

Stabat Mater

Music by Nicola Burnett Smith
Words by Phil Vernon

New music for Easter

First performance, Monday 15th April at 1:10pm as part of Holy Week Mass at St Paul's (The Actors' Church) Bedford Street, Covent Garden, WC2E 9ED
<https://actorschurch.org>

Composer Nicola Burnett Smith is pleased to announce the premiere of her new composition for three female voices and double bass, sung by Nicola Burnett Smith, Anna Braithwaite and Sarah Lambie with bassist Dai Price.

Stabat Mater, a 13th-century hymn to the Virgin Mary, portrays her suffering as Christ's mother at his crucifixion. Its author may be Franciscan friar Jacopone da Todi, or perhaps Pope Innocent III. The title comes from its first line, *Stabat Mater dolorosa*: the sorrowful Mother stood. It evokes Mary's awful sorrow at her son's execution, and the supplicant's very personal experience of the Passion, and prayer for Mary's intercession in acceding to Christ's grace.

Stabat Mater has been set to music many times, for example by Palestrina, Vivaldi, Pergolesi, Haydn, Rossini, Dvořák, Verdi, Poulenc and Arvo Pärt.

Phil: Having listened many times to Pergolesi's version, I wanted to adapt the lyrics in a modern version. In so doing, I aimed to retain the deeply emotional personal and spiritual core, while moving away from the formality of the original, and further compressing the already highly charged emotional content. I was thrilled when Nicola agreed to

write the beautiful music, further adapting some of the text as she did so, to be suitable for singing.



Mater Dolorosa. Workshop of Dieric Bouts. C. 1420-75. Art Institute of Chicago.

Nicola: in describing what he liked about Pergolesi's version, Phil spoke of 'passion' and 'restraint'. In the case of Phil's poem, the words were the passion and I felt the music could partner this with restraint.

The first section of the music came surprisingly easily as a result. I improvised a vocal line to the first stanza, recorded and transcribed it. It needed very little editing, and the addition of the double bass line, created by Dai Price, was satisfying. In the spirit of restraint, the rhythm is very slow and regular: the melody is simple and inexorable.

After that the real work began – creating a structure, responding to the different emotions of each stanza with sufficient variety for the listening ear and making good use of the four musicians I had at my disposal. Especially challenging to write for was the double bass, an instrument I love but about which I know very little. I am very grateful to Dai for his patience with my amateur understanding of his instrument and to Anna and Sarah for helping me try out the harmonies.

Nicola Burnett Smith has been an actor, singer and musician since 1986. Stage appearances include Royal National Theatre and Purcell Rooms as well as various repertory theatres and on screen in *Taggart*, *Silent Witness* and *The Bill*. Compositions include works for the *Out of Place* project in 2017 and adaptations of Sylvia Paskin's poetry. nicolaburnettsmith.co.uk

Phil Vernon's poetry is published in various magazines and websites. A micro-collection, *This Quieter Shore*, was published by Hedgehog Poetry Press in 2018, and a full collection *Poetry After Auschwitz* is forthcoming in 2019. philvernon.net/category/poetry.

Sarah Lambie is an actress (her most recent credits being the 2018 UK tour of *The Winslow Boy* and *Casualty* for the BBC). She sings jazz and classical music and performs regularly as a member of the Philharmonia Chorus – most recently Berlioz' *Grande Messe des Morts* in St Paul's Cathedral.

Anna Braithwaite is a classically trained singer, cabaret artist and composer. Her work is distinctly theatrical in nature, thought-provoking, humorous and unexpected. annabraithwaite.co.uk

Multi-instrumentalist **Dai Price**, from Newport, works as a session musician and songwriter in London. He also runs two bands - alt-folk outfit Dai & The Ramblers and 6-piece rhythm 'n' blues band The Cosimo Matassa Project. www.daiprice.com

Nicola, Sarah and Anna are frequent collaborators on music projects including Anna's own compositions. We're pleased to be working with Dai for the first time.

Enormous thanks to St Paul's for kindly including this performance in their Holy Week programme.

Stabat Mater

*Stabat mater dolorosa
juxta Crucem lacrimosa,
dum pendebat Filius.*

*Cuius animam gementem,
contristatam et dolentem
pertransiuit gladius.*

*O quam tristis et afflicta
fuit illa benedicta,
mater Unigeniti!*

*Quae mærebat et dolébat,
pia Mater, dum vidébat
nati pœnas íncliti.*

*Quis est homo qui non fleret,
matrem Christi si vidéret
in tanto supplicio?*

*Quis non posset contristári
Christi Matrem contemplári
dolentem cum Fílio?*

*Pro peccátis suæ gentis
vidit Iésu in torméntis,
et flagéllis súbditum.*

*Vidit suum dulcem Natum
moriéndo desolátum,
dum emísit spíritum.*

*Eja, Mater, fons amóris
me sentíre vim dolóris
fac, ut tecum lúgeam.*

*Fac, ut árdeat cor meum
in amándo Christum Deum
ut sibi compláceam.*

*Sancta Mater, istud agas,
crucifíxi fige plagas
cordi meo válide.*

*Tui Nati vulneráti,
tam dignáti pro me pati,
pœnas mecum dívide.*

*Fac me tecum pie flere,
crucifíxo condolére,
donec ego víxero.*

*Juxta Crucem tecum stare,
et me tibi sociáre
in planctu desídero.*

*Virgo víginum præclára,
míhi iam non sis amára,
fac me tecum plángere.*

*Fac, ut portem Christi mortem,
passiónis fac consórtem,
et plagas recólere.*

*Fac me plagis vulnerári,
fac me Cruce inebriári,
et cruóre Fílii.*

*Flammis ne urar succénsus,
per te, Virgo, sim defénsus
in die iudícii.*

*Christe, cum sit hinc exíre,
da per Matrem me veníre
ad palmam victóriæ.*

*Quando corpus moriétur,
fac, ut ánimæ donétur
paradísi glória. Amen.*

Rough translation, adapted from
<https://www.stabatmater.info/>

The grieving Mother stood weeping beside the cross where her Son was hanging. Compassionate and grieving, a sword passed through her weeping soul. How sad and distressed was that blessed Mother of the Only-begotten, who mourned and grieved and trembled at the torment of her glorious Child.

Who would not weep, seeing the Mother of Christ in such agony? Who would not feel compassion on beholding Christ's Mother suffering with her Son? For the sins of His people she saw Jesus in torment, scourged. She saw her sweet child dying, forsaken, while He gave up his spirit.

O Mother, fountain of love, make me feel the power of sorrow, so I can grieve with you. Grant that my heart may burn in the love of Christ my Lord, that I may please Him. Holy Mother, grant that the wounds of the Crucified drive deep into my heart. Share with me the agony of your wounded Son, who so deigned to suffer for me. Let me sincerely weep with you, bemoan the Crucified, as long as I live. I desire to stand beside the cross with you, and gladly share the weeping. Chosen Virgin of virgins, do not be bitter with me, let me weep with you.

Grant that I may bear the death of Christ, the fate of his Passion, and commemorate His wounds. Let me be wounded by his wounds, made drunk by the cross because of my love for the Son.

Defend me, O Virgin, lest I burn in the flames of hell on the day of judgement. Christ, when it is time to pass away, grant that through your Mother I may come to the palm of victory. When my body dies, grant that the glory of paradise is given to my soul. Amen

Stabat mater

She sank to her knees
on the shaking ground
when she reached the place.

A thorn pierced her heart,
as she raised her eyes
from the foot of the cross,
to her dying son.

A mother's pain.

And we weep too,
as though we were there.
We see her shudder
to share the deep-bone pain
he bore for us.

He died alone.

Mother, let me too
kneel down with you,
bear all I can of all he bore,
share in his love
and in the path he pointed to.

He died for us.

I know he felt those wounds
and died for me –
don't push me away –
mother, I need to feel this too:
I need to know the meaning of
this place.

He died for us.

Let me find harbour in what
happened in this place,
let me find harbour in your arms,
and in his grace.

- Phil Vernon, 2019