



Deeply emotional Dvořák *Stabat Mater* from Herreweghe in Amsterdam

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By David Pinedo, 17 February 2015

Tonight's performance at the Concertgebouw by Collegium Vocale Gent and the Orchestre des Champs-Élysées with their founder Philippe Herreweghe as conductor resulted in a highpoint of this season. Whether a Bach Passion with the RCO, Schütz cantatas, or an adventurous foray into Bruckner, the Flemish choir consistently performs the highest quality music. Tonight Herreweghe demonstrated yet again his ensemble's versatility with an illuminating performance of Dvořák's *Stabat Mater*. Together with a cast of top-notch soloists, a truly memorable evening took place. In quality, the seamless symbiosis of Herreweghe's ensembles overshadowed the excellent soloists, who sounded a bit out of place during the first two segments. As the piece progressed each seemed to fit in better, resulting in several fabulously sung moments.



Collegium Vocale Gent

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Dvořák wrote his first major composition to a liturgical text during an excruciating period during which he lost three children. Such musical digestion of personal loss brings Mahler's tragedies to mind, and tonight's work offered similar beauty and emotional depth. The piece opens with a nearly 20-minute long *Stabat mater dolorosa*. Ceaselessly, Herreweghe brought out transparency from choir and orchestra, illuminating Dvořák's score. Augmented by the acoustics of the Concertgebouw, the crystal clear beauty added a layer of emotional wonder to the performance. From their first moments, the lead oboist and flautist contrasted their

timbres crisply, distinguishing themselves clearly within their conductor's musical framework. The seemingly ever-present timpani rumbled quietly in the background; during the gentler passages, their softness and steady progression created a strangely comforting atmosphere.

The first highlight of the evening occurred during third part *Eia, Mater, fons amoris*. Offering a brief respite from the imposing passages earlier, orchestra and choir, in hypnotic repetition, build up to a brief fortissimo, foreshadowing the immense catharsis to come. Then with decreasing momentum and alternating volume they fades out, leading into the steadily paced *Fac, ut ardeat cor meum* that return the listeners back to mourning. Bohemian folk melodies surprised with a pastoral mood, channelling Dvořák's advocate Brahms. Backed by outbursts of the brass, Florian Boesch's deep bass contrasted powerfully with the mesmerising altos and sopranos in the choir. He contributed greatly to the chemistry on stage.

An impressive fugue followed with the entire choir moving between fortissimo and pianissimo on a cushion of timpani. At this point, Herreweghe peaked in his craftsmanship, though saving enough tricks for the finale. As the orchestra introduced the sixth segment, Magnus Staveland, somewhat aggressive but full of emotion, produced elegantly, clear phrasing in *Fac me vere tecum flere*. Here, Herreweghe turned even Dvořák's longwinded, repeated passages into exquisitely crystalline music. As the choir closed the seventh segment with *Fac me tecum plangere*, the mystical mood continued to resonate.

During the *Fac, ut portem Christi mortem*, the emotional performance reached operatic heights. Soloists Renata Pokupić and Staveland lovingly counterbalanced each other and produced another highlight with their duet. The mezzo-soprano sang with minimal vibrato generating welcome warmth, while the tenor countered passionately. Ilse Eerens continued the drama in *Inflammatum et accensum* with fragile vocal lines against a Baroque-tinted backdrop. The finale *Quando corpus morietur* progressed slowly but eventually the choir, orchestra and soloists burst out in a splendid eruption of joy, absorbing the deeply moving experience in a surprising B major catharsis. The work closed with voices cascading into a tremendous fugue, arriving at an all-forgiving "Amen". Dvořák's musical journey ended, but Herreweghe's exquisite transparency and mystical dimension won't be forgotten.