

## MUSIC NOTES - FRANZ LISZT'S *VIA CRUCIS*

Throughout the history of Western music, the events of Holy Week — as recounted in Biblical scripture — have inspired profound musical works. While the Catholic observance of the Stations of the Cross dates back as early as 312 CE, following Constantine's legalization of Christianity, musical settings of this devotion were relatively rare compared to more prominent sacred genres such as the cantata or requiem mass. Composed in 1879, Franz Liszt's *Via Crucis* stands as the first of few significant musical contributions of this tradition.

In the final years of his life, Liszt experienced a deepening spiritual crisis, marked by despair, a growing preoccupation with death, and a renewed commitment to his Catholic faith. Alongside contemporaries like Anton Bruckner, he sought to return to the austere beauty of earlier sacred music, drawing inspiration from the clarity and devotional purity of Palestrina. *Via Crucis* reflects this shift: while serene and reverent in tone — especially when contrasted with Liszt's earlier works — it also pushes the boundaries of tonality, breaking with the lush excesses of late Romanticism in favor of a more introspective and sacred musical language.

The work follows the traditional fourteen Stations of the Cross, portraying Jesus' condemnation, crucifixion, and burial. Liszt employs a diverse palette of musical forms: unison chant (Stations I and XIV), Lutheran chorales (Stations IV and XII), a Bach-inspired chorale (Station VI), and programmatic vocal and organ solos. He uses these forces to heighten the drama of the Passion narrative, assigning roles such as the women of Jerusalem, the voice of Christ (baritone soloist), and the angry mob (men's chorus). The organ also plays a pivotal role, using melodic gestures, chromatic tension, and thematic repetition to depict key moments like Simon carrying the cross, Jesus being stripped, and His body being taken down.

Throughout the fourteen movements, Liszt weaves in symbolic musical elements to enrich the drama. The "Madonna chord," representing the Virgin Mary, appears symbolically at the beginning of Station IV and returns in fragmented form at the end of Station X. A recurring "cross motif" — an ascending whole step followed by an ascending minor third — opens the work and returns often as a unifying theme. The pitches B-A-C-H (with B representing B-flat and H representing B-natural) appear several times as a further nod to the influence of Johann Sebastian Bach.

*Via Crucis* was a deeply personal endeavor for Liszt, describing it as an effort to "humbly express my devout emotion," but despite its modest demands in terms of performance forces, the work was neglected by his peers and the public, and was not performed publicly until 43 years after Liszt's death. Nearly a century after its eventual premiere on Good Friday in 1929, we are honored to present this deeply moving and contemplative work tonight in its originally intended form, integrated within our traditional Tenebrae service. May it offer new depth and resonance to the story of Christ's Passion.