

PROGRAM NOTES

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) is a rare example of a composer who achieved international fame during his lifetime. Even more remarkable is that his popularity has only grown in the century following his death—perhaps making him one of the most recognizable composers in Western classical music today.



Dvořák's works continue to decorate concert halls throughout the world with his signature blend of folk melodies and late-Romantic musical aesthetics.

Born in the Bohemian village of Nelahozeves just north of Prague in the modern-day Czech Republic, Dvořák began developing his unique style from a young age, influenced by Roman Catholic devotion and frequent exposure to a stunning variety of folk music performed by Bohemian locals and foreign travelers passing through Nelahozeves. In the village church, Dvořák heard sacred music by master composers like Mozart, and he also enjoyed regular folk music performances hosted at his family's tavern and butcher shop. Dvořák would later join the village bands and church ensembles as a violinist, encouraged by his family to explore and develop his apparent musical affinity. Guided by a strong sense of Christian faith and a deep connection to his Bohemian heritage, young Dvořák fell in love with a vibrant musical world that continued to inspire him throughout his composing career.

Despite his natural talent and dedicated efforts, Dvořák did not see critical acclaim until the late 1870s. In 1877, Dvořák submitted his *Moravian Duets* (a set of 23 vocal duets set to Moravian folk poetry) to the Austrian State Prize for Composition, with composer Johannes Brahms as a lead judge. While Dvořák had won the prize in previous years, Brahms was particularly moved by the *Moravian Duets* and referred Dvořák and the Duets to his publisher, the N. Simrock publishing house. This relationship turned Dvořák into a prominent international composer, leading to numerous commissions and performances of his folk-inspired works across Europe, Britain, and the United States.

Selections from *Legends*, Op. 59

Dvořák's relationship with Brahms, and especially the N. Simrock publishing house, kicked off a remarkably productive period in the composer's life. It was during this time that Dvořák composed some of his most monumental works, including the *Stabat Mater*, the *Slavonic Dances*, and his famous *Cello Concerto*. In 1880, just a few days before completing his sixth symphony, he wrote to Simrock regarding his intentions to complete the four-hands piano cycle entitled *Legends* by the end of 1880. Though he did not actually begin composing the work until the end of January 1881, the finished product was so admired by eminent musicians, including Brahms and conductor Hans von Bülow, that Simrock requested a full orchestration for the professional market.

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Dvořák dedicated the *Legends* cycle to Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick, who enthusiastically commended the enchanting and enigmatic narrative that pervades the work. Hanslick, like Brahms, served as a judge on the panel for the Austrian State Prize for Composition and was a consistent supporter of Dvořák throughout his career. In a quote provided by the Czech Ministry of Culture, Hanslick asks:

“What is it about Dvořák’s music that is so appealing to us
and, at the same time, stays us with its soft, warm hand?
Its sense of immediacy, its wholesome freshness...
only a master of harmonic and contrapuntal art
could have written these *Legends*.”

Indeed, though the work does not follow a specific story, Dvořák’s subtle lyricism and mastery of the orchestral medium give us a sense of an epic story in each movement. Selections from the breathtaking orchestral version of the cycle are presented this afternoon by the Sacramento Choral Society Orchestra.

MORTEN LAURIDSEN

Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943) is one of the most illustrious American choral composers of the 20th and 21st centuries. With five Grammy nominations, nine albums, and over 200 recordings of his works released to date, Lauridsen’s music has been heard worldwide—from the living room to the concert hall. Following a 52-year tenure at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music, Lauridsen continues to make significant contributions to the choral arts through his compositions, post-retirement artistic residencies, and the students he has trained in his long career. The National Endowment for the Arts named Lauridsen an ‘American Choral Master’ in 2006, and in 2007, he received the National Medal of Arts in a White House ceremony “for his composition of radiant choral works combining musical beauty, power, and spiritual depth that have thrilled audiences worldwide.”



Lux Aeterna

4. Veni, Sancte Spiritus

5. Agnus Dei – Lux Aeterna

Premiered in 1997 during his residency with the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Lauridsen composed his choral cycle *Lux Aeterna* as a response to the twilight of his mother’s life. By invoking various sacred Latin texts that reference light and redemption, Lauridsen nods to the *Lux Aeterna* offering in the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass, wherein God is asked to shine His eternal light on the deceased in their eternal rest. In a publication by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Lauridsen describes that he “found great personal comfort and solace in setting to music these

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timeless and wondrous words about Light, a universal symbol of illumination at all levels—spiritual, artistic, and intellectual.” Lauridsen’s *Lux Aeterna* is a breathtaking musical display of tranquility that matches perfectly the serene wonder conveyed in those timeless words.

Stabat Mater, Op. 58

Antonín Dvořák

One of Dvořák’s most prominent works from the early-Simrock era is tonight’s *Stabat Mater*, a work that rose from tragedy in the midst of Dvořák’s meteoric rise to success. The work appears to have been instigated by the death of his newborn daughter, Josefa, just six months earlier than Dvořák’s earliest sketches from February 1876. The tragic premature deaths of two more of his children, Otaker and Růžena, in 1877 prompted Dvořák to complete the *Stabat Mater*, though it was not published until 1881. When considering the significance of the *Stabat Mater* poem in the Christian faith, it is clear why Dvořák sought refuge in it—derived from a 13th-century Christian hymn, the text illustrates the dreadful suffering of Mary during the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and has been the subject of several sacred musical works for centuries as a site for expressing profound sorrow. In his grief, Dvořák turned to his faith and called upon the *Stabat Mater* to process his misery at the loss of his children, and in the process, created one of the most ambitious, emotional, and renowned *Stabat Mater* settings to date.

Composed for four vocal soloists, choir, orchestra, and organ, the work comprises ten movements that move through the entirety of the tragic poem.

The first movement, *Stabat Mater Dolorosa*, opens quietly on a sustained single pitch in the orchestra, frozen in Mary’s grief as she witnesses Jesus upon the cross.

This single note expands downward, like tears falling, before evolving into a more complex expression of her sadness—understated at first, the movement fleshes out an ineffable sense of loss as the choir and soloists join to develop and recapitulate the anguished melodies and establish the direction for the remainder of the work.

Movements two through nine portray specific themes exhibited throughout the poem—whether an utterance of futility, a meditation on Mary’s sorrow, or an empathizing moment for Jesus’s pain upon the cross, Dvořák takes us through an array of complex emotions through pensive lamentations, operatic declarations, and solemn lyricism. The second movement is a quartet between the vocal soloists. As they enter one by one, they ask “Is there one who would not weep, whelmed by miseries so deep, Christ’s dear Mother to behold?” The steady, dirge-like third movement gives the impression of a slow funeral march as the choir offers its empathetic mourning to Mary.

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In the fourth movement, Dvořák puts his torment on full display. The bass soloist declares the burning in his heart, requesting that his deep wounds be healed.

When the choir responds, it is as though Dvořák himself is communing with the singing angels of Heaven.

The fifth movement opens and closes with a serene melody and lush harmonies as the choir and orchestra play off each other, interrupted in the middle by a brief cathartic release of pent-up intensity. In the sixth movement, Dvořák's folk inspirations come into relief in an intimate tenor lullaby, straightforward in its tenderness. The seventh and eighth movements develop this tender sentiment as the choir and soloists continue to empathize with Mary's loss, preparing a particularly somber alto aria in the ninth movement.

The tenth and final movement unifies the work by returning to material presented in the first movement. The soloists, choir, and orchestra work in equal measure to remind us of the grief that inspired the work. In the conclusion, however, we are not left with dejection and pain—we are instead met with an expression of hope and reconciliation. We hear Dvořák seeking peace and affirmation in his tragedy with the knowledge that, someday, he will return to Heaven, concluding his prayer with a major-chord "Amen."

Sven Liam Joseph, Bachelor of Arts – Music
California State University, Sacramento (2022)
Eastman School of Music, PhD candidate

EUROPEAN MASTERWORKS 2024

STABAT MATER | DVORAK

SAT MARCH 2 AT 3 PM (*New Matinée*)

SAFE CREDIT UNION
PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

SOLOISTS
Olivia Smith, Soprano
Maggie Renée, Mezzo
Salvatore Atti, Tenor
David Soar, Bass

 Sacramento
CHORAL SOCIETY
& Orchestra

Conductor Donald Kendrick

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