

# Class 8 : Faith

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## B. Sacred Surprises

### 1. Main title 3 (Church choir)

This second hour will not be so much a discussion as an examination of some of the surprises you can encounter when considering the question of what makes music sacred. For example, take the song *Bist du bei mir*, written in one of the *Notebooks* of **Anna Magdalena Bach**, the composer's second wife. Probably we all know it; it is as lovely example as you can imagine of the total trust of the believer. I'll give you the text here; I'd rather not clutter the video with titles.

### 2. Text of "Bist du bei mir"

### 3. Benjamin Appl recording "Bist du bei mir"

### 4. Text (repeat)

If there is anyone who does not know the facts behind this song, I'd love to hear what you think of it. I myself have always thought it one of the simplest and loveliest of Bach's works, and the very definition of a sacred song. But it appears I was wrong. Like many of the pieces in the *Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook*, it is not by Bach himself but an earlier composer, **Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel**, written down by Bach to be played in the family. More surprising than that, it comes from an opera, *Diomedes*, now lost, and given that title, it would seem it is not a sacred song at all; the "Du" in the song is not Christ, but some earthly lover! Did the Bachs know this? Or did the simple process of removing it from its dramatic context make it sacred? Or is love in the face of death a sacred emotion in *any* context?

### 5. Quiz questions

Now a little quiz. The lady shown here is going to play a theme twice on the piano. It is from a religious work, having to do with some aspect of the Christian story. I'll give you a POLL to guess which it is (yes, I know some of the answers are ridiculous). There will also be a box to check if you actually recognize the piece; I want all the answers to be real guesses.

### 6. Rossini, theme of "Cuius animam" played on the piano

### 7. Quiz questions (repeat)

What does the poll say? It is actually an aria from the *Stabat Mater* (1842) by **Gioacchino Rossini**. The title refers to the grieving Mary standing beside the Cross, watching the torture and death of her son. The text is a 13th-century Latin poem in rhyming three-line stanzas; here are the first four:

### 8. *Stabat Mater*, text of the first four stanzas

Of course this is only one aria in an hour-long work that has plenty of moments of tragedy, and any composer would have to vary the pace. This particular aria has become a showpiece for tenors. I am going to give you a more subtle comparison than usual: a couple of versions of this opening, in audio only, one from 50 years ago sung by the Italian tenor **Franco Bonisolti**, the other from 5 years back sung by the American **Matthew Polenzani**. As you listen, consider the tempo chosen by each conductor, and what each singer does with his high notes. Each clip is about 1¼ minutes long.

9. Rossini: *Stabat Mater*, "Cuius animam" (Bonisolti)

10. Rossini: *Stabat Mater*, "Cuius animam" (Polenzani)

11. Bonisolti and Polenzani

So what did you think? My own view is that Bonisolti, with his ringing high notes and bouncing beat, is by far the more exciting. But **Antonio Pappano**, conducting the Polenzani version, seems deliberately to have forsworn all that, choosing a slightly slower tempo, softening the rhythm, and encouraging Polenzani (who has never been a showboat tenor by temperament) to take those high notes as part of a continuous line rather than a display of fireworks. Does this make it more genuinely religious?

12. Antonio Vivaldi

Let's jump back 100 years to the *Stabat Mater* of Antonio Vivaldi, written in 1712. It calls for a male alto soloist and a small orchestra. Listen to it sung by countertenor **Andreas Scholl** with the score onscreen, and discuss his approach to the text: he goes through it twice as you will hear: what is added the second time around?

13. Vivaldi: *Stabat Mater*, "Cuius animam" (Scholl)

14. Antonio Vivaldi, with score of "Cuius animam"

So what does happen the second time around? The repeat is longer, as you see, and it has many more notes. And what those notes do is to create an emotional extension of each idea, making the singer linger on it, and coloring it with emotion.

15. Giambattista Pergolesi

I want to give you a different comparison, between the second and fourth stanzas as set by **Giambattista Pergolesi** in 1729. The second stanza is sung by a soprano (**Emöke Barath**), the fourth by a countertenor (**Philippe Jaroussky**); the conductor is **Nathalie Stutzmann**, a fine singer herself; she will be conducting two Mozart operas next year at the Met. As you listen, think of the appropriateness of the music to the text being sung. They are each two minutes long.

16. Pergolesi: *Stabat Mater*, "Cuius animam"

17. Pergolesi: *Stabat Mater*, "Quae moerebat"

18. *Stabat Mater*, text of the stanzas just heard

What did you think? There is no question that the anguish of the music in her solo matches the pain in the words. But what about his aria, which involves no change in tone as far as the written text is concerned? Had Pergolesi lost his mind? I don't think so. For the idea of one-to-one correspondence

between music and emotion did not become absolute until the late classical and romantic eras. If the overall mood of Pergolesi's work is suitably reverential, why should there not be variation between the individual movements? The text itself has no variation at all; perhaps that is why Rossini got so bouncy with it in his setting of the second stanza, "Cuius animam."

#### 19. Franz Joseph Haydn

To end with, if there is time, I want to show you another curiosity that also raises questions about sacred music. This comes from a staging—yes, a staging—of the *Missa in Tempore Belli*, or "Mass in Time of War," by **Franz Joseph Haydn**. The movement I am going to play is the beautiful *Qui tollis peccata*, or "Who carries away the sins of the world." It is sung by the baritone (**Johannes Kammler**) with a solo cello *obbligato*; in this production by **Barbara Horakova**, the cellist comes right up onto the stage. I don't think I can explain the visual action; some of it is off-the-wall, but its most beautiful moments match the beauty of the music. Really, it is the *sound* I want to leave you with.

20. Haydn: *Missa in Tempore Belli*, "Qui tollis" (Dutch National Opera, 2021)

21. Main title 4 (still from the above)