

Tonbridge Philharmonic Society

Review by Roger Evenden

Dvorak's Stabat Mater

Chapel of St Augustine, Tonbridge School

23 November 2019

Of the repertoire of works for chorus and orchestra from the nineteenth century, Dvorak's *Stabat Mater* must be one of the more rarely heard; yet it is undoubtedly a masterpiece. Part of the reason may be the strange incongruity between the somewhat austere 13th century text and its expression through full-blooded Romanticism. The poem (attributed to a Franciscan friar) is one of unremitting sorrow until the fleeting vision of paradise in the last stanza. Dvorak, however, has given us a work full of variety in mood, key and texture. Saturday's concert allowed the large and appreciative audience to hear all the different groupings of musicians which make up the whole ensemble expressing this text, each in their own particular way – full chorus, women's and men's voices alone, soloists individually and in duet and quartet, and the varied colours of the orchestra. Only in the finale did the full power of the tutti find expression in a splendid fugue and Amen before the final, peaceful coda.

In recent years, it has been noticeable that the Society has put considerable emphasis on finding a strong and balanced solo team. This performance certainly bore witness to the effectiveness of this strategy. Helena Dix (soprano), Sophie Dicks (Mezzo Soprano), Christopher Turner (Tenor) and Dawid Kimberg (Baritone) were all superb in their own individual ways, yet they blended perfectly in their different permutations. Of particular note was a beautifully-phrased duet between soprano and tenor.

In a work such as Dvorak's *Stabat Mater*, the interplay between soloists, chorus and orchestra is highly intricate yet essential to the spirit of the composition. There was much sensitive playing with some well-shaped and tonally colourful solo instrumental lines, yet there was the feeling that more rehearsal, with chorus and orchestra together, would have been beneficial, to develop the subtle interplay of instrumental and vocal colours.

Without doubt the performance grew in confidence and musical depth as the work progressed. The opening is cruelly exposed, with its orchestral octaves and solo lines, and its important entry by the chorus tenors. By the time we heard the men's and women's voices in their own verses, confidence had grown and these sections were tonally rich and assured.

The work was conducted by Matthew Scott Rogers, a newcomer to the Tonbridge Philharmonic, and a director who brings a wealth of experience working with professional musicians at the highest level. His restrained, yet authoritative, style of leadership made considerable demands on both chorus and orchestra, yet they responded magnificently, appreciating his considerable gifts in interpretation and shaping of this large work. The chorus was not given the overtly enthusiastic encouraging gestures often used by conductors to get the best out of amateur singers; but they knew they had to deliver, and they did. Matthew put great emphasis on the shaping of phrases and dynamic balance. His conducting style was immaculate in expressing his intentions, revealing his detailed understanding and knowledge of this complex score.

After much introspective music, it was a revelation to hear the full force of the ensemble in the final energetic fugue. The singing and playing overflowed with tightly-sprung energy and power - a moment of great excitement before the hushed epilogue. An evening to remember. Congratulations to Matthew Scott Rogers and his large team of musicians.