

EXPERIENCE
Choral Arts
THE CHORAL ARTS SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON
SCOTT TUCKER, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Bel Canto

Toward the end of his life, in the company of friends at one of his famous and coveted Saturday evening “salons”, Rossini sighed, so the story goes, and said, “Alas for us, we have lost our bel canto.” Some 23 years later, the Contralto Maria Albinoni, whom Rossini greatly admired, expressed a similar sentiment in a note she penned in 1881, “The art of singing is going, and it will only revert with the sole real music of the future: that of Rossini.” Of course, Albinoni knew, as did Rossini, that fashions were changing, and that his music was anything but the music of the future. The term “bel canto” has as many definitions as it does proponents, but what Rossini and Albinoni doubtless meant was that they were pining for the way singing used to be before the styles and sound ideals of the late 19th century began to change. With the ascent of composers like Wagner and even Verdi, singing that was once characterized by beauty of tone, lightness, and agility was being replaced by volume, power and a more straightforward declamation of text. The broadest definition of bel canto includes Italian vocal music from the 1700s, through Mozart and ending in the early-mid 1800s. In the 1950’s, after the opera world had been dominated by the works of Verdi, Puccini and Wagner, a revival of earlier works began. It was at this point that the “golden age” of bel canto was identified, specifically as the music of the staged works of Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini between 1810 and 1835, which is what bel canto means to most people now. The first half of this evening’s concert draws almost completely from that golden age.

Stabat Mater

Music by Gioachino Antonio Rossini (1792 – 1868)
Text from 13th-century Catholic hymn to Mary

In 1829, at the age of 37, Rossini premiered his epic opera *Guillaume Tell*. It was his 39th opera, and subsequently, whether from exhaustion, or because he had attained as much success as he desired, it was his last. Although he was to live another 39 years, he never penned another opera. Just eighteen months later, Rossini was travelling in Madrid with his friend and supporter Alexandre Aguado, when a mutual friend, an influential prelate named Varela, asked him to set the Stabat Mater to music. Ordinarily Rossini would have refused such a request, but because he owed so much to Aguado, he agreed on condition that the work be used for private performance only, and the manuscript never made public. After composing about half of the score, health problems caused Rossini to delay its completion. Finally, when it became apparent that he was not going to be able to finish the project, he asked his friend Tadolini to complete the work on his behalf, and on March 26, 1832 the score was sent to Madrid, and Rossini was sent a gold, diamond-encrusted snuffbox in gratitude. That would have been the end of it, and we would likely never have heard of the Stabat Mater if it weren’t for what happened next.

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When Varela (the prelate) died in 1837, the Stabat Mater was sold by his heirs to the publisher Aulagnier who wrote to Rossini joyfully announcing their intention to publish the work. Rossini wrote back to them immediately saying that if they went ahead with their plans he would pursue the matter, “to the death!” He then quickly set to the task of completing the work himself, replacing the movements that Tadolini had written, and sold the rights of his newly revised Stabat Mater to his own publisher, Troupenas. A long legal battle ensued, which Rossini and his publisher won when the court decided that a snuff box, no matter how elegant, did not constitute payment. Finally, on January 7, 1842, the revised Stabat Mater was premiered in Paris, followed three months later by performances in Bologna, all to great acclaim.

The text of the Stabat Mater is a thirteenth century liturgical poem which takes its title from the opening line and translates, “the mother stood in sorrow.” It is a poem about Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the foot of the cross. Like its cousin text, the Dies Irae, it is a Latin poem written in trochaic tetrameter. (Three lines of DAdum DAdum DAdum DAdum). Although it is not set as often as other liturgical texts, there is a long list of distinguished composers who have set it. Among them are Palestrina, Vivaldi, Pergolesi, Haydn, Dvořák, Verdi, Poulenc, and Pärt.

Although Rossini’s Stabat Mater was begun reluctantly, and finished seemingly out of spite, Rossini did write one other large sacred work at the end of his long life, the *Petite Messe Solennelle* this time quite willingly and for no particular occasion. In between these two large sacred works, Rossini wrote about one hundred and fifty songs and piano pieces to be performed at small gatherings, which he often hosted himself. These pieces, which he termed *Péchés de vieillesse* (Sins of Old Age) have been highly regarded over time, and some of them are captured in Respighi’s *La boutique fantasque* (The Magic Toy shop).

Rossini was known as a wit and a gourmet (Tournedos Rossini is a dish named after him). He liked to give the impression that he was lazy and didn’t put a lot of effort into his work, and he claimed that he would lie in bed writing, and if the papers fluttered away, he would just start a new piece rather than get out of bed. He could write music very fast – *Il barbiere di Siviglia* was written in thirteen days! – but he wrote with greater care than he would have others believe.

At the end of his *Petite Messe Solennelle*, a beautifully crafted piece written when he was seventy one, Rossini includes a postscript, which gives us a good sense of his self-deprecating sense of humor: “Dear God. Well, this poor little Mass is completed. Have I for once written real Sacred Music or merely damned bad music? I was born for opera buffa, as Thou knowest! Little skill, but some heart, that about sums it up. So blessed be Thou, and grant me Paradise.”

–Program note by Scott Tucker | © Scott Tucker, 2018