

Szymanowski's Stabat Mater

Written by bluesever

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Although Szymanowski is best-known for his orchestral and chamber music, his contribution to vocal music was far from negligible. He wrote collected songs and several stage-works, notably his opera "King Roger", while both the Third Symphony and the ballet "Harnasie" (Mountain Robbers) include a tenor solo and chorus. Towards the end of his life, he composed choral music on sacred topics, the two short cantatas "Veni Creator" and "Litany to the Virgin Mary." Undoubtedly, however, his vocal-instrumental masterpiece is the **Stabat Mater**. Despite its modest size and forces, it is one of his most expressive and resonant works and is one of the glories of twentieth-century sacred music.

Karol Szymanowski – Stabat Mater

Szymanowski described his "Stabat Mater" as a 'Peasant Requiem'. In fact, unlike the works Karol Szymanowski composed during the first two decades of the 20th century, his "Stabat Mater" could only have been written in a country with Slavic culture. Drawing on his musical roots and mother tongue, he wrote a transparent score for soloists, mixed choir and orchestra. It is all fascinatingly simple. The melodies consist of minor and major seconds and thirds and the pace of most movements is slow; only the second movement has a rhythm and melody that seem to pre-empt Orff's Carmina Burana. It is a unique masterpiece of oratorio.



Karol Szymanowski

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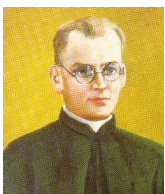
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"Stabat Mater" was commissioned by the Warsaw patron of the arts, Dr Bronislaw Krystall. The piece was meant as a requiem dedicated to the memory of Krystall's prematurely deceased wife. However, the death of Szymanowski's niece Alusia made the composer decide to change the contract, and compose a Stabat Mater instead of a Requiem. Under the circumstances, the theme of the suffering and grief of the Mother of the crucified Jesus was closer to the composer's heart. The work was completed in 1926 and, in accordance with the contract, was dedicated *"To the memory of Izabela Krystallowa"*.



Bronislaw Krystall

The text Szymanowski used was Jozef Jankowski's Polish translation, 'Stala matka bolejata', of the famous Mediaeval sequence 'Stabat Mater dolorosa', but outside Poland the work is sometimes performed with the original Latin lyrics. Although the 13th-century text is inherently dramatic, Janowski's translation is especially raw. Kornel Michalowski indicates the composer's initial attraction to the Polish translation was a result of its *"unusually primitive, almost 'folk-like' simplicity and naivety."*



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Jozef Jankowski

In the “**Stabat Mater for soloists, choir and orchestra opus 53,**” the composer created a Polish atmosphere by marrying popular elements with modern harmonic and tonal means’ but without ‘citing’ the music of the mountains, found in Zakopane which he made his permanent home in 1930, suffering from tuberculosis. Coinciding with his composition of Stabat Mater, was Szymanowski's study of early music – encompassing "pre-Palestrinian" and Palestrinian periods, as well as a study of old-Polish religious music. Devices used indicating this influence include: parallel movement between voices, modal pitch organization, and strongly patterned rhythms such as ostinati. Also incorporated into the work are melodic elements of two Polish Hymns: "Swiety Boze" [Holy God] and Gorzkie zale [Bitter Sorrows].



Szymanowski - Stabat Mater, autograf

The world premiere of Stabat Mater took place without the composer being present, as he was ill and staying at an Austrian sanatorium, on 11 January 1929 at the Warsaw Philharmonic, with soloists Stanisława Korwin-Szymanowska (the composer's sister), Halina Leska and Eugeniusz Mossakowski, conducted by Grzegorz Fitelberg. Many critics hailed the piece as Szymanowski's greatest work. The composer himself spoke of Stabat Mater as a work in which the expression of his creativity had fully crystallized.

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Stabat Mater Dolorosa

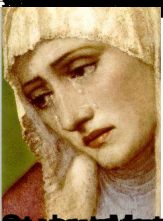
Tadeusz Zieliński wrote in his work 'Szymanowski. Liryka i ekstaza' / 'Szymanowski. Lyricism and Ecstasy':

„Stabat Mater occupies an important and special place in Szymanowski's output due to its great artistry achieved by a rather ruthless selection of means of expression. The music's huge emotional power reveals itself without any exuberant gesturing, spectacular sound arrangement, or mounting sophisticated chords. The deep, excruciating emotion seeks a direct outlet through simplicity - melody, harmony, texture, often even rhythmic pulse - and concentration. Striving for such an ideal, Szymanowski opted for archaization; work on the composition was preceded by his research into Renaissance music, especially Polish music. There is a clear trace of this in the work's harmonic language, in a fondness for triads (put together outside the classical convention), thirds alone and empty fifths, although archaic sound is mixed with contemporary, fresh combinations of sounds. An unusual economy of musical means and avoidance of flashy elements are prominent at first glance in the very modest picture of the score. However, and this needs emphasizing strongly, the external, sometimes ascetic austerity of the musical shape and means of expression combine beautifully with the internal warmth and delicate tenderness of the expressed content. It is probably this special, intriguing combination of apparent opposites - austere form and tender expression - that moves listeners easily, and means that audiences receive 'Stabat Mater' much more warmly than any other work by Szymanowski.”

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Szymanowski - Stabat Mater, Proms 1995