



Edition Ferenc Fricstay (XI) – G. Rossini: Stabat Mater

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Audiophile Audition (Gary Lemco - 2009.06.07)

Audite restores the live recording of 22 September 1954 from the University of the Arts, Berlin, when Ferenc Fricstay (1914-1963) assembled many of his favorite soloists for the 1842 *Stabat Mater* of Gioachino Rossini. Even today, the work treads a nervous tightrope between “strict” liturgy and Rossini’s extroverted, operatic style. The composer’s having arranged a drinking song for “Cujus animan gementem/contristantam et dolentem. . .” (Her grieving heart/so full of tears. . .), utilizing the old technique of *contrafactum*, both awed and angered many scholars and auditors, who found the text unfit for proper contextual worship. Yet, by varying his tempos and employing a popular idiom, Rossini avoids the monotony Dvorak encountered in his own setting of the *Stabat Mater*, as a series of adagios. In the present recording, a lyrical Ernst Haefliger intones the magical aria, which often imitates Mozart’s and Bellini’s *bel canto* style, ascending to a high D-flat. Its huge leaps and martial air, its long-held, high tessitura, nonetheless, yield to the *maestoso* indication under Fricstay to reveal much of its intended lamentation.

Fricstay adopts fairly brisk tempos throughout, so the duet “*Quis est homo qui non fleret*” (Who is it who would not weep) between Maria Stader and the swarthy-toned Marianna Radev moves with a kind of Verdi-esque character, almost a scene from *Il Trovatore*. The precision of the orchestral background--strings and intruding brass--add a pathos of breathtaking beauty to the fateful text, which has the soli rising in a unison that might have inspired *Lakme*. Visceral text painting occurs as Kim Borg illustrates the scourging of Jesus in the aria “*Pro peccata suae gentis/Vidit Jesum in tormentis*.” Borg’s descending line resonates with grueling sadness as we witness the forsaken Jesus yield up his dying spirit. A grim chorus chants, a cappella, “*Eja Mater, fons amoris*,” (O Mother, source of love), to which Borg lends his plaintive voice, beseeching the burning power of faith. The huge Quartetto, “*Sancta Mater, istud agas/Crucifxi fige plagas*” (Holy Mother, fix your crucified Son’s wounds in my heart) opens with a swaggering, march-like aria for tenor, to which Stader adds her lustrous voice so as to share humanity’s grief. Its duet at “*Donec ego vixero*” (. . .as long as I live) assumes a grand scale, the other two voices added over string pizzicati in imitation of the latter parts of Mozart’s *Requiem* to resolve in vocal sprezzatura at “*Fac me tecum plangere*” (Let me weep with thee).

Alto Radev has her extended moment in “*Fac ut portem Christi mortem*” (Grant that I might bear Christ’s death), shared with horns, woodwinds, and strutting, string leaps followed by quick figures suggesting flames of ardent faith. The famed soprano aria with chorus, “*Inflamatus et accensus*” (Inflamed and burning) allows Stader to display that flexible, streamlined coloratura which made her a leading Mozart exponent. The chorus and tympani invoke visions of Apocalypse, here mitigated by feminine mercies. The a cappella choir slowly, carefully intones “*Quando corpus morietur*” (When my body dies), to rise in ecstasies for “*Paradisi gloria*,” the joys of

Heaven. We conclude with only four words, "In sempiterna saecula, Amen." The last is first, shot out of Fricsay's cannon, followed by a strict fugue that embraces--forever and ever--the diapason of humanity. The trumpets and tympani salute with a four-note motif that nods to Beethoven. Massive, polished, stylistically eclectic, the Stabat Mater of Rossini receives a reverent, if mannered performance from one of the few German-tradition conductors to approach it in the days after World War II.

