

## Mass in D major, op 86

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Today, choral music is not something that would immediately spring to mind when the name of Dvořák is mentioned, but in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially in Britain, it was the genre for which he was best known. His *Stabat Mater* of 1880 was hugely popular when it was first performed in London in 1883, leading to performances of his cantata *The Spectre's Bride* in 1885 and the oratorio *Saint Ludmila* in 1886. The popularity of these works was so great that he was commissioned by the Birmingham Festival in 1890 to compose a *Requiem*. When his usual publisher, Simrock, showed little interest in tonight's work, Dvořák realised that an English publisher was probably his best bet, and offered it to Novello.

Dvořák was born in the small town of Nelahozeves near Prague in what was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was the eldest of 14 children and his father worked as an innkeeper and butcher who also played the zither in local bands. He studied organ, piano, violin and music theory with a local organist until in 1857 he entered the Prague Organ School. After graduating, Dvořák played viola in a number of orchestras and gave piano lessons to make ends meet, but increasingly dedicated himself to composition, his first published work being the String Quartet in A minor. By 1871 he was able to give up his orchestral work to concentrate on composition, though he still needed the income provided by a position as organist at St Adalbert's church in Prague.

In 1874 he applied for the annual Austrian State Prize (the "Stipendium") whose purpose was "to award financial support to talented composers in need" in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. One of the three jury members was Brahms, who was much impressed by Dvořák's entry. The official report of the 1874 prize says that the impoverished music teacher "has submitted 15 compositions, among them symphonies, which display an undoubted talent... The applicant... deserves a grant to ease his straitened circumstances and free him from anxiety in his creative work." Dvořák won the prize again in 1877, and Brahms came to the aid of the composer by recommending him to his own publisher Simrock. Brahms wrote: "As for the state stipendium, for several years I have enjoyed works sent in by Antonín Dvořák (pronounced Dvorschak) of Prague. This year he has sent works . . . that seem to me very pretty . . . . Play them through and you will like them as much as I do. Dvořák has written all manner of things: operas (Czech), symphonies, quartets, piano pieces. In any case, he is a very talented man. Moreover, he is poor! I ask you to think about it!" Simrock was clearly convinced by Brahms' advocacy. Indeed, Brahms' letter is credited with igniting the young man's career, for, in a very short time, Dvořák's music was being sold and performed throughout Europe.

In 1887, Josef Hlávka, an artistic patron, architect, and friend of Dvořák's and founder of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Art, commissioned tonight's work for the consecration of a private chapel at his country estate, Lužany Castle, in southwest Bohemia. Unlike Dvořák's other choral works, this Mass was conceived for a more intimate space and occasion than those works. It was scored for four soloists (or semi-chorus) and choir, with a simple organ accompaniment, and was intended for an actual religious service, as opposed to a concert performance. Dvořák wrote to Hlávka, "I have successfully completed the [Mass], and I am very pleased with it. I believe it is a work that will fulfil its purpose. It could bear the dedication: faith, hope, and love of Almighty God, with thanks for the great gift that has enabled me to bring this work in praise of the Highest and in the honour of art to a happy conclusion. Do not be surprised that I am so pious - an artist who is not could not achieve anything like this. Have we not found examples in Beethoven, Bach, Raphael, and many others? I also thank you for giving me the impulse to write

the work in this form, for I should hardly have thought of it; up to now I wrote works of this kind only on a large scale and for a large number of performers. This time, however, I have written for only a modest presentation, and still I dare to claim that my work has turned out well.”

The consecration took place on September 11, 1887. Dvořák himself conducted; the two female parts were sung by Hlávka's wife, Zdeňka (soprano), and Dvořák's wife, Anna (alto), accompanied by organist Josef Klička and the Hlahol Choir of Plzeň (Pilsen). When his publisher Simrock twice declined to publish the Mass, Dvorak offered it to Novello in London. They accepted it, but on the condition that Dvořák orchestrated the organ part. He readily agreed, and used the opportunity to revise the work in a number of minor ways. Bizarrely, having demanded the orchestration as a condition of publishing, Novello never published the orchestrated score. To add the absurd to the bizarre, instead of using Dvořák's original accompaniment, Novello then employed Berthold Tours to make a piano reduction based on the orchestral version of 1892, issuing only a piano-vocal score using Tours' accompaniment. The original version was not published until 1963.

## **The Crucifixion**

**John Stainer (1840-1901)**

When John Stainer was born in 1840, he entered a world centred on the choral tradition of the Anglican church, a world in which he would spend his entire life. His father was a schoolmaster who gave him organ lessons from a very early age, and in 1849 he became a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, soon becoming one of the leading solo boys (singing at the funerals of J.M.W. Turner in 1851 and the Duke of Wellington in 1852). In 1854 (aged 14) he became organist at St Benedict's and St Peter's in the City of London, moving to St Michael's College, Tenbury shortly afterwards. He entered Christ Church, Oxford as an undergraduate in 1859, was appointed organist of Magdalen College in 1860, and university organist in 1861. In 1872 he became organist at St Paul's Cathedral and began a series of very necessary reforms, increasing the size of the choir from 18 to 36, improving their salaries, and expanding the repertoire and the number of services sung. He was knighted in 1888, but in the same year had to resign as organist of St Paul's because of failing eyesight (he had lost the sight in one eye at the age of 5 through an accident). He became Professor of Music at Oxford in 1889 and vice president of the Royal College of Organists. He retired in 1899 and died suddenly at Verona whilst on a holiday in Italy in 1901. His compositions were almost exclusively of church music, including three other oratorios, *Gideon*, *The Daughter of Jairus* and *Mary Magdalene*, but although popular at the time, few have survived. He himself considered his compositions “rubbish”, but, at least in the case of *The Crucifixion*, he was unfairly hard on himself.

*The Crucifixion* was written in 1887 for St Marylebone Parish Church, where Stainer's former pupil, William Hodge, was organist, and where it has been performed every Good Friday since that year. The text was provided by the Rev. William Sparrow-Simpson, the son of a friend and colleague at St Paul's. Stainer's inspirations were the Passions of Bach, with their use of chorales in which the congregation could join (as a 13 year old, Stainer had taken part in the first English performance of the *St Matthew Passion*). In order to fulfil a genuine need in the repertoire, the style used was intentionally simple and “easy”, with just organ accompaniment and solo work which did not require highly trained voices, so that ordinary parish choirs would be able to perform it. It was an immediate success and remained a central part of the celebration of Holy Week in many Anglican churches for decades. Like much of Victorian art, it went out of fashion between the two world wars, but has retained the affection of many. Barry Rose

has written of *The Crucifixion* "To [Sparrow-Simpson's] words Stainer added his music, writing some of the most memorable hymn-tunes we shall ever hear, and showing a rare sense of understanding in painting the text with music that is both thoughtful and dramatic, whilst also giving us the sublime and unsurpassed unaccompanied setting of 'God So Loved The World'."

Paul Steinson  
Rochester Choral Society  
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