

PROGRAM NOTES

I

Niccola Antonio Porpora was born in Naples, August 17, 1686, and died there, March 3, 1768. At the age of ten he entered the Conservatorio dei Poveri de Gesu Christe at Naples where he was a student of Gaetano Greco, Matteo Biondano and Ottavio Campanile. During a long life dedicated to composition, performance and teaching (Joseph Haydn was one of his voice students), Porpora composed 44 operas, 11 oratorios and numerous masses and motets. In 1733 he was engaged by the directors of the "Opera of the Nobility" in London which had been organized as a rival company to that of George Frederic Handel.

During the period from 1726 to 1739 Porpora was engaged as a teacher of music by the "Ospedali degli Incurabili", one of four famous Venetian orphanages renowned for their high level of musical performance. The orchestras and choirs of these institutions were composed of girl residents. The "Magnificat" was composed for the aforementioned orphanage and received its first performance there.

II

Little can be said about the Poulenc STABAT MATER that does not encompass feelings of reverence and awe at its power and magnitude. In his youth Poulenc experimented with erotic and surrealist music, but in 1936 the tragic death of his friend Pierre-Octave Ferroud in an auto accident in Hungary made a deep mark on him. Poulenc was travelling in the south of France when he heard the news, and immediately went to visit the religious sanctuary of Rocamadour. The composer's wealthy father who had implanted the Catholic faith in Poulenc's mind had often spoken of the place to his son. That very evening, he wrote his first religious work, the "Litanyes a la vierge Noir de Rocadadour." In 1949 the death of another friend caused Poulenc to consider the writing of a "Requiem", but he shied away from the challenge of composing music for the trumpets of the Last Judgment. A "Stabat Mater", on the other hand, would be better suited to his style. This thirteenth-century hymn by Jacopone da Todi is no less tragic than the Mass for the Dead, but it treats the physical suffering of the Christ and the mental anguish of his Mother with a human warmth, a caressing tenderness perfectly suited to Poulenc's spirit. This setting, first performed at the Strasbourg Festival in 1951, takes its place among the most remarkable religious musical works of the twentieth century and perhaps of all time.