stabat mater

Dvořák

Stabat mater, Op 58 B71

Ilse Eerens sop Michaela Selinger mez
Maximilian Schmitt ten Florian Boesch bass
Collegium Vocale, Ghent; Royal Flemish
Philharmonic / Philippe Herreweghe

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The *Stabat mater* – a 13th-century poem that describes in 20 verses the imagined sufferings of the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross – has attracted a select but significant range of composers over the centuries, from Palestrina and Vivaldi, through Rossini and Howells to Karl Jenkins. Most settings hover around the 40-minute mark (for example Pergolesi's and Poulenc's); Jenkins's stretches to just over an hour. But the biggest-boned of all settings is surely Dvořák's, broken down into 10 wondrously varied – but also wholesomely coherent – movements. It was begun in 1876, with just a piano accompaniment, in memory of his daughter Josefa, who had died two days after her birth the previous year. The full score was completed in 1877 following the deaths of another daughter,

Růžena, and Dvořák's first-born son, Otakar. With such a terrible burden of personal grief and loss hanging over the work's genesis, coupled with what Eduard Hanslick called 'the tear-laden monotony' of the text, one might have expected a work full of gloom and despondency. But Dvořák rose above these personal and technical challenges to create a highly sensuous statement of personal faith and belief clothed in symphonic robes, which culminates in a dramatic 'Amen'.

Although Dvořák's *Stabat mater* is not currently a common feature on choral programmes (more's the pity), the work is well represented in the recording catalogue, with several splendid issues available spanning more than 40 years. Back in September 2012, I considered Neeme Järvi's live 2010 LPO disc to be 'an interpretation to savour'. This dramatic performance was dispatched in just 67 minutes, with the comparatively dry Royal Festival Hall acoustic and close-miking of the soloists no doubt adding to the intensity of the reading, though there were times when the text became rather blurred.

Now Philippe Herreweghe has released on his own PHI label a carefully considered and exquisitely refined recording, made in April 2012 in deSingel, a multi-arts venue on the outskirts of Antwerp. Possibly owing to the less pressurised atmosphere of the studio environment, his timings are generally longer, although the music doesn't sound slower, despite being consistently under Dvořák's metronome markings.

With such heart-tuggingly powerful music this is a small concern. What matters most is that all of Herreweghe's performers clearly love this ravishing music, relishing every detail of this beautifully nuanced score, despite the huge dynamic range demanded.

The orchestral introduction that opens the massive, 17-minute span of the first movement is set in B minor, a tragic enough key, weighted down with a sombre gravitas, and further emphasised by plentiful use of the lower strings, bassoons and flutes at the bottom of their range. The heavy brass are kept well in reserve for the truly climactic



Philippe Herreweghe conducts his Collegium Vocale choir and orchestra in 2012; (below) Dvořák, whose personal grief gave rise to the *Stabat mater*



PHOTOGRAPH: NAN MEVILLE, TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

moments. Here the choral sound is warm and wide without any congestive blasting, with crisp enunciation.

The solo quartet take over for the second movement, an E minor sarabande with a little Bachian lilt as well as an extraordinary passage of soft brass-writing (at 'Pro peccatis suae gentis') which seems to pre-echo a similar patch in Jongen's *Mass* (written some 70

years later). The choral 'Tui nati vulnerati' movement (one of the few passages in a major key) is beautifully effective and makes an excellent 'sample track' for the uninitiated. The Royal Flemish Philharmonic's playing is beyond reproach save for a slightly eager double-bass player who comes in a bar early in the introduction to the 'Fac, ut portem Christi mortem' duet – a bizarre blemish that should surely have been edited out.

What is especially pleasing is the soloists' contribution. They really listen to each other and achieve a subtle blend with plenty of non-competitive 'give and take'. Top prize goes to the tenor Maximilian Schmitt, who is always strain-free and equally magnificent whether leading the chorus in the 'Fac me vere tecum flere' movement or as part of the balanced quartet. Michaela Selinger relishes her big alto solo 'Inflammatum et accensum' with none of the swooping haughtiness of Dagmar Pecková for Järvi, and Ilse Eerens's top Bs crown the choral texture with a bell-like clarity. This new release must be the top choice. **G**

Selected comparison:
LPO, *N Järvi* (9/12) (LPO) LPO0062

Listening points

Your guide to the disc's memorable moments

Track 1, 'Stabat mater dolorosa'

After a Wagnerian dominant pedal note, the falling chromatic phrases are full of flowing tears. The emotional temperature for the whole piece is now set.

Track 2, 'Quis est homo, qui non fletur'

Marvel at Dvořák's pared-down scoring here with the sweetness of the alto and tenor soloists singing in parallel sixths.

Track 5, 'Tui nati vulnerati'

This flowing 6/8 movement is imbued with the spirit of Brahms at his most benign, with

hints of the *German Requiem's* 'Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen', with which it shares a key.

Track 9, 'Inflammatum et accensum'

Another vivid piece of word-setting (inflamed and burning); rather Handelian with its striding octave quavers in the bass-line.

Track 10, 'Quando corpus morietur'

After a reminiscence of the very opening of the piece, soloists and chorus unite in an eight-part texture as the soul gains the 'glory of Paradise' in D major.

G Visit the Gramophone Player at gramophone.co.uk to hear an excerpt from this issue's Recording of the Month