
Rossini's Stabat Mater

By Richard Wagner

Translated by William Ashton Ellis



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About this Title

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Preface

The account of this remarkable occurrence in the highest Paris world of music our friend despatched to Robert Schumann, who at that time was editor of the "Neue Zeitschrift für Musik" and headed the skit—signed with an inexplicable pseudonym—with the following motto:

"Das ist am allermeisten unerquickend,
Dass sich so breit darf machen das Unächte,
Das Ächte selbst mit falscher Scheu umstrickend."

("Of all our evils 'tis the sorriest token
How wide the spurious has spread its rule,
That e'en the genuine with false shame is spoken.")

RÜCKERT.

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Rossini's Stabat Mater

WHILE waiting for other musical treats in preparation for the glorious Paris public; while waiting for Halévy's "Maltese Knight," the "Water-carrier" of Cherubini, and finally, in the dimmest background, the "*Nonne Sanglante*" of Berlioz,—nothing so excites and captivates the interest of this fevered world of dilettanti, as—*Rossini's piety*. (1) Rossini is pious,—all the world is pious, and the Parisian salons have been turned into praying-cells.—It is extraordinary! So long as this man lives, he'll always be the mode. Makes he the Mode, or makes it him? 'Tis a ticklish problem. True, that this piety took root a long time since, especially in high society;—what time this ardour has been catered-for in Berlin by philosophic Pietism; what time the whole of Germany lays bare its heart to' the musical gospel according to Felix Mendelssohn,—the Paris world of quality has no idea of being left behind. For some while past they have been getting their first quadrille-composers to write quite exquisite *Ave Marias* or *Salve Reginas*; and themselves, the duchesses and countesses, have made it their duty to study the two, or three parts of them, and edify therewith their thronging guests, groaning for very reverence and overcrowding. This glowing stress of piety had long burnt through the charming corsets of these lion-hearted duchesses and countesses, and threatened to singe the costly tulle and [144] laces which theretofore had heaved so blamelessly and unimpassioned on their modest chests—when at last, at a most appropriate opportunity, it kindled into vivid flame. That opportunity was none other than the *in memoriam* service for the Emperor Napoleon, in the chapel of the Invalides. All the world knows that for these obsequies the most entrancing singers of the Italian and French Operas felt themselves impelled to render Mozart's Requiem, and all the world may see that that was no small matter. Above all, however, the *high* world of Paris was quite carried away by this flash of insight: it is wont to melt, without conditions, in presence of *Rubini's* and *Persiani's* singing; to close its fan with nerveless hand, to sink back upon its satin mantle, to close its eyes, and lisp: "*c'est ravissant!*" Further is it wont, when recovering from the exhaustion of its transports, to breathe out the yearning question: "By whom, this composition?" For this it really is quite requisite to know, if in one's stress to imitate those singers one means to send one's gold-laced chasseur next morning to the music-sellers, to fetch one home that heavenly aria or that divine duet. By strict observance of this custom the high Parisian world had come to learn that it was *Rossini*, *Bellini*, *Donizetti*, who had provided those intoxicating singers with the wherewithal to melt it; it recognised the merit of these masters, and it loved them.

So the destiny of France would have it that, to hear the adored *Rubini* and the bewitching *Persiani*, instead of in the *Théâtre des Italiens* one must assemble beneath the dome of the Invalides. In view of all the circumstances, the Ministry of Public Affairs had formed the wise resolve that this time, in lieu of Rossini's *Cenerentola*, *Mozart's* Requiem should be sung; and thus it came to pass, quite of itself, that our dilettantist duchesses and countesses were given something very different to hear, for once, from what they were accustomed-to at the Italian Opera. With the most touching lack of prejudice, however, they accommodated themselves to everything: they heard *Rubini* and *Persiani*,—they [145] melted away; instead of their fans, they dropped their muffs; they leant back on their costly furs (for it was mortal cold in church on December 15, 1840)—and, just as at the Opera, they lisped: "*c'est ravissant!*" Next day one sends for Mozart's Requiem, and turns its first few pages over: it has plenty of *colorature!* One tries them,—but: "Good Heavens! It tastes like physic! They're fugues!" "Powers above! where have we got to?" "How is it possible? This can't be the right thing!", "And yet!"—What's to be done?—One tortures oneself,—one tries,—it won't go at all!—But there's no help for it; sacred music must be sung! Did not *Rubini* and *Persiani* sing sacred

music?—Then kindly music-dealers, beholding the anguish of these pious ladies' hearts, rush in to the rescue: "Here you have brand-new Latin pieces by Clapisson, by Thomas, by Monpou, by Musard, &c., &c. All cut and dried for you! Made expressly for you! Here an *Ave*; there a *Salve*!"

Ah! how happy they were, the pious Paris duchesses, the fervent countesses! They all sing Latin: two soprani in thirds, with occasionally the purest fifths in all the world,—a tenor *col basso*! Their souls are calmed; no one now need be afraid of purgatory!—

Yet,—quadrilles of Musard's, or Clapisson's, one only dances *once*,—their *Ave*! and *Salve*!, with any good grace, one can sing but *twice* at most; that, however, is too little for the fervour of our high-class world; it asks for edifying songs which one may sing at least fifty times over, just like the lovely operatic arias and duets of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti. Someone had read indeed, in a theatrical report from Leipzig, that Donizetti's *Favorite* was full of old-Italian church-style; however, the fact that this opera's church-pieces were composed to a French, and not to a Latin text, obstructed our high world from giving vent to its religious stress by singing them; and it still remained to find the man whose church-songs one might sing with orthodox belief.

About this time it happened that *Rossini* had let nothing [146] be heard of him for ten long years: he sat in Bologna, ate pastry, and made wills. Among the pleadings in the recent action between Messieurs *Schlesinger* (2) and *Troupenas*, an inspired advocate declared that during those ten years the musical world had "moaned" beneath the silence of the giant master; and we may assume that, on this occasion, the Parisian *high* world even "groaned." Nevertheless there circulated dismal rumours about the extraordinary mood the *maestro* was in; at one moment we heard that his hypogastrium was much incommoded, at another—his beloved father had died [April 29, 1839];—one said that he meant to turn fishmonger; another, that he refused to hear his operas any more. But the truth of it seems to have been, he felt penitent and meant to write church-music; for this one relied on an old, a well-known proverb, and the fact is that Rossini evinced an invincible longing to make this proverb's second half come true, since he positively had no more need to verify its first. The earliest stimulus to carry out his expiation seems to have come to him in Spain: in Spain, where Don Juan found the amplest, choicest opportunities of sin, Rossini is said to have found the spur to penance.

It was on a journey which he was making with his good friend the Paris banker, Herr *Aguado*;—they were sitting at ease in a well-appointed chariot, and admiring the beauties of Nature,—Herr *Aguado* was nibbling chocolate, Rossini was munching pastry. Then it suddenly occurred to Herr *Aguado* that he really had robbed his compatriots more than was proper, and, smitten with remorse, he drew the chocolate from his mouth;—not to be behind such a beautiful example, Rossini gave his teeth a rest, and confessed that all through life he had devoted too much time to pastry. Both agreed that it would well beseem their present mood to stop their chariot at the nearest cloister, and go through some fit act of penance: no sooner said than done. The Prior of the nearest monastery received the travellers like a friend: he kept a capital [147] cellar, excellent *Lacrymæ Christi* and other good sorts, which quite uncommonly consoled the contrite sinners. Nevertheless it struck Messrs *Aguado* and *Rossini*, as they were in the right humour, that they really had meant to undergo a penance: Herr *Aguado* seized his pocket-book in haste, drew out a few telling banknotes, and dedicated them to the sagacious Prior. Behind this fine example of his friend's, again, Rossini felt he must not linger,—he produced a solid quire of music-paper, and what he wrote on it post-haste was nothing less than a whole *Stabat mater* with grand orchestra; that *Stabat* he presented to the estimable Prior. The latter gave them absolution, and they both got back into their chariot. But the worthy Prior soon was raised to lofty rank, and translated to Madrid; where he lost no time in having the *Stabat* of his confessional child performed, and dying at the earliest opportunity. Among a thousand memorable relics, his executors found the score of

that contrite *Stabat mater*; they sold it, at not at all a bad figure, for good of the poor—and thus, from hand to hand, this much-prized composition became at last the property of a Paris music-publisher.

Now this music-publisher, deeply moved by its countless beauties, and no less touched on the other side by the growing pain of unallayed religious fervour among the high Parisian dilettanti, resolved to make his treasure public. With stealthy haste he was having the plates engraved when up there sprang another publisher, who with astounding cruelty clapped an injunction on his busy, hidden offering. That other publisher, a stiff-necked man by the name of *Troupenas*, maintained he had far better claims to the copyright of that *Stabat mater*, for his friend Rossini had pledged it to him against a huge consignment of pastry. He further averred that the work had been in his possession quite a number of years, and his only reason for not publishing it had been Rossini's wish to first provide it with a fugue or two, and a counterpoint in the seventh; these, however, were still a hard task for the [148] master, as he had not quite completed his many years' study with that end in view; nevertheless, the master of late had gained so profound an insight into double counterpoint that his *Stabat* no longer pleased him in its present shape, and he had decided under no conditions to lay it thus—without fugues and such-like—before the world. (3) Unfortunately Herr *Troupenas*' letters of authorisation date merely from quite recent times; so that it would be difficult for this publisher to prove his prior rights, did he not believe he had one crushing argument, namely that so long ago as the obsequies of the Emperor Napoleon on December 15th, 1840, he had proposed this *Stabat* for performance in the chapel of the Invalides.

A shriek of horror and indignation rose from every salon of high Paris, when this latter statement was made known. "What!" cried everyone: "A composition of Rossini's was in existence,—it was offered you, and you Minister of Public Affairs, you rejected it? You dared, instead, to foist on us that hopeless Requiem by Mozart?"—In effect, the Ministry trembled; all the more, as its uncommon popularity had made it most obnoxious to the upper classes. It feared dismissal, an indictment for high treason, and therefore held it opportune to spread a secret rumour that Rossini's *Stabat mater* wouldn't at all have done for the Emperor's obsequies as its text was concerned with quite other things than were meet for Napoleon's shade to hear, and so forth.—That this was merely a herring drawn across the scent, one thought one saw at once; for one could justly reply that not a creature understood this Latin text, and finally—what mattered the text at all, if *Rossini's* [149] heavenly melodies were to be sung by the most ravishing singers in the world?—

But the strife of parties round this fateful *Stabat mater* rages all the fiercer, since there is a further point involved in those awaited fugues. At last, then, is this mysterious class of composition about to be made presentable for salons of the higher dilettanti! At last, then, shall they learn the secret of that silly stuff which so racked their brains in Mozart's Requiem! At last will *they* be able, too, to boast of singing fugues; and these fugues will be oh! so charming and adorable, so delicate, so aërial! And these *counterpointlets*—they'll make everything else quite foolish,—they'll look like Brussels lace, and smell like patchouli!—What?—And without these fugues, without these counterpointlets, we were to have had the *Stabat*? How shameful! No, we'll wait till Herr *Troupenas* receives the fugues.—Heavens!—but there arrives a *Stabat*, straight from Germany! Finished, bound in a yellow cover There, too, are publishers who maintain they have sent baked goods to Rossini, at heavy prices! Is the bewilderment to have no end? Spain, France, Germany, all fall to blows around this *Stabat*:—Action! Fight! Tumult! Revolution! Horror!—

Then Herr *Schlesinger* decides to shed a friendly ray upon the night of trouble: he publishes a *Waltz by Rossini*. All smooth the wrinkles from their brow,—eyes beam with joy,—lips smile: ala! what lovely waltzes!—But Destiny descends:—Herr *Troupenas* impounds the friendly ray! That dreadful word: *Copyright*—growls through the scarce laid

breezes. Action! Action! Once more, Action! And money is fetched out, to pay the best of lawyers, to get documents produced, to enter caveats.— — —O ye foolish people, have ye lost your hiking for your gold? I know somebody who for five francs will make you five waltzes, each of them better than that misery of the wealthy master's!

Paris, 15th December, 1841.

Notes

Note 1 on page 7

This article (to which a little editorial note was added, "From a new correspondent") formed the 'leader' in the *N.Z.f.M.* of December 28, 1841, and was signed "H. Valentino." The quotation from Friedrich Rückert (a celebrated German poet, 1788-1866) appears to have been Schumann's own selection, for it was assigned the usual place of honour beneath the journal's superscription. The text in the *Ges. Schr.* is absolutely identical with that in the *N.Z.*—Tr.

Note 2 on page 8

Publisher of the *Gazette Musicale.*—Tr.

Note 3 on page 9

According to Grove's Dictionary of Music, it was at the request of Aguado that Rossini composed six numbers of his *Stabat Mater* in 1832 for the Spanish Minister, Señor Valera, the work being then completed with four numbers by Tadolini. In 1839 the heirs of Valera sold the MS. for 2,000 fr. to a Paris publisher, at which Rossini was most indignant and instructed Troupenas to stop the publication and performance. He then wrote the remaining four numbers, and sold the whole to Troupenas for 6,000 fr. The first six numbers were produced at the Salle Herz in Paris on Oct. 31, 1841; the complete work was first performed at the Salle Ventadour, Jan. 7, 1842, by Grisi, Albertazzi, Mario and Tamburini.—Tr.

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Summary

Religious fervour in Parisian salons; duchesses and countesses singing their little *Ave* etc.; re-interment of Bonaparte's remains to accompaniment of Mozart's *Requiem*—they melt away, then try its music, "it tastes like physic"; so they get their quadrille-composers to write Latin pieces (145). Rossini's retirement at Bologna; his tour in Spain with Aguado; a *Stabat Mater* of contrition. Disputes about its copyright (147). The maestro learning counterpoint; at last the duchesses will be able to sing fugues. A "friendly ray" impounded (149).