

CHURCH TIMES

***Roderic Dunnett* finds **Richard Blackford's** new work first-class**

RICHARD BLACKFORD, whose intensely beautiful large-scale work *Pietà* has just had its première at The Lighthouse Hall in Poole, Dorset, is a composer utterly unfazed in writing music for large choral forces. His cantata *Mirror of Perfection* drew on poetic texts by St Francis of Assisi. Especially moving was *Voices of Exile*, an extraordinarily original composition that brings together, poignantly, melodies from numerous places where suffering or persecution is rife: for instance, Tibet, Bosnia, the DRC (former Zaire), or Kurdistan. It was inspired by an encounter with a destitute child left adrift on the streets of Calcutta.



Pietà focuses on the *Stabat Mater*, but with potent additions. It was commissioned for the Bournemouth Symphony Chorus, of which Blackford is president, and features distinctive writing for string orchestra and also for children's choir. It was conducted by Gavin Carr, a keen supporter of the composer.

Why *Pietà*? “Originally,” the composer recalls, “I envisaged simply *Stabat Mater*. But on a visit to Rome I was confronted by the incredible statue by Michelangelo in St Peter's basilica. It combines astonishing beauty with poignancy — it seemed almost luminous. There and then I decided my setting should not be downright depressing or painful, but, rather, beautiful and lyrical.

“It also seemed to me there is a great deal of dramatic and passionate elements — in fact calling for aggressive, passionate, fast music. For instance, at the flagellation of Christ, where I’ve set it for quite an awesome baritone solo.”

But Blackford has also interspersed some especially distinctive other texts. While writing *Pietà*, he came across the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966), especially a sequence, *Requiem*. It was written when she believed that her son, like her husband, had been removed to the Gulag or execution. It occurred to the composer that the *Pietà* and the *Stabat Mater*, have “a universal aspect”: not just the Holy Family, “but about what any mother might experience through natural causes or warfare or as a refugee”.

In this way, as in *Not in our Time*, which explores the grim interrelation between war and religion (as in the Crusades), Blackford determined to give *Pietà* a 20th- or 21st-century relevance. Rather wonderfully, he has a part for soprano saxophone, a “third voice” underlining today’s suffering, which adds a plaintive sound, sometimes lamenting, but also allowing a measure of hope to peer through. His use of this solo obbligato (a wonderfully moving part for Amy Dickson) brings something quite special and fresh to the score.

The work is scored for mezzo-soprano (Jennifer Johnston), baritone (Stephen Gadd), and full chorus, with children’s choir interspersed occasionally. The first four-stanza section for choir, with slow-treading strings, was restrained and expressive, and gained much from sensitive word-repetition, which is a feature of the work of the whole. Here and there, Blackford gives the double-basses their head. The section ends with an outcry from full chorus (“*Quae moerebat*”) and a tangibly violent short link from the orchestra.

What follows is an intense sequence for mezzo-soprano solo (“Seeing the Mother of Christ in such agony?”), rising into high coloratura, while the solo saxophone supports and intertwines. At the repeat of “*supplicio*” (agony) the soloist shouts, while Blackford expresses real anger at “*Dolentem cum filio*”, evoking the suffering of Mary, and of any bereaved or anguished mother.

The next passage, marked *furioso*, unleashed a savage outburst as the Virgin witnesses Jesus “scourged and tormented”. But hereafter Blackford’s aspiration to make the work also gentle and lyrical shines out: the soloist floats above the strings with marked tenderness, and the final stage — the death of Jesus — despite an urgent rocking motif, sinks to *pianissimo*, truly apt, for the baritone’s “*Dum emisit Spiritum*”. The choir’s exquisite “*Eia mater, fons amoris*”, is coloured by a sudden *pianissimo*, most sensitively executed. The composer brings expressive tonality here gorgeously to the fore, with the mezzo-soprano’s help, at “Grant my heart may burn in the love of Christ my Lord”: it is like an aria from Bach’s Passions, though, periodically, I found myself thinking of Elgar. The mature, well-rehearsed children’s choir take over for “*Sancta mater, istud agas*,” where a marked plangency came through; the saxophone joined in, as gentle as a cor anglais, and all reached an exquisitely plotted resolution. The first Akhmatova poem is similarly aching, violins especially prominent, all expiring in an urgent, insistent conclusion. Drama characterises the later Russian poem, which employs chorus and baritone, the first part yearning, and empathising: the second, after an outburst, even slower and pacified: “To his Mother he said, ‘Do

not weep for me.” After a brief outburst, “a wholly new theme of calm and tenderness” emerges, questing and penitential. There is lovely writing for sopranos as the saxophone plays over them.

Rocking cellos and basses, with mezzo-soprano, nurse along what follows. Gadd’s solo baritone voice rang out beautifully over the chorus. The final section is, unsurprisingly, initially explosive (*Flammis ne urar accensus*) — the kind of energised music that Blackford excels in — and was delivered excitingly by the men of the chorus especially, with string tremolando. Finally, a massive conclusion, in which the sopranos reach notably high, combines awe and ecstasy. Blackford makes it a kind of In Paradisum: “May my soul be granted the glory of Paradise.”

The alternation of strong and violent music with rapture, exaltation, and ecstasy is surely what distinguishes Blackford’s work. *Pietà* could be taken up beneficially by any large choral society. A bonus is that the composer supplies a detailed introduction to each section, invaluable for his audience. One thus learns of the evolution of this rich, romantic, and discerning new work: nothing less than a masterpiece. **Roderic Dunnett for Church Times July 2019**

The London première of *Pietà* is at the Cadogan Hall, Sloane Terrace, London SW1, on Saturday 19 October at 7.30 p.m. Box office: phone 020 7730 4500.