



**ONLINE**

St Matthew-in-the-City,  
Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand  
Tuesday 7 April 2020, 12pm

## **John Wells – piano**

Programme

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

### **Consolations, S.172**

*Andante con moto*

*Un poco più mosso*

*Lento placido*

*Quasi Adagio*

*Andantino*

*Allegretto sempre cantabile*

### **Via Crucis, S.53**



Programme notes by John Wells

## **Consolations, S.172**

*Andante con moto - Un poco più mosso - Lento placido -  
Quasi Adagio - Andantino - Allegretto sempre cantabile*

These character pieces date from 1849/1850. The title may have been inspired from French poets such as Lamartine. The key system is unusual: E major is used for all the pieces except Nos 3 and 4, which are in D flat major. However, the key shifts are beautifully smooth when they occur.

The third consolation makes use of what was a relatively new piano device, originally called the *sostenuto* pedal, but more usefully, nowadays, the *capture* pedal. Originally a French invention, it was picked up and patented by the Steinway company in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Steinways sent Liszt a piano in 1883 which possessed this device; he was sufficiently impressed to transcribe this Consolation, among other pieces, using the effect. Single bass notes are 'captured' while upper harmonies can be smoothly changed in the usual way without losing the bass line.

The fourth consolation is headed with a decorative star, hence the subtitle "Star Consolation". The meaning is unclear.

## Via Crucis, S.53

The popular image of Liszt as a flamboyant virtuoso and also an ordained priest always sits uneasily in our minds. There's a schizophrenic feel to it. The truth about this complex man needs to be briefly unpacked if we are to appreciate the music of his *Via Crucis*.

You could make a case that Liszt's religious aspirations were insincere and accuse him of hypocrisy, particularly noting his social life. He has been described as 'Mephistopheles disguised as a abbé'. Nonetheless, he was given minor orders in the Catholic Church as doorkeeper, reader, acolyte and exorcist. His letters show more than a passing infatuation with religious matters; he refers to himself in one place as a 'very humble musician who says his prayers'. He was a liberal Catholic before his time; the Index of prohibited books was still a powerful weapon the Church used to maintain the status quo. It is difficult to imagine that the Church would have admitted him to minor orders, however, without being satisfied of some degree of genuine commitment to its mission, no matter how inconsistent or untidy.

So I suggest we accept the music of the *Via Crucis* as penned by a real believer, despite his human frailties – which we share!

The *Via Crucis* is a complex score psychologically, with its eyes fixed on the stars but its feet still not clear of the mud. This concert, too, is a mixed bag: half recital, half meditation. These 14 'stations of the cross' are more familiar to Catholic Christians; they are inspired by traditional 'snapshots' of Jesus' journey from Pilate's court to the cross. Most are Biblical, but St Veronica is a medieval fiction.

The score I am playing from is sanctioned by Liszt himself, being the last in a group of versions of the same piece. Its notation is conflicted: this is mainly seen by the fact that some of the staves have text written above them – there are even extra ‘voice’ staves. What Liszt meant by this could be an interesting topic of conversation but I hope the notes shown on your screens will help you navigate the separate movements.

### **Introduction – Hymn: Vexilla regis (incl. 2 verses plus Amen)**

The Royal Banner forward goes,  
The mystic Cross refulgent glows:  
Where He, in Flesh, flesh who made,  
Upon the Tree of pain is laid.

### **Station 1 – Jesus is condemned to death**

Brusque octaves, violent chords as Jesus is struck

### **Station 2 – Jesus takes his cross**

Low, mysterious tremolandi  
Solo line with text (‘Ave, ave crux’ *‘Hail, O Cross’*)  
Low, steady octaves; Jesus begins walking the Via  
Dolorosa

### **Station 3 – Jesus falls for the first time**

Rough chords, then Ave crux motif, then sad, smooth thirds anticipating Mary’s grief at seeing her son hanging on the cross.

### **Station 4 – Jesus meets his mother**

Long, sinuous melodic line which ends hanging, unfinished in the upper register. Hint of Wagner’s famous “Tristan” chord.

### **Station 5 – Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry his cross**

Tenor register, falling

Pulsing chords then support the melody, characterized by upwards leaps and downwards steps. The ‘trudging’ motif reappears.

### **Station 6 – Saint Veronica**

Long solo line – no text, then the familiar *Passion Chorale*

### **Station 7 – Jesus falls for the second time**

A musical reprise of Station 3.

### **Station 8 – The women of Jerusalem**

Hurrying, anxious, highly chromatic; St Veronica is briefly recalled but the biblical quote above the music suggests that Jesus himself is interrupting the women with a quote from Luke 23:28: “Do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children”. Then a martial section.

### **Station 9 – Jesus falls for the third time**

A musical reprise of Station 3.

### **Station 10 – Jesus is stripped of his clothes**

Starting in the low register, ponderous octaves with a chromatic,

flowing inner line; the pitches rises and the texture thins out and dissipates like smoke.

### **Station 11 – Jesus is nailed to the cross**

Ugly, jagged music reflecting the horror of crucifixion, a process invented by and widely used by the Romans.

### **Station 12 – Jesus dies on the cross**

The longest and most complex movement. In order: a solo line ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'); soft chords; 'Into your hands I commend my spirit'; the music builds to a climax; 'It is finished'; The second hymn dates from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and was used by Bach:

O darkest woe!

Ye tears forth flow!

Has earth so sad a wonder,

That the father's only Son

Now lies buried yonder!

### **Station 13 – Jesus is taken down from the cross**

A free, solo line (no text), a recall of the women weeping (Station 3) then a longer reprise of Station 4; St Veronica briefly recalled at the end.

### **Station 14 – Jesus is laid in the tomb**

A complete recall of *Vexilla regis* with a different texture, then a marvellous change to D major, and a concluding *Amen*.



Our next planned concerts are:

Tuesday 5 May  
**Auckland Trio**  
Three Vibrant Strings

Tuesday 2 June  
**Hsiaoyi Yu, *organ***  
Organ Power from Taiwan

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