

Text Painting in Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*

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Music Literature 1

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“My poor, favourite Pergolesi has just died of a chest infection... but his *Stabat Mater* is considered to be the masterwork of Latin music.” Giovanni Battista Pergolesi was a very young composer of the Baroque Era who (after his untimely death at the age of 26) was described as “the Raphael and Virgil of music”, with compositions said to be “as indestructible as nature”. One of these works is his setting of *Stabat Mater*. It has been treasured for centuries because of the unique and poignant text painting Pergolesi employs throughout the music. Written for just two voices, three strings, and a basso continuo, it lends a personal experience to not only the listener but also to the performer.¹ This paper will explore movements 1, 2, 7, and 12 of *Stabat Mater* and how Pergolesi’s use of keys, phrase structure, instrumentation, dynamics, notes, and rhythms all combine to give the listener a sacred and intimate experience with the Divine.

First, I will offer some context for this inspired piece of music before getting into its specifics. *Stabat Mater* is a poem in Latin written in the Thirteenth Century, most likely by Jacopone da Todi, an Italian friar. The title translates to “the Mother was standing” and depicts the sorrow and agony felt by the Virgin Mary as she watched her Son be crucified. It was originally set as a hymn to be sung during mass on the third Friday of September and the Friday following Passion Sunday, also known as Good Friday. However, it was such an impactful text that eventually several composers set it as a polyphonic work, Pergolesi’s being one of the most beloved versions. He was asked by the Fraternity of San Luigi in 1736 to write a version to replace Scarlatti’s and did so in the final year of his life. It was written in twelve movements,

¹ Kate Bolton-Porciatti, “Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*: A Guide to the Composer's Masterpiece and its Best Recordings,” *Classical Music*, July 8, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.classical-music.com/features/recordings/pergolesis-stabat-mater-a-guide-to-the-composers-masterpiece-and-its-best-recordings/>

one for each stanza of poetry, with a thin texture, making it easier to focus on text. While listening to his setting of Stabat Mater, with its constant text painting and evocative musical devices, it's not difficult to grasp the depth of Pergolesi's personal emotional state at the time as well as his devotion to God.

The lyrics of Movement 1 translate to "The grieving Mother stood weeping beside the cross where her Son was hanging"² and Pergolesi uses several musical stylistic features to better portray this specific text. "For instance, weeping suspensions and the key of F-minor set the haunting tone; Christian Schubart later associated that key with 'groans of misery and longing for the grave.'"³ These "weeping suspensions" make plenty of room for dissonances and Pergolesi certainly uses that to his advantage, whether it be with specific chords in the accompaniment or the embellishments of the singers. In fact, we don't get a break from dissonance until beat 3 of measure 5, when it opens up to a C-Major chord but the sense of angst doesn't stay away for long.

Several scholars compare specific musical features in this work to the actual sword that pierces Jesus' side. Elaborating on this, the instrumental introduction (measures 5-10) of this movement includes dramatic articulations that create a beautiful legato line in the violins and viola, followed by punctuating staccatos that are indicative of the sword piercing Christ and the excruciating pain that is piercing Mary's heart at the same time. Through this, we see that even though Pergolesi has eased up on the dissonance slightly, he continues to beautifully portray the sorrow felt in this text.

² Pamela Dellal, "Miscellaneous Translations: Stabat Mater Dolorosa," Accessed November 25, 2022, http://www.pameladellal.com/notes_translations/translations_other/t_pergolesi_stabat_mater.htm.

³ Porciatti

Mary doesn't speak directly in *Stabat Mater* but measures 12-17 of the first movement, Pergolesi uses a predictable rise and fall melodic line, along with a steady heartbeat like bass line to help the listener feel as if she is there in the flesh.⁴ In the same measures and throughout the whole first movement, elongated suspensions and the imitation of voices and instruments beautifully illustrates what is written in the poetry, which translates to "The grieving Mother stood weeping beside the cross where her Son was hanging." As described by Richard Will, a writer for *The Musical Quarterly*, "The Virgin may stand frozen in sorrow, but life flows through and around her, and no harmonic or rhythmic ambiguity obscures her figure."⁵ It is useful to note that the basso continuo is constantly moving on eighth notes throughout this movement except for in measures 33-36. In the text, this is the last time the following words are sung in this movement: "juxta crucem, lacrimosa", which translate to "stood weeping beside the cross."⁶ In this section, the basso continuo elongates to half notes, painting the image of the Mother standing firm and immovable at her Son's side as life slows down around her, giving the listener a final reminder of the depth of her grief.

It's said that Pergolesi uses quicker tempos in movement 2, "Cujus Animam Gementem" to illustrate Mary's desperation in seeing her Son on the cross. We hear this technique being used in the beginning along with plenty of syncopation and trills, evoking the sobs and pain felt by the Mother. As described by Kate Bolton-Porciatti, writer for the *Classical Music* magazine, "off-beat rhythms deliberately distort the natural accents of the text to [again] evoke the stabbing sword that pierces the Virgin's soul, while acidulous trills convey her anguish."⁷ It's almost as if

⁴ Richard Will, "Pergolesi's 'Stabat Mater' and the Politics of Feminine Virtue," *The Musical Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2004): 571-572.

⁵ Will, 572.

⁶ Dellal.

⁷ Porciatti.

we can actually hear, through these accents as well as the *andante amorosa* (lovingly walking)⁸ tempo marking, her irregular heartbeat and even her paces back and forth as she watches the horrors unfold.

Unnatural accenting⁹ as well as the use of dramatic dynamic changes evoke the opposing emotions that Mary must have been feeling; quiet hopelessness in the phrases marked *piano* followed by agonized sobs in phrases marked with *mezzo forte* or, even more dramatically at the end, *forte*. These dynamics do not change consistently with the words either, but seem to be random and sporadic, much like grief itself. More specifically, in measures 15-19, the violins are suspended on trills with a *forte* dynamic marking, repeating one elongated G5 for each measure. If this were sung by a voice, it would sound much like a sob and is another example of Pergolesi's ingenious compositional style. This theme returns later in the voice sung on the word "pertransivit," meaning "passed through," also referring to the sword thrust in to Jesus' side and also the sword of grief felt by His mother. When it's repeated at the end of movement 2, it is sung through trills at the top of the soprano's range, painting a clear picture of lamenting and cries let out by Mary.¹⁰

The accented rhythmic pattern of this movement is somewhat unusual for the Baroque time period. Instead of the typical long-short-long-short pattern that was customary, Pergolesi reversed it, making it short-long-short-long. This was such an unpopular stylistic choice that one critic from the Eighteenth Century went so far as to say "the poor effect of the short-long rhythm

⁸ Emili Brook Elizabeth Losier, "Pergolesi's Stabat Mater: Production of a Historically Informed Performance" (Bachelor's Thesis, Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences, 2010), 38.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Will, "Pergolesi's 'Stabat Mater' and the Politics of Feminine Virtue," 576.

would cause any connoisseur to shudder.”¹¹ This only adds to the uneasiness of “Cujus Animam Gementem” and to Pergolesi’s ability to reach his audience and make them feel a piece of what Mary was feeling.

This movement is one of only three that is in triple meter¹² which has been highly symbolic since even before the Renaissance. In Catholicism, the number 3 is considered to be a symbol of perfection or wholeness, often indicative of the trinity or, in this case the Virgin Mary. It was also widely accepted during this time period that a woman’s greatest virtue is lamentation. The lyrics of this movement translate to “Through her weeping soul, compassionate and grieving, a sword passed.”¹³ Therefore, it is safe to say that Pergolesi used triple meter in “Cujus Animam Gementem” as a way to express admiration for the Perfect Mother and her natural ability to feel such deep grief for her suffering Son.

Movement 7 of Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* is “Eja Mater, fons Amoris” and the text translates to “O Mother, fountain of love, make me feel the power of sorrow, that I may grieve with you.”¹⁴ The focus of the text has now shifted from Mary’s suffering to the narrator now asking her if they can share in her suffering. Pergolesi brings back the image of the sword from movement 2 through syncopation, a sustained G5 note, and the wave-like, emotional melodic line. This imagery specifies what the narrator is asking for specifically, without them actually speaking of a physical sword. Being an alto solo, the lower tessitura reiterates the solemnity and pain being felt by Mary and now the narrator. It also makes it sound more speechlike which adds

¹¹ Floyd K. Grave, “Abbé Vogler’s Revision of Pergolesi’s ‘Stabat Mater’,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 30, No. 1 (Spring, 1977): 47.

¹² Losier, 37.

¹³ Dellal.

¹⁴ Ibid.

to its intimate and heartfelt message.¹⁵ The very first sung line in movement 7 says, “Eja mater fons amoris” which translates to “O Mother, fountain of love.” The melodic line put to these words in measures 14-19 and again in 40-45 ascends and descends on eighth and sixteenth notes, painting the image of an actual fountain of water, or in this case, a fountain of love.

Kate Bolton-Porciatti describes Movement 7 by saying “chromatic colours and oscillating dynamics paint the Eja mater.”¹⁶ We see this in the repeating phrase, “Fac, ut tecum lugeam” (“that I may grieve with you”)¹⁷ which is always sung on a single sustained note (G4) followed by a more melodic and syncopated urgent plea using the same lyrics. Not only does the melodic shape change drastically here, but the dynamics go from piano in the first utterance to a striking forte in the reprise. This, to me, illustrates the “oscillating dynamics” described above and clearly paints the narrator as gently approaching Mary and asking to mourn with her but then begging her to put her suffering onto them after they do not receive an answer.

It is interesting to note that this movement is the only other movement, along with movement 2, that is in 3/8 and it is also in C-minor. The lyrics of the second movement translate to “Through her weeping soul, compassionate and grieving, a sword passed” and the lyrics to movement 7 translate to “O Mother, fountain of love, make me feel the power of sorrow, that I may grieve with you.”¹⁸ Both movements are about feeling grief and love simultaneously, but from different perspectives, both movements are in 3/8 and the key of C-minor, and both movements use the short-long-short-long rhythmic pattern and a rise and fall melodic line. With

¹⁵ Will, 583-585.

¹⁶ Bolton-Porciatti.

¹⁷ Dellal.

¹⁸ Ibid.

all of these similarities, it's safe to say that Pergolesi did this for a reason and these stanzas could be considered sister movements in a way.

Lastly, we will explore the techniques used to word paint in the final movement of *Stabat Mater*, "Quando corpus morietur." The words of this movement translate to "When my body dies, grant that to my soul is given the glory of paradise. Amen."¹⁹ "Here, the voice utters only one syllable at a time, painting the agony of watching a slow and painful death."²⁰ In the instrumental introduction, there is a repeated melodic contour in the second violins which eventually gets doubled by the first violins starting in measure 8, when the voices come in. It's as if we are supposed to hear this figure even over the voices at times. It consists of a leap up followed by several descending 3 note sequences on sixteenth notes, "like spirits oscillating between hope and despair" and is also a call back to Movement 1.²¹ This creates syncopation against the eighth notes in the viola and basso continuo and also create the imagery behind this movement about death, as if a coffin is being laid in the ground. The entire movement is very quiet and somber, getting softer and softer toward the end. "One can imagine the laboring of a last breath or step. Then miraculously, above begins this beautiful long sustaining line of melody. This was imagined by the ensemble as the death occurring and as it comes closer and closer to finality one is able to glimpse a larger view of paradise thus making the passing of life into death more bearable and even 'welcoming.'"²²

Pergolesi then shocks the listeners by going straight into a prolonged forte amen cadence in cut time, full of melismas, step wise chromaticism, and polyphony. Perhaps this is his own

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Pergolesi: Stabat Mater," Accessed November 27, 2022, [https://musc520-musical-styles-s14.fandom.com/wiki/Pergolesi: Stabat Mater](https://musc520-musical-styles-s14.fandom.com/wiki/Pergolesi:_Stabat_Mater) .

²¹ Will, 585.

²² Losier, 92.

personal plea from his deathbed to be let into Paradise or perhaps it is simply because he loved opera and wanted to end his *Stabat Mater* on a dramatic note. In measures 37-50 and again in measures 74-81, there is a syncopated melody found that descends stepwise on half notes found in the strings and voices. A similar sequence is found throughout the entire “Amen Movement” where each voice or instrument descends stepwise on quarter notes that are not syncopated. Both of these phrases offer a sense of lamenting through what sounds like sighs and/or sobs in those descending lines.

Through these observations and more, it is clear to see that setting *Stabat Mater* as a chamber work was by no means a simple task, as gifted as Pergolesi was. In order to convey the deep messages within the text, he needed to put his musical education to the test as well as dig deep within himself, all while making it appealing to his commissioners. Through the use of thematic material, dynamics, keys, phrasing, rhythmic patterns, and instrumentation, he was able to accomplish this tremendous task while dying from tuberculosis. Even if this had been his only composition, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi would have been worthy of the title “The Raphael and Virgil of music.”²³ He truly was a master of text painting and the art of employing pathos in his music. His *Stabat Mater* truly is “a sublime summary of the religious and aesthetics of its time. It is also a simple man’s expression of religious sense, sublimated in a music of astonishing sweetness and touching naturalness.”²⁴ It will live on as a testament to the Virgin Mary and the sacrifices made by her and her Son as well as to Pergolesi’s personal devotion to both of them.

²³ Bolton-Porciatti.

²⁴ Sara Filippini, “Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater*, a Sublime Piece of Sacred Chamber Music” *L’Ulisse Errante*, December 20, 2020, <https://ulisserrante.com/pergolesis-stabat-mater-an-incomparable-gem/>.

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