

More than Rossini's Stabat Mater: The 19th Century Music and Musicians of the Holy Cross Priory, Leicester

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By the middle of the eighteenth century the wide-ranging Anti-Catholic legal and administrative measures imposed during the English Reformation were still in place, though generally were less severely applied. The small Catholic population and even smaller numbers of undercover priests kept a deliberately low profile for their own safety, meeting and worshipping only in unofficial private chapels mostly within private houses in the countryside.

In Leicestershire from 1774 there was then a more or less continuous presence of missionary priests, mainly Dominicans associated with the English mission's priory and small seminary at Bornhem, Belgium. This included serving the few Catholics in Leicester itself. From 1798 the Dominicans served a chapel in a small and inconspicuous building with a double door secure entrance in Causeway Lane, and Mass was offered there on a regular basis for the next 20 years. Little is known about the details, but in addition to a simple altar and tabernacle there must have been a small organ. Rosetta Hennessey is known to have been the organist throughout these decades, and became the first organist of the first Holy Cross, before she later married and emigrated to America.



First Holy Cross Church 1819, with 1824 Presbytery and Schoolroom. (Reproduced by permission of Holy Cross Priory.)

In 1817 Fr Benedict Caestryck OP, exiled from Bornhem, moved into a small house on the corner of Wellington Street and Dover Street, to plan a permanent presence in the centre of the town. He created a small first floor chapel in the house while he worked towards the building on Wellington Street of the first Holy Cross Church. (This is now part of the Priory's Blackfriars Hall, following the opening of the first part of the present Church in 1931.) The Penal era laws relating to the building of Catholic and nonconformist places of worship still applied until Catholic Emancipation in 1829,

so the site had to be inconspicuous and away from a main road or street.

One of the issues that faced Fr Caestryck was the question of music to support the liturgy in the new church. Like all Dominican clergy he would of course have had a solid grounding in the traditional Dominican Rite plain chant, but more would be required to serve a growing congregation. He was however able to turn in at least two directions for help with this. Though public Masses had remained banned since the sixteenth century, the Catholic chapel of The Spanish and Sardinian Embassy in Lincoln's Inn, London, was legally regarded as foreign territory and so outside the Penal laws, and by the eighteenth century English sacred music had been developing in these. In particular the composer Samuel Webbe (1740-1816) served the embassy for many years. Over several decades he had written around 250 four-part motets and a number of four part masses settings for the different Sundays and Feast Days of the year, which were within the capabilities of a modest amateur choir serving the new Leicester Catholic Chapel.

Also, as preparations were made for establishing the new Church and its liturgy, the leading Leicester musical figure of the time, William Gardiner (1770-1863), organist of the non-conformist Great Meeting, introduced the ideal person to establish the musical liturgy and to help lay the foundations of what was to become one of the region's leading Catholic choirs. Charles Guynemer (1791-after 1841) had been a virtuoso violinist, composer and a senior Professor in the Paris Conservatoire of Music, and by 1814 he was beginning to establish a chamber music ensemble in Paris. A strong Bonapartiste, he had also been given a valuable sinecure government position as Head of Customs for all of Flanders by Napoleon personally.

However, with the defeat and capture of the Emperor in the Battle of Paris on 31st March 1814, Guynemer feared for his life because of his political views and associations, and overnight fled the country for England, arriving in London as a political refugee. He had testimonials and letters of introduction to William Gardiner from, among others, the leading London-based Italian composer Muzio Clementi. Gardiner immediately helped him to settle in Leicester. Among other things Guynemer took over and reformed Leicester's fairly moribund subscription concert series,

moving these to the new Assembly Rooms in Hotel Street (now the City Rooms). Guynemer was soon well established in the town as a conductor, soloist, and teacher of music (and newly fashionable social dancing). With his recent musical experience in Catholic France, Guynemer was the ideal person to help Fr Caestryck establish and train Leicester's first Catholic choir since the suppression of the Royal Choral College and Hospital of the Newarke on Easter Sunday 1548.

On Sunday 14th September 1819 a Solemn High Mass was celebrated to mark the opening of the new Church. No details seem to have survived of the music of the event, but it seems most likely that this would have been a combination of Dominican Chant and the emerging new English Catholic style developed by Samuel Webbe.

As Fr Richard Finn OP, Provincial Archivist and Historian of the English Dominicans, has pointed out to me, for Fr Caestryck at Holy Cross sacred music was essential to his fundraising campaigns, first for the Chapel itself, and then for the Catholic poor schools in the parish. Thus on 13th October 1821 he published an advertisement announcing the 'opening' of his Chapel on Wednesday 24th October with Solemn Mass by Haydn and discourse by the Abbot of St Mary's Oscott, to be repeated the next day because of the small size of the Chapel, with collections towards the debt of the building. This is an indication, that by this time, Guynemer had recruited and trained a Choir capable of singing a Haydn mass and other challenging choral music. The Royal Music Library collection, now in the British Library, includes a four-part *Tantum Ergo* by Guynemer which may well have been written for his Holy Cross Choir, perhaps even this event.

Fr Caestryck was clearly concerned to integrate his small but growing congregation with Leicester society more generally. Even during the original fundraising for the new Chapel he had made a donation on behalf of Leicester Catholics towards the Leicester Infirmary, and in October 1825 he presented a Mass in support of the Infirmary, including a 'Grand Mass by Haydn performed with a full orchestra'. From November 1814 Guynemer was presenting orchestral concerts regularly for the Subscription Concerts in the Assembly Rooms which he was able to press into service for such events.

From around 1821 or 1822 Guynemer was spending more and more time in London, where he eventually established what was probably Britain's first touring symphony orchestra and was increasingly performing e.g. at Windsor



Fr Benedict Caestryck OP (1762-1844). (Reproduced by permission of Holy Cross Priory.)

Castle under the patronage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. But he retained his affection for and links with Leicester and Holy Cross. During a concert performance by his touring orchestra on 29th January 1835 in the Wellington Street Assembly Rooms (soon afterwards to be replaced by Joseph Hansom's 'Pork Pie Chapel') the Leicester artist John Paget did the pencil drawing of Guynemer conducting, published here for the first time, which is the only known image of him.

While Guynemer may have stayed in touch with his Holy Cross Choir, Thomas Phillips took over as choir 'manager' with Rosetta Hennessey continuing as organist. However, when Fr Caestryck moved from Holy Cross in 1832, no

Dominican was immediately available to replace him, so a secular priest, Fr B. Hulme, was appointed as the Parish Priest of Holy Cross. Very soon without warning he dismissed Thomas Phillips and all the choir. Despite strong protests from the congregation Fr Hulme refused to back down, and on 29th September 1832 the *London Evening Standard*, *Leicester Mercury* and *Northampton Mercury* reported that the body of Phillips had been found in the Grand Union Canal with his wrist tied to his ankle to prevent himself from swimming.



Charles Guynemer (1791 - ?1862) conducting his Leicester Assembly Rooms concert, 29th January 1835, pencil drawing by John Paget (1811-1892). (Coll. Patrick Boylan.)

Fr Caestryck returned to Holy Cross on 23rd June 1833 to celebrate a Grand High Mass, Vespers in the afternoon and Compline and Benediction. (Could this have included Guynemer's *Tantum Ergo*, published in London that year by Novello and Co., now in the British Library?) The following year, 1834, the Dominicans returned to Holy Cross, with the appointment of Fr Lewis Oxley OP as Parish Priest, and the Dominicans have continued to serve Holy Cross ever since, which was raised by the Order to the status of a Priory in 1882.

There seems to be little information on the music of Holy Cross during the next two decades though no doubt the long-serving Organist Rosetta Hennessey was a help in recovering from the 1832 tragedy until her emigration to America in 1839, and the recently founded Vincent Novello London publisher was rapidly publishing the Masses and Motets of Webbe, as well as leading continental composers, while a new genre of Catholic hymns was emerging from authors such as Frederick Faber and home-grown composers, notably J. F. Hemy, organist of the Newcastle Catholic Parish Church and a teacher at the Ushaw College seminary, Co. Durham.

In the same way that the music of Holy Cross through the first half of the nineteenth century owes a great deal to two immigrants – the Fleming Fr Caestryck and the Frenchman Charles Guynemer, for its music Holy Cross was very much indebted through the second half of the century to two further immigrants, this time from Germany, Joseph Winterhalder and Jacob Klee.

Winterhalder was an expert watchmaker who moved to Leicester with his family and a Swiss watchmaker assistant from Zurich in 1853, establishing his business and home in Belgrave Gate. Born in Friberg, Baden, Germany in 1828, Winterhalder was baptised into the Lutheran Church. He was himself a very good bass singer, but more important from the point of view of Holy Cross, though only 24, he was already both a very good voice coach and an inspiring choir master and conductor, though always technically an amateur.

He was soon volunteering with Holy Cross, quickly building up both a very good four-part choir building up to around 60 singers, and at least two of each voice within the choir was trained by him to perform solo parts at a professional standard in the most challenging music of the day (notably the Rossini *Stabat Mater*). Soon

Winterhalder had introduced to Holy Cross the Masses and motets of Mozart, with the Coronation Mass and Exultate Jubilate as special favourites along with the Rossini *Stabat Mater*, but also sacred music by Haydn, Beethoven, Weber, Lutz, Hummel and other composers. He very quickly established a standard of singing and overall performance equal to the highest professional standards.

Rosetta Hennessey's long service as organist from the Causeway Lane temporary chapel onwards shows that from the beginning, the new church had some sort of organ. However Holy Cross was not to have an instrument of real quality and scale until the arrival in Leicester from West Yorkshire of the organ builder Joshua Poritt. One of Poritt's first commissions, no doubt at least partly prompted by Winterhalder, was for Holy Cross in 1861, and in 1890 he enlarged this organ considerably. The Poritt instrument was regarded at that time as second only in Leicester to the 1777 Seltzer organ in St Martin's (now the Cathedral). (The Poritt was moved into the chancel of the new Holy Cross Church in 1931, and is still there with its 1890 configuration – to the side of the Sanctuary on the right. The Great Organ in the Choir Gallery is a rebuilt 1880 three manual instrument by Ebenezer Richardson, in the style of 'Father' Willis, removed in 1995 from a redundant Anglican church in Preston, Lancashire.)

The opening of Leicester's Royal Opera House in Silver Street (which had the 'Royal' title 80 years before the better known one in Covent Garden!) offered further opportunities for Holy Cross and Winterhalder. Established with a resident orchestra, its first – and long-serving – professional musical director was Jacob Theodore Klee, born in Frickhoven, Bavaria, in 1857.



Leicester Royal Opera House, Silver Street, 1876. (Copy in the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society's records of the 1907 British Association meeting in Leicester, deposited on loan in the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

Klee had already had a lot of experience as an orchestral musician, composer and conductor in London and around England, and on arriving in Leicester soon offered to assist Winterhalder with the music of Holy Cross. With the Church constantly overcrowded for major musical events, especially the annual Holy Week Rossini Stabat Mater, the Opera House management was quickly persuaded to support the Church with the use of the orchestra for performances in Holy Cross, and eventually accommodating the annual Stabat Mater performances in the much larger space and seating of the Opera House.

The two, supported also by W. D. Vann as the Organist, worked together on major festivals and fundraising events. For example, there was a concert in the Opera House under the patronage of Bishop Bagshaw to raise funds for the planned church for the Sacred Heart Mission, including Mozart's Coronation Mass. Klee wrote a full four part Mass to be performed at the opening of the Sacred Heart Church, which was commercially published. (A performing set of vocal scores is still in the Holy Cross Organ loft music collection).

Not all the special events were religious. For example in 1889 Winterhalder and Klee with the choir took a leading role in a one day Irish Fancy Fair under the patronage of among others the Mayor of Leicester aiming to 'liquidate the debt on the new Catholic Schools on New Walk'. The programme opened with a new Trumpet March by Klee, the Gloria from Mozart's Coronation Mass, and later included a performance with band and chorus of Sir Julius Benedict's then popular three act opera 'The Lily of Killarney', (with Winterhalder himself singing the bass villain role of Mr Corrigan).

Winterhalder died in 1900 and is buried in the Welford Road Cemetery. At this point, or perhaps a little earlier, Klee succeeded him, among other things introducing to England in 1898 the Charles Gounod Messe Sollenelle St Cecilia, which quickly became a great favourite around the country, equalling the Mozart Coronation Mass. Klee died in 1929 and is also buried in the Welford Road Cemetery.

Postscript: Holy Cross and the Stabat Mater

One of the strongest oral traditions about the music of Holy Cross, is that the nineteenth century Church mounted the first performance - in England?? - or in the Midlands?? of Rossini's Stabat Mater. It is undeniably true that for at least half a century Stabat Mater was Holy Cross's musical highlight of Holy Week and indeed the musical year, but what if anything supports this proud tradition?

The work's origins are complicated but interesting. Rossini was commissioned to write a setting of this unusual meditation on the Crucifixion seen from the point of view of Our Lady standing with just a handful of supporters at the

foot of the Cross as she watched the three hour agony and death of her Son on the Cross. This was to be performed in Holy Week in the Royal Chapel San Felipe in Madrid.

By the end of the fourteenth century the present Latin text was widely known and had begun to be used as a Sequence in Masses in honour of the Virgin Mary. For many centuries the text was traditionally ascribed to the fourteenth century Franciscan friar Jacopone da Todì, but very recently a much earlier plainsong notated copy has been discovered in a thirteenth century Gradual belonging to Dominican nuns in Bologna, now in the City's Museo Civico.



Gioacchino Rossini in London, January 1824, lithograph by Charles Hullmandel. (Permission © The Trustees of the British Museum, released as CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.)

Rossini began work on the text, but he was in poor health and after completing six of the ten movements he asked a composer friend to complete the work so that it could be performed on schedule in San Felipe e Real on Holy Saturday 1833. After this single performance Rossini put the score aside for years. However, in the late 1830s he learned that a Paris publisher was producing a pirate edition of the Madrid version attributing the whole of this to Rossini. As well as starting legal proceedings Rossini returned to the score Stabat Mater and completed it by writing his own versions of the remaining movements.

The first performance of the complete work was in the Paris Theatre-Italiens on 7th January 1842. This large 1300 seat opera house was very different from the much smaller chapel for which it had been originally conceived. The performance was also given a full 'operatic' treatment, with the theatre's large chorus and orchestra and four world famous soloists: the soprano Guila Grisi, tenor Matteo Mario, the English coloratura contralto Emma Howson (using her stage name Albertazzi), and the finest Italian baritone of the day, Antonio Tamburini. The performance was an enormous success, amongst other things showing that a work conceived as a chamber work was equally successful on a large scale.

Much more in line with Rossini's original conception was the equally successful first Italian performance two months later. This was in a beautiful small sixteenth century lecture hall of Bologna University (now part of the Municipal Library), which was immediately afterwards officially named Salla Stabat Mater. This performance was conducted by the up and coming composer Gaetano Donizetti, in the presence of Rossini. It has to be conceded that Rossini's genius was to create a work that – like Handel's 'Messiah' – works equally well at very different scales.

Some years ago I attended a performance in the huge French Army Church of Les Invalides, Paris, with a chorus of 400, an orchestra of 80 and paying audience of 1500! Though this was undoubtedly impressive, I felt that the October 2019 Holy Cross 200th anniversary performance of Stabat Mater with Coro Nostro and the Knighton Chamber Orchestra conducted by Paul Jenkins was much more in the spirit of Rossini, and indeed of the remarkable anonymous meditation on Mary's experience of her son's barbaric Crucifixion.

So what about the first performances in Britain in relation to the Holy Cross tradition? I have searched through the scanned copies of thousands of British national and local newspapers in the British Library collection that are now searchable online, looking for both news items and advertisements across the UK for performances of Rossini's Stabat Mater between 1842 and 1880.

The first London performance was in fact mounted in Her Majesty's Theatre London 'under the Patronage of His Royal Highness Prince Albert' (incidentally, an influential patron of Charles Gounod) on Friday 29th July 1842, and by popular demand it was repeated on 3rd August. Twelve leading opera soloists appeared with a chorus of 100, and the Italian Opera Company orchestra was supplemented by no less than 11 famous virtuoso players. The concert performance was played in front of a set 'descriptive of a Roman Catholic Cathedral'. A long review in the *Illustrated London News* gave the highest praise to the work itself and

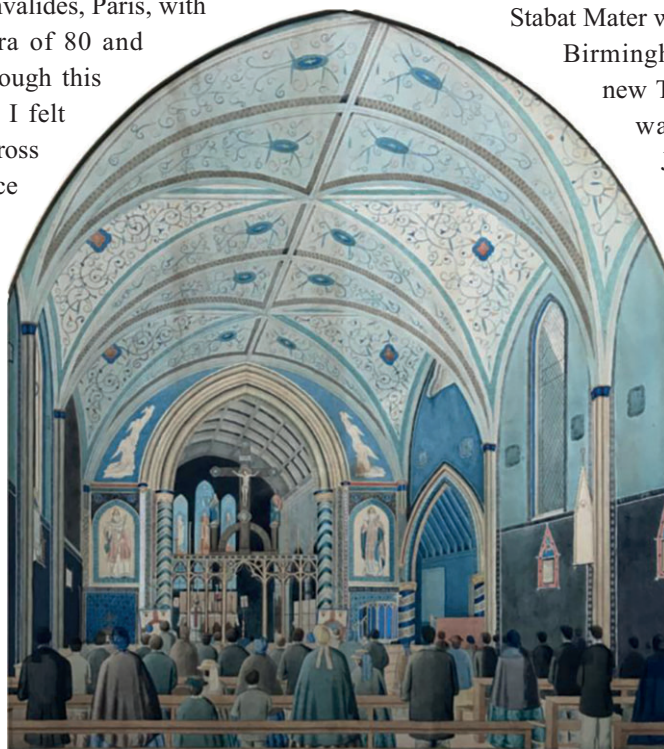
the performance, and reported that nearly half of the movements had to be encored.

However, opinion was very divided, not about the music but about the words and sentiment of the Stabat Mater's focus on the agony of the Virgin Mary. For example, a Protestant writer in Dublin's *Statesman and Christian Record* denounced it as 'an abomination' and 'idolatory'. Easier to justify were the denunciations in August 1842 of a published 'The Stabat Mater Quadrilles' for piano!

Further concert performances followed in 1843 at Her Majesty's, London. The same year in Birmingham, Stabat Mater was the centrepiece of the triennial Birmingham Music Festival held in the new Town Hall, of which the architect was the Catholic Hinckley-born Joseph Hansom, (who was also responsible for most of the extension and remodelling of the first Holy Cross Church). The Birmingham performance, though a great success, again provoked a vehement denunciation on religious grounds, this time from the Rector of St Martin's, who said that as Chairman of the Hospital Committee he was contemplating refusing to accept the money raised for the Hospital by such a blasphemous and disgraceful event! (The Birmingham Festival had a distinguished history of introducing major choral works: two years later they commissioned

Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, and later Gounod's *Redemption*, and in 1900 they commissioned Elgar's setting of the *Dream of Gerontius* by Cardinal – now Saint – John Henry Newman.)

Over the next twenty years or so there were a dozen or more performances of Rossini's Stabat Mater in Britain and Belfast. So is anything left of the Holy Cross legend in relation to Rossini's Stabat Mater? I am pleased to be able to answer 'yes'! All of these performances were again in concert halls or theatres. In Britain there was a long tradition of banning church performances of oratorios and similar works. (Jonathan Swift, the Dublin author and Dean not only refused Handel permission to give the first performance of *Messiah* in the Cathedral, but forbade the adult and boy singers of the Cathedral Choir to sing in the concert hall premiere.)



The first Holy Cross Church, extended and decorated c1849 by Joseph Hansom, who added a narthex (porch) on Wellington Street, a chancel/choir extension towards New Walk, and a Lady Chapel on the right of the nave. Anon. Watercolour. (Reproduced by permission of Holy Cross Priory.)



The first Holy Cross Church with the 1850s decorations painted over. Watercolour by Sydney W. A. Newton, 1914. (Reproduced by permission of Holy Cross Priory.)

We don't seem to have a record of when exactly the Holy Cross tradition of a Holy Week performance began, but it is clear that this was very much an initiative of Joseph Winterhalder, who from 1852-1853 had quickly built up what was soon a famous choir and group of soloists able to achieve professional standards of performance. An indication of possible moves towards learning and performing Stabat Mater is that by 1853, the music publisher's agency based at the Leicester Theatre Royal was offering copies of the vocal score for two shillings (10p) for a single copy or five copies for seven shillings, suggesting that somebody was buying it in performance sets. Very tentatively I suggest that Winterhalder would have been able to present Stabat Mater in the Holy Cross Church no later than the mid 1850s. No doubt the purchase of the original Porritt organ in 1861 is a further indication of Winterhalder's ambitions for the Church and his choir at the time.

In my countrywide searching of all the newspapers and programmes, the earliest church performances of Stabat Mater I have found was one in the Italian Church, Hatton Gardens, London, on 13th March 1864, followed by one (by the same performers perhaps) the following week on 19th March 1864 in the Sacred Heart Church, Lauriston Street, Edinburgh.

Therefore, while Holy Cross did not present the first British performance of Rossini's Stabat Mater, it was almost certainly justified in claiming to have been first to present this outstanding work in a Church and a Holy Week liturgical setting. It continued to be a much anticipated feature of the Holy Cross Holy Week and indeed the Leicester musical year into the twentieth century.

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I also acknowledge all the work of the late Alderman (and Lord Mayor) Archibald Kimberlin for his work *The Return of Catholicism 1746-1946 Leicester* (1946), and to Fr Isidore Clarke OP of Holy Cross Priory, who published a *Short History of the Dominicans in Leicester* (1997) on the 750th anniversary of the arrival of the Dominicans in Leicester. Thanks also to Bernard Marriott, a long-standing fellow former member of the Holy Cross Choir.



Stabat Mater during the Holy Cross Bicentenary Concert, October 2019. (Fr Matthew Jarvis OP.)