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# *Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater"*

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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## Contents

About this Title .....	4
Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" .....	5
Notes .....	9
Summary .....	11

## About this Title

### Source

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By Richard Wagner

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[102]

## Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater"

(1)

THERE still are good musicians who find their keenest joy in searching the chefs-d'œuvre of ancient masters, to fill themselves with their incomparable beauties; and when one brings to such a study so much zeal and intelligence as the author of whom we are about to speak, the results deserve no less esteem and recognition than if they were original works. It would be a great mistake to ascribe to M. Lvoff the claim of having added to the perfection of the work of Pergolesi, for it is evident that his only aim has been to remind the modern school of a sublime exemplar, and to get it enrolled in the repertoire of contemporary performances. Under influence of this conviction, and in spite of all aesthetic scruples excited by this mode of secondary arrangement, it is impossible to deny the interest and importance of the publication now before us.

At an epoch like ours, when the different branches of the art of Music have taken such divergent lines, often to the point of a most abnormal transformation, it is an essential need and noble duty to ascend to primal sources for new elements of force and fecundity. But to usefully re-knit these ties of parentage with the great masters of the past, the practice of their compositions—adapted, if [103] necessary, to the exigences of modern taste—will always be more efficacious than a pale and mediocre imitation of their wondrous style. In fact the last procedure offers all the danger of a retrogression, for such copiers are but too frequently inclined to reproduce in their concoctions those superannuated forms which purity of taste reproves.

The exclusive admirers of the ancient school have fallen into a vicious exaggeration, through attaching the same value to its imperfect canons as to the depth and thought revealed in its works.

Grand and noble as are those thoughts, the details of material execution shew inexperience and the gropings of a science in its infancy; and it is impossible to call in doubt the greater perfecting of form, if not in our day, at least during the intermediary period that succeeded to this golden age of musical art.

It was with Mozart, the chief of the Idealistic school, that religious music really touched its apogee in point of structure; and if I did not fear being misinterpreted, I should venture to express the wish that all the works of the preceding period had been transmitted to us clad in forms analogous, for the perfection of these latter would have been ample recompense for the pains of such a transformation; nor would the difficulty have been very great, since Mozart was not too distant from the primitive epoch, and his manner still preserved its sentiment and characteristic traits. On the contrary, he has brilliantly proved how much the older masterpieces could be enhanced by a vivacity and freshness of colour, without losing aught of their intrinsic merit, so to say, and notably by his arrangement of Haendel's oratorio *The Messiah*.

We are far from blaming those who would only have Haendel's oratorio performed in a cathedral with a chorus of from three to four hundred voices, supported by organs and a quartet of stringed instruments of proportionate number, to enjoy the whole splendour and primitive energy of the composition. For the individual anxious to appreciate the historic value of Haendel's music it [104] would no doubt be preferable to hear it rendered by such potent means,—a thing almost impossible to realise to-day for reason of one notorious circumstance, namely that Haendel himself improvised the accompaniments on the organ for the first performances of the *Messiah*. Is it not permissible to assume that the composer, unacquainted with the more perfect modern use of the 'wind,' employed the organ to produce

the same effects that Mozart entrusted later to the improved wind-instruments of his day?

In any case, Mozart's instrumentation has embellished the work of Haendel in the general interest of art. It needed, in truth, the genius of a Mozart, to accomplish such a task in so complete a measure. He who undertakes a similar work to-day, can therefore do no better than adopt that for his model, without seeking to complicate its simple and natural lines; for an application of the resources of modern orchestration would be the surest means of travestying the theme and character of ancient works.

And such has been the laudable desire of M. Lvoff. An examination of his score will demonstrate that he has taken his type from the discreet instrumentation of Mozart. Three trombones, two trumpets, the drums, two clarinets and two bassoons,—such are the elements added to the original orchestra. And most frequently it is only the clarinets and bassoons that take an active part in the accompaniment, following the precedent of the bassoons and basset-horns in Mozart's *Requiem*. The greatest difficulty must have resided in the general revision of the string-quartet, as Pergolesi had written it entirely in the naïve style of olden days, limiting himself for most of the time to three parts, and sometimes even to two. Very often the complementary harmonic part was a matter of course, and one finds it hard to explain why the composer omitted to write it, thereby producing very perceptible gaps. But in other places the filling-up presented serious difficulties, especially where the melody seems to admit [105] of only three parts, or sometimes two, and where a supplementary voice might be considered superfluous, if not harmful. Nevertheless this great obstacle has always been happily surmounted by M. Lvoff, whose general discretion is beyond all praise. The wind-instruments which he introduces, far from ever smothering or altering the original theme, serve on the contrary to throw it into higher relief. They even have a certain independent character that contributes to the effect of the ensemble, entirely after the rules adopted by Mozart, and in this regard we may particularly instance the fourth strophe, *Quæ mærebat*. Only occasionally, for example at the beginning of the first number, was it wrong, perhaps, to transfer the part of the violins to the bassoons and clarinets; not that the author has here misjudged the character of these latter instruments, but since the bass, retained for the lower strings, appears too full and too sonorous for its new superstructure.

It is astonishing, however, that the author of so conscientious a work should have let himself be once betrayed into altering the bass: namely at the commencement of the second strophe, where M. Lvoff has modified the entire phrase, greatly to the disadvantage of the original melody. No doubt he did it to avoid a passage of a certain crudity which Pergolesi had given to the part of the alto; but in our opinion there were other ways of remedying this harshness, without sacrificing the great composer's lovely bass. For the rest, it is the solitary instance, in all the work, of a change both useless and unfavourable. With scarcely another exception, we have witness of the most conscientious zeal and a highly delicate appreciation of the old chef-d'œuvre, down to tiny details of a character a trifle superannuated.

Beyond dispute the most audacious step in M. Lvoff's undertaking is the addition of choruses, since Pergolesi wrote his *Stabat* for but two voices, the one soprano and the other high contralto. Strictly speaking, it would have been better to respect the original intention of the master; [106] but as this introduction of choruses has in no way spoiled the work, and as, moreover, the two original solo parts have been preserved in their integrity, it would be impossible to seriously blame the adaptor; in fact one must even acknowledge that he has added to the richness of the ensemble, for this adjunction has been effected with a rare address and a superior understanding of the text.

Thus in the first number the intermittent fusion of the choral with the solo voices reminds us happily of the manner in which the two choirs are treated in Palestrina's *Stabat*. However it is principally upon the choir, that weighs the difficulty of adding complementary parts in the places aforesaid where Pergolesi had designed his melody exclusively for two or three. Here

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the arranger is obliged to restrict the rôle of the chorus to three parts at most, not to absolutely mar the original harmony and disfigure its noble simplicity. This is especially perceptible in the fugal passages, such as the *Fac ut ardeat*. Further, the vocal theme is never in the tenor register, but devolves exclusively on either the soprano or alto, as in the original composition, or the bass which it was easy to extract from the primary accompaniment. Above all, the reviser must have been embarrassed by the *Amen*, expressly written by Pergolesi for two voices alone.

Apropos of No. 10, *Fac ut portem*, we must remark that it would have been better to omit the accompaniment by the choir, as also the concluding cadence, these two accessories reminding one too much of modern Opera, and ill according with the character of the sacred work.

But if we have felt it our duty to point out the reefs presented by so rare a task, we have also to frankly avow that the modern composer has given proof of great ability in doubling them. It would be impossible to praise too much the noble aim that has governed M. Lvoff's enterprise; for if an intelligent admiration and an ardent sympathy for so great a masterpiece alone were capable of prompting anyone to such a labour, there also is no doubt that M. Lvoff took the perfect measure of its difficulty [107] and extent. It therefore is no more than just to recognise not merely the talent, but also the courage necessary to accomplish a labour where the artist has to make complete denial of, and constantly efface himself, to let the superior genius to whom he renders loving homage shine in all his glory.

R. WAGNER.





## Notes

### Note 1 on page 5

This "revue critique" of the "*Stabat Mater* de Pergolèse, arrangé pour grand orchestre avec chœurs par Alexis Lvoff, membre des Académies de Bologne et de Saint-Pétersbourg" appeared in the *Gazette Musicale* of Oct. 11, 1840. Although it is not included in the *Ges. Schr.*, having evidently been regarded by the author as simply a pot-boiler, I fancy that many of its sentences will justify my rescuing it from oblivion. Col. Alexis Lvoff, or Lvoff, was the composer of the Russian National Anthem.—Tr.



[363]

## Summary

Importance of reviving old masterpieces for performance: limits to be observed by the adaptor; Mozart's revision of Handel's *Messiah* a model (104). Detailed criticism of M. Lvoff's adaptation; difficulties he has overcome (107).