Before Handel collected his twelve concerti grossi into a single published collection, his Op. 6 (1740), several of the concertos had served him as overtures or entr'acte music. The movements of his Op. 6, Nº 5 aptly serve that function here because Handel himself used this concerto as the overture to his *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*. The term concerto grosso means "big concerto" or just "big group," and the genre is defined by its focus on different combinations of selected instruments within the larger ensemble. The six movements in this concerto thus feature different alternations of performing forces to create contrasts of texture, timbre, and sonority. Thus, for example, the opening and third movements feature a solo violinist versus the full ensemble; the second movement introduces the instruments section by section in its fugal exposition (first violins, second violins, and then violas and continuo); the fourth movement distinguishes a trio of soloists (two violins and cello) within the larger ensemble; and the fifth movement turns that larger ensemble into a soloist en masse with concertato writing (that is, rapid-fire, repeated notes) in all of the parts above a driving bass line.

The four Handel duets divide evenly between opera (*Tolomeo* and *Rinaldo*) and oratorio (*Judas Maccabeus* and *Theodora*), and they also illustrate early, middle, and late phases of Handel's career. In spite of the different genres and the span of time that they cover, the duets show a consistency in Handel's dramatic use of them: each illustrates a key moment or central relationship within the larger plot. In *Judas Maccabeus*, the Israelitish Man and Woman, singing "O, Lovely Peace" and standing for the Israelites as a whole, celebrate their final victory over the Seleucid enemy within a story that emphasizes the importance of acknowledging God's power in the deliverance of His people. This sort of victory and reflection was keenly felt by Handel's English audience because *Judas Maccabeus* premiered shortly after the British defeat of what seemed an existential threat: Scottish forces led by the Young Pretender to the British throne, Bonnie Prince Charlie—a Catholic, no less. In contrast to the gently pastoral air of "O, Lovely Peace," "Se il cor ti perde," the duet from *Tolomeo*, strikes a mournful and anxious tone, with its insistently active bass accompaniment. Tolomeo, the king of Egypt and his beloved wife, Seleuce, face defeat in a power struggle that threatens their rule. In this touching farewell made in the face of their anticipated death, they promise never to forget one another.

Tolomeo and Seleuce, however, prevail according to the custom of 18th-century opera seria and its happy endings. By contrast, Theodora and Didymus, characters in an oratorio about Christian faith and martyrdom, experience a different fate. Theodora, a 4th-century noblewoman of Antioch, is cast into a brothel because her faith prohibits her from offering sacrifices to pagan gods. Didymus, a Roman soldier and secret convert to Christianity, finds her and gives her his armor so that she may escape in disguise. Recognizing his sacrifice, Theodora sings "To thee, thou glorious son of worth" while he responds with "To thee, whose virtues suit thy birth." To finish their story, Theodora is momentarily freed, but she ultimately rejects this freedom and is martyred with Didymus—after they sing a second duet to immortality (not included on the program). The brightly exuberant "Scherzano sul

tuo volto," sung by Rinaldo and his betrothed, Almirena, is happier stuff, in which the lovers declare their mutual devotion. The moment is especially poignant because Almirena is then suddenly borne away by the magical powers of her rival for Rinaldo's affections, the sorceress Armida.

The list of composers who have set the *Stabat mater*—Josquin Desprez, Lassus, Palestrina, Vivaldi, Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti (separately!), Mozart, Rossini, Schubert, Verdi, Kodály, Poulenc, Virgil Thomson, Arvo Pärt—testifies to its spiritual power and historical significance. Dating to the 13th century, this Franciscan hymn to the Virgin Mary recounts her compassionate suffering as she witnesses Christ's crucifixion. The text and an added plainchant melody were later incorporated into the Roman Catholic liturgy to be sung during Mass on the feast day of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows (September 15), but its dozens of polyphonic settings reflect its broader devotional and concert uses across several centuries.

Pergolesi's setting, which he composed at the very end of his brief life (he was just 26 when he died), is often described as his finest work. Working not within the longstanding Roman choral tradition but instead in a newer Neapolitan and opera-influenced style, Pergolesi wrote his *Stabat mater* for just two soloists (soprano and alto) and strings. The result is a setting and style that the 18th-century composer and tradition-minded historian, Giambattista Martini, found to be too operatic for church music: where Martini wanted erudite counterpoint, Pergolesi supplied arias whose expressive language is closely similar to what we hear in Handel's duets, but whose forms are through-composed settings suited to their selections of Latin text. Pergolesi's innovative style of church aria avoids operatic virtuosity, but similar to opera, it clearly and even forcefully communicates a central affect. For example, the slow, searing quality of overlapping dissonances in the opening movement ("Stabat mater dolorosa")—first in the strings during the ritornello and then when the soprano and alto enter—vividly paint the picture of Mary's aching sadness as she stood at the foot of the cross. The following movement ("Cuius animam gementem"), an energetic andante, portrays the specific pain that Mary feels with its repeated two-note staccato motif evoking the sword tip that pierces her soul. Further on, the mention of the cause of all this, the sins of mankind ("pro peccatis suæ gentis"), inspires aggressive, angry music; the call directed to Mary to let us feel the wounds that Christ feels ("Sancta Mater, istud agas") brings forth a music of persuasive insistence; and our desire to bear the weight of Christ's death upon ourselves ("Fac ut portem Christi mortem") is plainly funereal in its austere dotted-note unisons and piercing vocal leaps.

Martini, in judging Pergolesi by the standard of earlier masters of vocal polyphony, thought his *Stabat mater* as too light, too modern. Without that standard in our minds, we can appreciate not only the distinctive design of arias that Pergolesi created, but also the variety of affects that they could pour out. The piece is of such quality that we remember Pergolesi's early death and wonder—as we also do of Purcell, Mozart, or Schubert—at what he might have composed had he lived longer.