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Since our debut in 1979, I have made a habit of putting relatively unknown works alongside the well-known. Steffani is one of those composers who was highly regarded and respected in his lifetime but, sadly, is relatively neglected today. I have to confess that I knew nothing about him until an old friend of mine, Roland Tatnell, drew my attention to his work. Roland and I used to sing together at Westminster Abbey back in the early 1980s and, unbeknown to me, he used to spend many hours at the British Library sifting through manuscripts of Steffani.

Although much revered as a musician, Steffani spent the latter part of his life more involved in diplomatic affairs and the church; however, his final years saw him appointed President of the Academy of Ancient Music in London. This was a group of aristocratic amateur musicians and some eminent professionals, who met fortnightly in the Crown and Anchor in the Strand, in an attempt to restore ancient church music (the ancients being those who lived before the end of the sixteenth century). The thirteen original members included such people as Maurice Greene, Galliard, Pepusch and Samuel Wesley; Bononcini, Croft, Geminiani, Hayes and Senesino joined later, and Steffani was elected president in 1727. It was for these people that he wrote his Stabat Mater, probably his last ever composition, as he was to die of apoplexy only a few months after completing it. As you will hear, it is an extraordinary work, very sonorous and richly textured, yet at times quite archaic, reflecting perhaps the aims of the society for which it was written.

It could not be more different from the almost crazy effervescence of Handel’s Dixit Dominus. After Handel had met Steffani in Hanover in the early 1700s, he wrote:

“he (Steffani) received me with great kindness, and took an early opportunity to introduce me to the Princess Sophia and the Elector’s son, giving them to understand that I was what he was pleased to call a virtuoso in music.”

A couple of years later, they were to meet up again in Rome. Handel would have only been twenty years old, and the highly influential and well established Steffani may well have heard the young man’s Dixit Dominus. On listening to this amazing work, he, like us today, would have been taken on what can only be called a roller coaster of vocal exuberance.
### Agostino Steffani (1654-1728)  
**Stabat Mater dolorosa**  
**Soprano:** Elin Manahan Thomas & Grace Davidson  
**Tenor:** Jeremy Budd & Mark Dobell  
**Bass:** Rob Macdonald

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<td>2</td>
<td>Soli (SST) and Chorus Cuius animam gementem</td>
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<td>Soli (TTB) Inflammatus et accensus</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Chorus Quando corpus morietur</td>
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### George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)  
**Dixit Dominus** (HWV 232)

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**STEFFANI AND HANDEL**

The composers represented on this recording are linked in several ways. Born in 1654, Steffani was just over thirty years older than Handel (born in 1685); they were about a generation apart. Steffani served the house of Hanover from 1688 to 1703 – first as Kapellmeister and then (from 1695) as a diplomat (‘envoyé extraordinaire’); Handel was the Hanoverian Kapellmeister from 1710 to 1713, the year before Elector Georg Ludwig acceded to the British throne. In 1727 Steffani was elected president of London’s Academy of Vocal Music (which became the Academy of Ancient Music and Handel, who had been settled in England for fifteen years, applied for naturalisation as a British subject. Steffani’s operas and vocal chamber duets provided a model for Handel, who freely borrowed musical material and ideas from both kinds of work and adapted them in his own compositions.

Born in the Veneto, Steffani moved to Munich at the age of thirteen and spent the rest of his life in Germany. Although he embarked on a musical career, as a singer, keyboard player and composer, he developed into an accomplished diplomat, politician, bishop and, finally, Apostolic Vicar of Northern Germany. As a composer he was known in his day particularly for his vocal chamber duets (‘the smoothly finished counterpoint of which even Handel could only imitate but not surpass’: Bukofzer) and for his Hanover operas, which helped establish opera in north Germany. Most of his sacred music was composed during his Munich period (1667-88), but it emerges from his correspondence with Giuseppe Riva, the Modenese diplomatic resident in London, that his Stabat Mater was composed during the year before Elector Georg Ludwig acceded to the British throne. In 1727 Steffani was elected president of London’s Academy of Vocal Music (which became the Academy of Ancient Music and Handel, who had been settled in England for fifteen years, applied for naturalisation as a British subject. Steffani’s operas and vocal chamber duets provided a model for Handel, who freely borrowed musical material and ideas from both kinds of work and adapted them in his own compositions.
The words of the *Stabat Mater* are a medieval sequence, probably Franciscan in origin. Essentially a prayer to the Virgin, the poem depicts Mary, the mother of Christ, at the foot of the cross, expresses sympathy with her and a desire to share her grief and her son’s suffering, and prays for protection on the day of judgment both from her and from the cross. Removed from the liturgy in the sixteenth century by the Council of Trent, it had been restored to universal use by Pope Benedict XIII in 1727 and was set by many composers around that time. Various versions of the text were in circulation: the one set by Steffani is found also in Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti and in Pergolesi; other versions were used by Caldara and d’Astorga; Vivaldi set only for a r e a section and duet and trio combinations.

Steffani’s *Stabat Mater* is scored for six voices (two trebles, alto, two tenors, bass), six string instruments and organ. To judge from the sources, the string instruments were two violins, three violas and cello, a combination that produces a rich and sonorous texture; the string writing makes relatively modest technical demands of the players. In a similar way, the vocal writing is confined to the middle and lower registers, conveying a sense of seriousness and intensity. Although the writing for voices and instruments occasionally reflects its date of composition, it also has much in common with seventeenth- and even sixteenth-century styles. The mixture of ancient and modern is somewhat reminiscent of Purcell, but the ancient also evokes the other-worldliness of the subject – the mystery of the cross – and thus promotes the composer’s expressive purpose.

The *Stabat Mater* is the most powerful expression of Steffani’s religious fervour and, outside opera, his largest, most varied and most heart-felt composition. The emphasis on solo voices in verses i-vi highlights subjective elements in the text. The opening solo conveys Mary’s loneliness as well as her grief, and the solo voices used for the writing for voices and instruments, the material of the vocal section is combined with that of the instrumental interlude, which turns out to be the setting of ‘Amen’. All this material is exploited in the concluding twenty bars. By saving his most ambitious counterpoint to the end, Steffani ensured that the closing words, which refer to the day of judgment, would receive the maximum emphasis. As he composed this movement, he must have known that his own end was nigh: that he died shortly afterwards lends a special poignancy to his setting.

*Dixit Dominus* (HWV232) **George Frideric Handel** (1685-1759)

Handel finished composing *Dixit Dominus* in Rome in April 1707, at the age of twenty-two. As a youngster in Halle he had received keyboard and composition lessons from Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow, the local organist. At the age of eighteen he had left home for Hamburg, where he worked as a theatre violinist and harpsichordist and composed his first operas. Three years later he had set off for Italy, effectively to finish his musical education. He visited and worked in all the major artistic centres, but his principal base was Rome. There, among other things, he acquired a manuscript volume of Steffani duets and concentrated, as a composer, on chamber music, oratorio and church music. The text of *Dixit Dominus*, Psalm 109 in the Vulgate, is part of the vespers service, but there is no evidence that his setting was performed in this context on the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, as has been suggested.

Brimming with youthful energy and virtuosity, *Dixit Dominus* is the earliest work by Handel to have secured a place in the repertory. It is scored for five voices (two sopranos, alto, tenor, bass) and, rather unusually, five-part strings (with two violas).
Apart from the ‘Gloria Patri’ (the last two verses of the psalm), each movement is based on a single verse. For the last verse, ‘Sicut erat in principio’ (‘As it was in the beginning’), Handel recalls music from the first movement; not all psalm-settings of this period employ such repetition. Incidentally, the cantus firmus here sounds as though it is a liturgical melody, but the model for it (if any) has never been found. The alto and soprano are the only voices to have solo arias (nos. 2 and 3), but every voice is given a solo or duet passage (which may be integrated into a chorus), and the writing is often very taxing.

If the control of forces is masterly, the range of texture and style is breathtaking. The alto aria, no. 2, is an object-lesson in two-part counterpoint between the voice and an ostinato-like bass. Here, and in the soprano aria, since psalm verses lack the shape and rhyme scheme of a da capo aria text, Handel invents the musical form by means of (varied) repetition and tonal planning. The basic texture of no. 6 – vocal duets over a running bass – is that of the trio sonata. The choral writing uses all the available textures, from simple homophony to complex counterpoint; special emphasis is placed on syllabic word-setting and chains of suspensions. In no. 5 (‘Tu es sacerdos’) Handel combines two forms of scale – rising crotchets and falling semiquavers; in no. 7, at ‘implebit ruinas’, he uses the opposite – rising semiquavers and falling crotchets (although the crotchets are subdivided). Later in no. 7 he illustrates ‘conquassabit’ with repeated notes reminiscent of Monteverdi’s stile concitato. The soprano duet of no. 8 is supported in the other voices by slow repeated notes followed by a descending octave leap; this figure is speeded up in the bass at the beginning of no. 9, where it turns out to be the music for ‘et in Spiritui Sancto’: Handel ‘did’ sublety as well as vigour!

When he left Italy for Hanover, and when he settled in London, the composer effectively sacrificed his best chance of securing a performance of his youthful masterpiece. At the same time, because the work was unknown north of the Alps, he opened up the possibility of using it as a source of material for other compositions, as he did in his ‘Utrecht’ Te Deum (1713), his ‘Chandos’ anthems (1717-18) and his oratorio Deborah (1733). Handel can hardly be blamed for ‘borrowing’ from himself in this way, for his setting of Dixit Dominus is irresistible.

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Agostino Steffani
Stabat Mater dolorosa

Soprano: Elin Manahan Thomas & Grace Davidson
Tenor: Jeremy Budd & Mark Dobell
Bass: Rob Macdonald

Stabat Mater dolorosa (S solo)

i. Stabat Mater dolorosa, iuxta crucec lacrimosa, dum pendebat Filius. The grieving Mother stood weeping beside the cross where her Son was hanging.

Cuius animam gementem (SST soli and Chorus)

ii. Cuius animam gementem contristantem et dolentem pertransivit gladius. Whose weeping soul, saddened and grieving, has been pierced by a sword.

iii. O quam tristis et afflicta fuit illa benedicta Mater Unigeniti! O how sad and afflicted was that blessed Mother of the Only-begotten!

iv. Quae moeretat et dolebat, et tremebat, cum videbat nati poenas incliti. She mourned and grieved, the gentle Mother, as she saw the torment of her glorious Son.
For the sins of His people she saw Jesus in torment and subjected to the scourge. She saw her sweet Son dying, forsaken, while He gave up His spirit.

O Mother, fountain of love, let me feel the power of sorrow, that I may grieve with you.

Who is the man who would not weep if he saw the Mother of Christ in such agony? Would not he have compassion when he beheld the devout Mother suffering with her Son?

Grant that my heart may burn with the love of Christ, my God, that I may please Him. Holy Mother, grant this of yours, that the wounds of the Crucified may be fixed firmly in my heart. Grant that the punishment of your wounded Son, so graciously suffered for me, may be shared with me.

Let me sincerely weep with you, bemoan the Crucified, for as long as I live. To stand beside the cross with you, and to join you in mourning, this I desire.

Chosen Virgin of virgins, do not treat me harshly now; let me weep with you.
Fac ut portem Christi mortem (SST soli)

xvi. Fac ut portem Christi mortem, passionis eius sortem et plagas recolere.
Grant that I may bear the death of Christ, grant me a share in His passion and the remembrance of His wounds.

Fac me plagis vulnerari (Chorus)

xvii. Fac me plagis vulnerari, cruce hac inebriari, ob amorem Filii.
Let me be wounded with His wounds, let me drink the cup of the cross and the blood of your Son.

Inflammatus et accensus (TTB soli)

xviii. Inflammatus et accensus per te, Virgo, sim defensus in die iudicii.
So that I do not burn, consumed by flames, then through you, O Virgin, may I be defended on the day of judgement.

xix. Fac me cruce custodiri, morte Christi praemuniri, confoveri gratia.
Let me be guarded by the cross, fortified by the death of Christ, and cherished by grace.

Quando corpus morietur (Chorus)

When my body dies, grant that to my soul may be given the glory of paradise. Amen.

George Frideric Handel

Dixit Dominus

Soprano: Elin Manahan Thomas & Grace Davidson
Alto: Ruth Massey
Tenor: Jeremy Budd & Mark Dobell
Bass: Eamonn Dougan

Dixit Dominus (Chorus)

Dixit Dominus Domino meo: Sede a dextris meis, donec ponam inimicos tuos scabellum pedum tuorum.
The Lord said unto my Lord: Sit thou on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.

Virgam virtutis tuae (Alto aria)

Virgam virtutis tuae emittet Dominus ex Sion: dominare in medio inimicorum tuorum.
The Lord shall send the rod of thy power out of Sion: be thou ruler, even in the midst among thine enemies.

Tecum principium in die virtutis (Soprano aria)

Tecum principium in die virtutis tuae in splendoribus sanctorum: ex utero ante luciferum genui te.
In the day of thy power shall the people offer thee free-will offerings with an holy worship: the dew of thy birth is of the womb of the morning.
**Iuravit Dominus** (Chorus)

*Iuravit Dominus et non poenitebit eum.* The Lord sware and will not repent.

**Tu es sacerdos in aeternum** (Chorus)

*Tu es sacerdos in aeternum secundum ordinem Melchisedech.* Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedech.

**Dominus a dextris tuis** (SSTTB soli and Chorus)

*Dominus a dextris tuis confregit in die irae suae reges.* The Lord upon thy right hand shall wound even kings in the day of his wrath.

**Iudicabit in nationibus** (Chorus)

*Iudicabit in nationibus, impiebit ruinas: conquassabit capita in terra multorum.* He shall judge among the heathen; he shall fill the plains with the dead bodies: and smite in sunder the heads over divers countries.

**De torrente in via bibet** (SS soli and Chorus)

*De torrente in via bibet: propterea exaltabit caput.* He shall drink of the brook in the way: therefore shall he lift up his head.

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**Gloria Patri et Filio** (Chorus)

*Gloria Patri et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto: sicut erat in principio, et nunc et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.* Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

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**The Sixteen**

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**ORGAN & HARPSCICHORD** Mark Williams
Harry Christophers is known internationally as founder and conductor of The Sixteen as well as a regular guest conductor for many of the major symphony orchestras and opera companies worldwide. He has directed The Sixteen choir and orchestra throughout Europe, America and the Far East gaining a distinguished reputation for his work in Renaissance, Baroque and twentieth century music. In 2000 he instituted the Choral Pilgrimage, a national tour of English cathedrals from York to Canterbury in music from the pre-Reformation, as The Sixteen’s contribution to the millennium celebrations. It raised awareness of this historic repertoire so successfully that the Choral Pilgrimage in the UK is now central to The Sixteen’s annual artistic programme.

In 2008 Harry Christophers was appointed Artistic Director of Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society, he is also Principal Guest Conductor of the Granada Symphony Orchestra as well as enjoying a very special partnership with the BBC Philharmonic with whom he won a Diapason d’Or. He is a regular guest conductor with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and the Orquestra de la Comunidad de Madrid and he has conducted the Hallé, the London Symphony Orchestra and the San Francisco Symphony.

Increasingly busy in opera, Harry Christophers has conducted Monteverdi’s Il ritorno d’Ulisse, Gluck’s Orfeo, Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte, Purcell’s King Arthur and Rameau’s Platée for Lisbon Opera. After an acclaimed English National Opera debut with The Coronation of Poppea he has since returned for Gluck’s Orfeo and Handel’s Ariodante, as well as conducting the UK premiere of Messager’s opera Fortunio for Grange Park Opera. He conducts regularly at Buxton Opera.

In October 2008, Harry Christophers was awarded the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Music from the University of Leicester. In July 2009 he was elected an Honorary Fellow of The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and he was elected an Honorary Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford in October 2009.

After three decades of world-wide performance and recording, The Sixteen is recognised as one of the world’s greatest ensembles. Comprising both choir and period instrument orchestra, the group’s special reputation for performing early English polyphony, masterpieces of the Renaissance, Baroque and early Classical, and a diversity of twentieth century music, all stems from the passions of conductor and founder, Harry Christophers.

The Sixteen tours throughout Europe, Japan, Australia and the Americas and has given regular performances worldwide at the major concert halls and festivals. At home in the UK, The Sixteen are “The Voices of Classic FM” as well as Associate Artists of Southbank Centre, London. The group also promotes the Choral Pilgrimage, an annual tour of the UK’s finest cathedrals, bringing music back to the buildings for which it was written.

The Sixteen’s period instrument orchestra has taken part in acclaimed semi-staged performances of Purcell’s Fairy Queen in Tel Aviv and London, a fully-staged production of Purcell’s King Arthur in Lisbon’s Belem Centre, and new productions of Monteverdi’s Il ritorno d’Ulisse at Lisbon Opera House and The Coronation of Poppea at English National Opera.

Over one hundred recordings reflect The Sixteen’s quality in a range of work spanning the music of five hundred years, winning many awards. In 2008, The Sixteen featured in the highly successful BBC Four television series, Sacred Music, presented by Simon Russell Beale.