

Pietà by Richard Blackford – a Stabat Mater for our troubled times

By The Cross-Eyed Pianist June 22, 2019

The Stabat Mater, a Medieval hymn which portrays Mary's suffering as Christ's mother during his Crucifixion, has been set to music by numerous composers, most notably Pergolesi, Schubert, Dvořák, Pärt and Macmillan. In this new setting, *Pietà*, a co-commission from the Bournemouth Symphony Chorus and St. Albans Choral Society, British composer Richard Blackford interweaves the text of the Stabat Mater with poems from the 'Requiem' cycle by Anna Akhmatova, whose husband was taken away and 'disappeared' by Stalin's KGB; her son was also arrested and she feared she would never see him again. In our troubled, turbulent times, contemporary *Pietàs* are tragically all too familiar – refugee parents desperately cradling babies and children, mourning mothers in war-ravaged communities, the anger and grief of victims of tragedies like the Manchester Arena terrorist attack or the Grenfell Tower fire.... Through the settings of Akhmatova's poetry, Blackford makes the Stabat Mater a universal reflection on grief and loss – and the attendant rage, pain and incomprehension.

*For seventeen months I've pleaded
Pleaded that you come home,
Flung myself at the hangman's feet
For you, my son,
For you, my horror*
from 'Requiem' by Anna Ahkmatova

Blackford chose the title after seeing Michelangelo's marble *Pietà* in Rome, and, like the sculpture, his new work encompasses grief, rage and sorrow with tenderness, poignancy and, ultimately, beauty and hope. The work is scored for string orchestra, chorus, children's choir, mezzo-soprano, baritone and solo saxophone. While the chorus and soloists present the main narrative – the pain and grief of Mary and Anna Ahkmatova – the saxophone provides a third, abstract voice, the voice of every grieving mother. Blackford chose the soprano saxophone to create "a modern instrumental dimension, very close to the sound of the human voice".



In its world premiere performance on 22 June 2019 at Poole Lighthouse, *Pietà* was preceded in the first half by Fauré's Requiem, which was given a meditative, other-worldly performance by the excellent BSO Chorus under Gavin Carr, with soloists Issie Curchin and Stephen Gadd. This provided a wonderful foil to Blackford's music, which is intellectual and sophisticated, yet accessible in its use of carefully-crafted melody and counterpoint. Rooted in tonality and modality, *Pietà* is characterised by rhythmic dynamism, breadth of expression and lush textures, redolent of Janáček and Syzmanowski. The use of a children's choir (in the fifth movement of the work) is a nod to another of Blackford's influences – Benjamin Britten – and provides an episode of innocence and sweetness in this grief-scorched narrative.

With powerful, operatic singing by mezzo Jennifer Johnston and baritone Stephen Gadd, a fine, emotionally engaging performance by the BSO and BSO Chorus (whose intonation, timing and precision was impressive), the entire work has a filmic, visual quality with its gripping narrative and vividly descriptive scoring – tumultuous strings, passionate dramatic climaxes, 'snapping' pizzicato in the cellos (to represent Christ's flagellation), jagged syncopated rhythms, an acapella movement of intense concentration and beauty. Organised in three parts, *Pietà* moves from grief and rage to redemption and hope via nine distinct movements. The obligato saxophone, eloquently played by Amy Dickson, provides a unifying link between the movements, initially haunting, mournful and timeless, evocative of an ancient shawm, and later calm and tender as the music moves towards its hopeful, redemptive close.

An absorbing and committed performance by all, supplemented by detailed programme notes by the composer with translations of the text.

This arresting, emotionally intense and accessible work for choir and orchestra receives its London premiere at Cadogan Hall on 19th October. A recording on the Nimbus Label is expected very soon.

Meet the Artist – Richard Blackford, composer

By [The Cross-Eyed Pianist](#) June 6, 2019

Who or what inspired you to pursue a career in music?

Whilst on a German school exchange to Munich when I was fifteen I was taken to a performance of Berg's Lulu in the Nationaltheater. I had never seen or heard anything like it before in my life and decided on the spot that I wanted to be a composer, especially of dramatic music (i.e. theatre, opera, ballet, film)

Who or what were the most significant influences on your musical life and career as a composer?

Meeting Olivier Messiaen while I was a student at the Royal College of Music confirmed my lifelong passion for his music. At that time I studied and loved Britten's operas, and learned much about dramatic timing and word setting. I've also had a lifelong love of the music of Leoš Janáček, who still remains a strong influence. The concision of his writing, his limitless imagination in the development of motifs and his sophisticated melodic curves of speech continue to fascinate me.

What have been the greatest challenges/frustrations of your career so far?

I had the good fortune to be offered a lot of film commissions in my thirties and forties. One of the challenges was to put aside enough time each year to compose at least one

major concert piece. It sometimes became frustrating not to have enough time in the year to develop compositional ideas. It was for this reason that, when I retired from film music four years ago, I decided to take a PhD at Bristol University in order to really get to grips with composition technique and to become more familiar with what is being written today.

Of which works are you most proud?

One of the works I wrote for the PhD was called Kalon, for string quartet and string orchestra. What is unusual about it is that the two string groups perform almost throughout in different simultaneous tempi. I nearly abandoned it twice, so difficult was it to write clearly in polytempo without it sounding a mess. When I heard the Czech Philharmonic play it for the Signum Classics recording I felt so glad that I had stuck with it and that the piece really works.

What are the special challenges/pleasures of working on a commissioned piece?

I've always needed to work to a deadline, even if the deadline is three years off. I have a fear of the piece either not being ready or not being the best I can write, so I tend to finish a commission months before it is due for delivery. This means I can sit with it, re-visit and change or improve large or small things before it is published and the parts are sent to the performers. With my second violin concerto Niobe I persuaded the Czech Philharmonic, who commissioned it, to let me have a playthrough with the wonderful soloist Tamsin Waley-Cohen four months before the first rehearsal. I learned so much from the experience and, as a result, revised several passages to give it even more punch and dramatic impact. In such circumstances my publisher Nimbus Publishing were endlessly patient in allowing me to re-print the score and parts for what turned out to be the definitive version that we premiered and recorded.

What are the special challenges/pleasures of working with particular musicians, singers, ensembles and orchestras?

Knowing the choir, orchestra or soloists is always a pleasure. Pietà is my third commission for the Bournemouth Symphony Chorus and as well as knowing the choir very well I am always thrilled to work with their conductor Gavin Carr. Gavin heard the piece at different stages of the composition and made a number of incisive observations about voicing and the overall impact of the work's structure and climaxes. I feel very lucky to have worked with collaborators like him, and Pietà is dedicated to Gavin in thanks for all his support and encouragement over many years.

How would you characterise your compositional/musical language?

Hard to answer this one meaningfully. I've always felt a need to communicate with my music and consequently have tried, without limiting the freshness or originality of the work, to make it accessible and direct. Having experimented with atonal and serial music in my twenties I am now more interested in using different forms of modal music, or even triadic harmony in new ways. During the PhD I chose my thesis topic as polyrhythm, polymetre and polytempo, and I think my music is characterised by a rhythmic dynamism and freshness. People have also told me that my music is very melodic, and creating well-crafted melodic material remains one of my preoccupations.

How do you work?

I mostly work in my studio in the village in Oxfordshire where I live. The studio has inspiring views on a small lake and I work on a lovely Yamaha grand piano that is also

aligned to a computer on which I write with Sibelius. I often sketch on manuscript paper, then go into short score or full orchestral. Occasionally I have ideas in the middle of the night and come downstairs to work for an hour or so. Mostly, I put in about eight hours a day and never work during the evenings, as my brain would be too stimulated to be able to sleep.

As a musician, what is your definition of success?

Having people want to perform and hear my music is entirely my definition of success. Creating music that is good to play, sing or listen to is all I can hope for. If at a concert someone comes up after a performance and says they sincerely enjoyed the piece, or were visibly moved by it, makes all the hard work worthwhile.

What do you consider to be the most important ideas and concepts to impart to aspiring musicians?

If asked, I always tell composers to follow their hearts and their instinct, to write what they want to write rather than what is considered fashionable or in vogue. I hope they will write or perform out of love for what they do, rather than for the critics or the approval of a small elite. But this is just my own experience, and every musician has to follow their own path and create their own truth.

Where would you like to be in 10 years' time?

At this stage of my life I have decades of experience behind me of writing music in every genre, from commercial to art music. I hope that, energy and good health permitting, I still have my best work to come. I am a great admirer of the Japanese artist Hokusai, who said that nothing he created before his seventieth year amounted to very much, but by the age of seventy he was just getting the hang of painting. I like to think that, aged 65, I am beginning to get the hang of writing music.

The world première of *Pietà*, a new work by Richard Blackford, which will take place at the Lighthouse, Poole on Saturday 22 June 2019. *Pietà* is a setting of the *Stabat Mater*, with additional poems by the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. The work will be recorded for Nimbus shortly after the first performance. The London première will be on Saturday 19 October 2019 at the Cadogan Hall.

The Cross-Eyed Pianist June 22, 2019