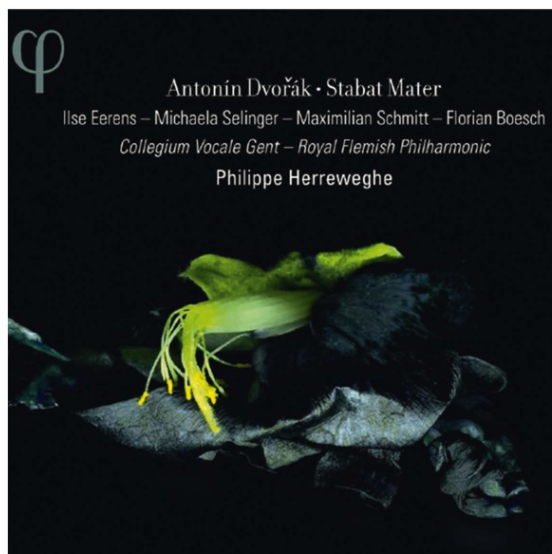




# July



Antonín Dvořák • Stabat Mater

Ilse Eerens sop • Michaela Selinger mez

Maximilian Schmitt ten • Florian Boesch bass

Collegium Vocale Gent – Royal Flemish Philharmonic

Philippe Herreweghe

*'All of Herreweghe's performers clearly love this ravishing music, relishing every detail of this beautifully nuanced score'*

## Malcolm Riley is moved by a new recording of Dvořák's Stabat mater

### Dvořák

Stabat mater, Op 58 B71

Ilse Eerens sop • Michaela Selinger mez

Maximilian Schmitt ten • Florian Boesch bass

Collegium Vocale, Ghent; Royal Flemish

Philharmonic / Philippe Herreweghe

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The *Stabat mater* – a 13th-century poem that describes in 20 verses the imagined sufferings of the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross – has attracted a select but significant range of composers over the centuries, from Palestrina and Vivaldi, through Rossini and Howells to Karl Jenkins. Most settings hover around the 40-minute mark (for example Pergolesi's and Poulenc's); Jenkins's stretches to just over an hour. But the biggest-boned of all settings is surely Dvořák's, broken down into 10 wondrously varied – but also wholesomely coherent – movements. It was begun in 1876, with just a piano accompaniment, in memory of his daughter Josefa, who had died two days after her birth the previous year. The full score was completed in 1877 following the deaths of another daughter,

Růžena, and Dvořák's first-born son, Otakar. With such a terrible burden of personal grief and loss hanging over the work's genesis, coupled with what Eduard Hanslick called 'the tear-laden monotony' of the text, one might have expected a work full of gloom and despondency. But Dvořák rose above these personal and technical challenges to create a highly sensuous statement of personal faith and belief clothed in symphonic robes, which culminates in a dramatic 'Amen'.

Although Dvořák's *Stabat mater* is not currently a common feature on choral programmes (more's the pity), the work is well represented in the recording catalogue, with several splendid issues available spanning more than 40 years. Back in September 2012, I considered Neeme Järvi's live 2010 LPO disc to be 'an interpretation to savour'. This dramatic performance was dispatched in just 67 minutes, with the comparatively dry Royal Festival Hall acoustic and close-miking of the soloists no doubt adding to the intensity of the reading, though there were times when the text became rather blurred.

Now Philippe Herreweghe has released on his own PHI label a carefully considered and exquisitely refined recording, made in April 2012 in deSingel, a multi-arts venue on the outskirts of Antwerp. Possibly owing to the less pressurised atmosphere of the studio environment, his timings are generally longer, although the music doesn't sound slower, despite being consistently under Dvořák's metronome markings.

With such heart-tuggingly powerful music this is a small concern. What matters most is that all of Herreweghe's performers clearly love this ravishing music, relishing every detail of this beautifully nuanced score, despite the huge dynamic range demanded.

The orchestral introduction that opens the massive, 17-minute span of the first movement is set in B minor, a tragic enough key, weighted down with a sombre gravitas, and further emphasised by plentiful use of the lower strings, bassoons and flutes at the bottom of their range. The heavy brass are kept well in reserve for the truly climactic