

# Children's Choir



## Celebrating the 300th Anniversary of Pergolesi's Birth: Appropriate Literature for Children's Choirs

by

Tom T. Shelton, Jr.

By his understanding of human emotions, Pergolesi showed himself capable, like Mozart, of illuminating the gamut of musical expression. One can only wonder what he might have accomplished had he lived, like Mozart, to the ripe old age of thirty-six.

—Barry Brook,  
Pergolesi Scholar<sup>1</sup>

### Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (January 4, 1710 – March 16, 1736)

In 2010, we celebrate the 300th anniversary of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's birth. While short, Pergolesi's life was interesting, full of drama and excitement. His professional career lasted only five years; yet, in this short period, Pergolesi composed music that has stood the test of time – most notably the *Stabat Mater*.

Several editions and arrangements of Pergolesi compositions appropriate for children's voices are available. Introducing

Pergolesi to young singers allows numerous opportunities to weave history, culture, and foreign language into choral education. The purpose of this article is to suggest appropriate Pergolesi compositions for young voices and provide background information regarding each work.

### *Confitebor*

In late 1732, Naples, Italy, experienced a series of earthquakes. The Archbishop persuaded the regent to close the theaters during carnival as a sign of the city's atonement.<sup>2</sup> Church civic leaders moved to make St. Emidius the patron saint for protection

from earthquakes and to celebrate this festival annually with a solemn mass and double Vespers. Pergolesi was commissioned to write a Mass of Thanksgiving for the Santa Maria Della Stella Church. *Confitebor* was one of several works Pergolesi composed for this event.<sup>3</sup>

- "Fidelia omnia mandata ejus" from *Confitebor* (Pergolesi/arr. Shelton; Hinshaw HMC2236) is an arrangement of a soprano air. Unison Latin with piano and violin, the composition has been lowered a minor third, making it accessible for children's voices. The arrangement includes a translation and pronunciation

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guide as well as suggestions regarding relevant musical skills, understandings, and curricular connections.

## Stabat Mater

Deathly ill with tuberculosis, Pergolesi was advised at age 26 to move closer to the sea where the air would be better for his lungs. Pergolesi moved into the Franciscan monastery in Pozzuoli (founded by the ancestors of his patron, the Duke of Maddaloni). Before he left Naples, he gave his possessions to his aunt, expecting that he would not return. Over the last few months of his life, Pergolesi composed the cantata *Orfeo*, the *Salve Regina in C Minor* for

*Soprano and Strings*, and the *Stabat Mater*, his last work.<sup>4</sup>

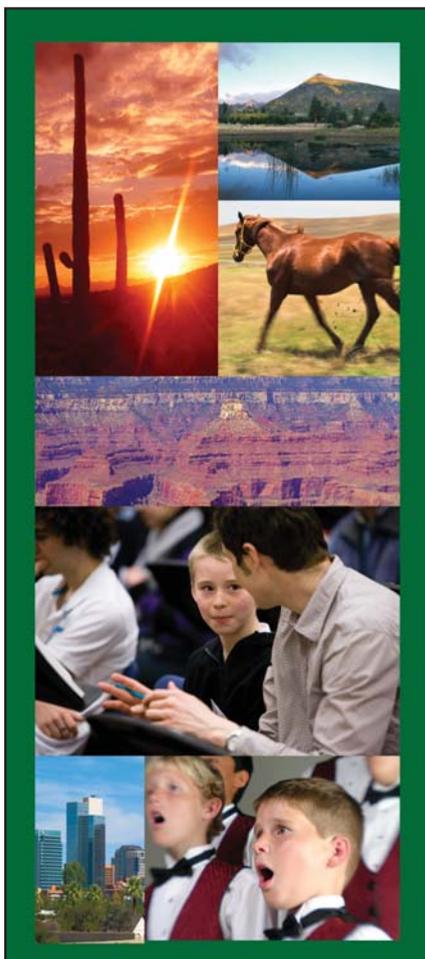
The *Stabat Mater* was commissioned by the Brotherhood of the Seven Sorrows of Mary of the Church of San Luigi di Palazzo in Naples. It was intended for Good Friday services, as well as to serve as an alternate or replacement for Scarlatti's work of the same voicing and similar instrumentation.<sup>5</sup> The text is comprised of a famous medieval sequence relating to Christ's death on the cross through the eyes of Mary. This poem is believed to be of 13th Century Franciscan origin.<sup>6</sup>

The commission was given in late 1735, and Pergolesi was unable to fulfill it until the end of his life. It is haunting to imagine

this beautiful composition was written in his last days, set to a Franciscan poem, while he was being cared for in a Franciscan monastery. While no exact record of the first performance of this work exists, most scholars believe it was performed at the end of March, weeks after his death.<sup>7</sup>

Several movements from Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, appropriate for children's voices, are available.

- *Stabat Mater* (excerpts) (Pergolesi/ed. Bartle; Hinshaw HMB-209) includes five movements from the work: I. *Stabat Mater dolorosa*; IV. *Quae moerebat et dolebat*; VIII. *Fac, ut ardeat cor meum*; XI. *Inflammatum et accensus*; and XII.



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Quando corpus morietur. Jean Ashworth Bartle, an authority on working with children's voices, provides careful editing indicating appropriate dynamics and articulation. This set includes background information and translations. The movements could be performed individually or as a set (duration: 15'15").

- *Pergolesi Suite* (Pergolesi/ed. Rao; Boosey and Hawkes 48004463) consists of the last two movements from the *Stabat Mater* (No. 11 and No. 12). Doreen Rao, renowned children's choir conductor, provides brief biographical information and a translation of the two movements. Additionally, Rao suggests appropriate dynamics, articulation, and other expressive elements.

- *Sing to the Lord God* (Pergolesi/ed. and arr. by Michael Burkhardt; Morningstar MSM-50-9451) is a unison work with keyboard and C instrument. Burkhardt has taken the music from movement IV, *Quae moerebat et dolebat*, and changed the text, using Psalm 96: 1–4. This piece is particularly appropriate (as well as accessible) for children's choirs in the church setting.

- *Glory to God* (Pergolesi/ed. & arr. by Michael Burkhardt; Morningstar MSM-50-1450) is a two-part selection with keyboard and two optional C instruments (flutes or violins). Burkhardt has taken the music from movement no. 11, *Inflammatum et accensus*, raised the pitch a minor 3rd, and changed the text, using Luke 2:14. The repeated sections and short harmonic passages in thirds make this piece particularly accessible for younger singers. Instrumental parts are available separately from the publisher.

Pergolesi died at the age of 26 in Pozzuoli and was buried in the common pit next to the cathedral. Little did he know that the *Stabat Mater* would become the most frequently published text of the eighteenth century, circulated in many adaptations, including one by Bach.<sup>8</sup>

After his death, Pergolesi's popularity exploded. His music reflected the new principles of an evolving *galant* style and the development of the church aria.<sup>9</sup> Unscrupulous publishers put Pergolesi's name on works that were not his. While the world's libraries contain 330 compositions bearing his name, only 33 of the works attributed to Pergolesi were written by him.<sup>10</sup>

This article has only addressed octavos and background information related to *Confitebor* and *Stabat Mater*. Delve deeper into Pergolesi's life, and one would find all the trappings of a feature film: earthquakes, political turmoil, opera successes as well as failures, *La Serva Padrona* and the *Querelle des Bouffons*, the *Stabat Mater*, illness and early death. Take a few moments to research G. B. Pergolesi and learn more about his short, yet fascinating, life.

Pergolesi's 'other' Operas." *Opera News* (August 1990): 54.

<sup>2</sup> Hertz, Daniel. *Music in European Capitals: The Galant Style 1720–80*. (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2003), 106.

<sup>3</sup> Hucke, Helmut and Dale E. Monson: "Pergolesi, Giovanni Battista," Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy (Accessed 23 January 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth D. Robbins, "A Musical and Historical Analysis of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*" (Master's Thesis, Georgia State University, 1999), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Hertz, *Music in European Capitals*, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Robbins, "A Musical and Historical Analysis," 16.

<sup>8</sup> Hucke, "Pergolesi, Giovanni Battista," Grove Music Online.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Brook, "Neapolitan Specialty," 30.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Brook, Barry. "Neapolitan Specialty: Unearthing



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