Stabat Mater: A Spiritual Journey

ANONYMOUS - XII CENTURY
Lamentation de la Vierge au pied de la Croix

CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI (1567-1643)
Adoramus te Christe

JOÃO RODRIGUES ESTEVES (c. 1710-1751)
Miserere a due Cori

ALESSANDRO DELLA CIAIA (1605-1670)
Lamentatio Virginis in dispositione Filii de cruce à 9

—Intermission—

DOMENICO SCARLATTI (1685-1757)
Stabat Mater a 10 voci
Stabat mater dolorosa
Cujus animam gementem
Eja mater, fons amoris
Sancta mater, istud agas
Fac me vere tecum flere
Juxta crucem tecum stare
Inflammatus et accensus
Fac ut animae donetur
Amen
Love, lamentation, all-consuming devotion. These emotions, entwined and entangled with each other, formed a great well of inspiration for composers working in seventeenth-century Italy. Tonight’s programme invites us to reflect on these thoughts, focusing on this period, in which composers drew on a highly expressive musical language to depict and reinforce the emotions associated with Catholic devotion. The chief focus is the Blessed Virgin Mary, juxtaposing her pure love for her Christ-Child with her deep grief at his crucifixion.

**LAMENTATION OF THE VIRGIN AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS**

**Anonymous**

The programme opens with an anonymous twelfth-century *Lamentation of the Virgin at the Foot of the Cross*. Sung in Old French, it is a work of somewhat unsettling beauty, and represents a period which witnessed the birth of romantic French verse. It is in the form of a *lai*, a popular medieval form which used rhymed couplets. Only some of the original thirteen verses are used – verses I, III, V, VI, and X.

**ADORAMUS TE CHRISTE**

**Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)**

Claudio Monteverdi never managed to secure the job in Rome that he had once sought. It seems an audience with the Pope did not lead to a favorable result. However, his contribution to musical life in Venice has formed a large part of his extraordinary musical legacy. The motet *Adoramus te, Christe* displays a willingness to take on the rapid changes of character associated with the secular madrigal. Long-breathed phrases alternate with more rapid text-declamation in other voices in this effectively-proportioned piece.

**MISERERE A DUE CORI**

**João Rodrigues Esteves (c. 1710-1670)**

João Rodrigues Esteves, a Portugese composer, had been sent by the Portuguese King to study in Rome with Pitoni, a master of the Roman school. Later he became Master of Music at the Lisbon Cathedral. This piece, a *Miserere* for two choirs, dates from around 1737, and displays considerable mastery of the (by then a little old-fashioned) Roman style, with frequent, plangeant suspensions and grand cadences. These polyphonic sections are thrown into relief by alternation with plainchant, which in themselves contain considerable variety and alternation between the two choirs.

**LAMENTATION VIRGINIS IN DISPOSITIONE**

**Dilii de cruce à 9**

**Alessandro Della Ciaia (1605-70)**

The first half of the program concludes with a piece written by the Italian nobleman and amateur composer, Alessandro della Ciaia. Though not renowned as a musician, della Ciaia published three books of songs, demonstrating a remarkable facility in both polyphony and solo song. This work is a fine example of his skill, and is considered his most successful composition.

Taken from the collection *Sacri modulatus*, published in 1666, the *Lamentatio Virginis in dispositione*
Filii de cruce is a paraphrase of part of the famous devotional poem, Stabat mater. The narrative takes the form of a dialogue between the lamenting Mary (in passages reminiscent of Carissimi’s famous closing chorus ‘Plorate filii’ from the oratorio Jepthe) and a chorus of angels singing extracts from the Stabat mater. At the conclusion of the piece, the chorus joins the Virgin Mary in her lamenting and sublime close. Della Ciaia’s harmonic writing has a surprising audacity for an amateur musician, and there is no denying its powerful emotional pull.

Stabat Mater
Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)

These works form a prelude to Domenico Scarlatti’s most famous religious composition, the Stabat mater for ten voices and basso continuo, in which the composer pays homage to the great tradition of polyphony. Written for ten soloists, Scarlatti employs a great wealth of techniques to portray in music the grief of the Virgin at the crucifixion of her son.

The sheer number of manuscripts in which this work is preserved attest to its fame. All indications point to its being written for the Capella Giulia in Rome, the Pope’s own choir of St Peter’s Basilica. The vocal arrangement is astonishing – neither simply a choir split into two halves, nor a choir with soloists, but a choir consisting of ten solo parts, which are deployed in various combinations throughout. The result is a constantly evolving texture. Only in the two repeated sections (‘Eja mater’ and ‘Amen’) do the voices come together in their five pairs. Powerfully moving, it is one of Scarlatti’s most beautiful works, never more so than in the slow movements, which bring to bear wrenching tension and passages of tender lyricism. Only two verses suggest a faster tempo – the eighth verse, ‘Inflammatus’, which entrusts a virtuosic solo to the tenor and soprano, and the ninth verse, a fugal movement which introduces the final, brilliant Amen. In contrast to many traditional settings of the Stabat mater (for example those by Pergolesi, Vivadi, and Boccherini), which do not hesitate to alternate greatly contrasting tempos, Scarlatti’s setting is a more sombre, meditative affair. Indeed, it could be said to pay more attention to the mood of the text than some of the other Italian composers. Accordingly, only when the text makes reference to the gates of Paradise, does the mournful atmosphere seem to lift, like the parting of clouds, and the dance-like, triple-time conclusion to the piece is undeniably an expression of joy.

Program notes by James Potter © 2016

Vox Luminis

“...but there is also the extraordinary way in which Meunier has tuned the ensemble. First by bringing together singers with uniquely different timbres, but mostly by creating an overarching artistic sensibility that permeates the group and establishes one organic musical consciousness from which the music flows in beautiful, otherworldly weavings.” (San Francisco Classical Voice)

Specializing in the performance of 16th-18th century vocal music, Vox Luminis is praised for its seamless blend of high quality individual voices, exquisite tuning, and clarity of sound. Founded in 2004 in Namur, Belgium, the group met at one of the most distinguished centers for early music in Europe, the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. Vox Luminis performs in festivals and venues worldwide, including Belgium, France, Germany, Portugal, and Croatia. For the last several years, Vox Luminis has been the resident ensemble for the Utrecht Early Music Festival, the most important festival of its kind in the world. Vox Luminis’ most recent recording received several prestigious awards such as the Gramophone Recording of the Year, the Baroque Vocal Gramophone Award and the International Classical Music Award. It is also the recipient of Gramophone’s Editor’s Choice, Diapason d’Or, Choc de Classica, Muse d’Or Baroque, Preis der Deutschen Schallplatten Kritik, Joker de Crescendo, and Prix Caecilia. Vox Luminis’ all-encompassing passion for early music is demonstrated by its choice of repertoire: both beloved classics and more esoteric works find a home in its discography. As part of the Belgian Label Ricercar, the ensemble released its first recording in 2007, featuring four vocal works by Domenico Scarlatti, including his famous 10-part Stabat Mater. In May 2010, the ensemble released its second album, Samuel Scheidt: Sacrae Cantiones, which features several world premieres. Vox Luminis’ most recent CD, released in 2012, created a buzz with an interpretation of Heinrich Schütz’s Musicalische Exequien.

Vox Luminis is represented by Alliance Arts Management.