

Stabat Mater

Domenico Scarlatti (1685 - 1757)

There were two famous Scarlattis: Alessandro, who was an internationally important figure in the early development of opera, and his son Domenico. Scarlatti junior was born in Naples in the same year as Bach and Handel; he met Handel in Venice in 1705 and the two composers became lifelong friends. Domenico Scarlatti is known today for the 550 or so virtuoso harpsichord sonatas composed during his later years in Spain, but the earlier part of his career was concentrated on sacred and secular vocal music, little of which is now performed other than the *Stabat Mater*. He was for a time *Maestro di Capella* at St Peter's Basilica in Rome (1714 - 1719).

The *Stabat Mater* text, which has been set to music by many composers, is a 13th century Latin hymn of uncertain authorship, originating during the peak of Franciscan devotion to the crucified Jesus. It depicts in the most graphic language the sufferings of the crucified Christ and the anguish of his mother, Mary. It is not certain whether Scarlatti's *Stabat Mater* was composed whilst he was in Venice, or during the five years he was in Rome. Either way it is an early work, written not later than 1715. It calls for ten voice parts: 4 sopranos, 2 altos, 2 tenors and 2 basses, and an organ accompaniment. Unusually for this period, Scarlatti does not divide the choir into two opposing blocks, and neither does he use any instruments other than the organ *continuo*. Instead he creates a constantly varied contrapuntal tapestry with different combinations of choral and solo voices. In places the audacity of Scarlatti's harmony hints at the much later musical language of the Classical period. The work is divided into seven sections, each comprising between one and five stanzas of the poem. The final section is notable for its dancing fugue.

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