

## Ave Verum Corpus

“Ave verum corpus” is a short Eucharistic hymn based on a 14th century poem, which has been set to music by various composers. Mozart’s setting was written in 1791 to celebrate the Catholic feast of Corpus Christi.

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### Lyrics

The text is in Latin, and reads:

Ave verum corpus natum  
de Maria Virgine,  
vere passum, immolatum  
in cruce pro homine,  
cuius latus perforatum  
unda fluxit et sanguine,  
esto nobis praegustatum  
in mortis examine.

A translation into English is:

Hail, true Body,  
Born of the Virgin Mary,  
Truly suffered, immolated  
On the Cross for man,  
Whose pierced side  
Flowed with water and blood,  
Let it be for us a foretaste [of  
heaven]  
In the trial of death.

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### I. Ave Verum Corpus

*Ave verum corpus* is a short Eucharistic hymn dating from the 14th century and attributed to Pope Innocent VI (d. 1362), which has been set to music by various composers. During the Middle Ages it was sung at the elevation of the host during the consecration. It was also used frequently during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

The hymn's title means "Hail, true body", and is based on a poem deriving from a 14th-century manuscript from the Abbey of Reichenau, Lake Constance. The poem is a meditation on the

Catholic belief in Jesus' Real Presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist, and ties it to Catholic ideas on the redemptive meaning of suffering in the life of all believers.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's setting of *Ave verum corpus* (K. 618) was written for Anton Stoll (a friend of his and Haydn's) who was musical co-ordinator in the parish of Baden, near Vienna. It was composed to celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi and the autograph is dated 17 June 1791. It is only forty-six bars long and is scored for choir, stringed instruments, and organ. Mozart's manuscript itself contains minimal directions, with only a single *sotto voce* at the beginning.

Mozart composed this motet while in the middle of writing his opera *Die Zauberflöte*, and while visiting his wife Constanze, who was pregnant with their sixth child and staying in a spa near Baden. It was less than six months before Mozart's death.

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## **II. Ave Verum Corpus**

In April of 1791, Leopold Hofmann, who was *Kapellmeister* at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna, fell gravely ill. Mozart, who had never been an avid composer of sacred music, nonetheless saw an opportunity to enhance his income, and maneuvered to succeed Hofmann. Towards this end, he turned his attentions again to sacred music, culminating ultimately with his *Requiem*. (As it happens, Hofmann survived Mozart, and died in 1793.)

Mozart set the Eucharistic hymn *Ave verum corpus* in June 1791. This setting was dedicated to his friend, Anton Stoll, who was chorus master of the parish church in Baden, and it was first performed in Baden at the Feast of Corpus Christi.

It is possible that Mozart set this hymn, mindful of the Imperial ban on elaborate concerted music, or it is possible that he was working with the limitations of Stoll's choir. One way or another, his setting is remarkable for its compact simplicity. There are a mere forty-six bars of music, with orchestral writing that serves to provide introduction, transition, and ending, and double the choral parts. The choral setting is simplicity itself, with the choir mostly singing the same text at the same time. This direct approach would suit a reform-minded Austria where textual clarity and brevity were all-important in church music.

Mozart's setting is far from pedestrian or undistinguished. (It actually isn't even complete; the text includes a final two verses, which Mozart omitted from his setting.) There is an unusual modulation from D major to F major at the text, "whose side was pierced, whence flowed water and blood," and the simplicity is the sort that Artur Schnabel famously described as too simple for children and too difficult for adults (after all, simple music like this exposes any lapses of rhythm, intonation, or ensemble). And the music seems to encompass a universe of feeling in forty-six short bars.

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### **III. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (IPA: [ˈvɔlfɡaŋ amaˈdeʊs ˈmoˈtʰsart], full name Johann Chrysostom Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (27 January 1756 – 5 December 1791), was a prolific and influential composer of the Classical era. He composed over six hundred works, many acknowledged as pinnacles of symphonic, concertante, chamber, piano, operatic, and choral music; and he is among the most enduringly popular of classical composers.

Mozart showed prodigious ability from his earliest childhood in Salzburg. Already competent on keyboard and violin, he composed from the age of five and performed before European royalty; at seventeen he was engaged as a court musician in Salzburg, but grew restless and traveled in search of a better position, always composing abundantly. Visiting Vienna in 1781 he was dismissed from his Salzburg position and chose to stay in the capital, where over the rest of life he achieved fame but little financial security. The final years in Vienna yielded many of his best-known symphonies, concertos, and operas, and the *Requiem*. The circumstances of his early death have been much mythologized. He was survived by his wife Constanze and two sons.

Mozart always learned voraciously from others, and developed a brilliance and maturity of style that encompassed the light and graceful along with the dark and passionate—the whole informed by a vision of humanity "redeemed through art, forgiven, and reconciled with nature and the absolute". His influence on all subsequent Western art music is profound. Beethoven wrote his own early compositions in the shadow of Mozart, of whom Joseph Haydn wrote that "posterity will not see such a talent again in 100 years".

### **Style**

Mozart's music, like Haydn's, stands as an archetypal example of the Classical style. At the time he began composing, European music was dominated by the *style galant*: a reaction against the highly evolved intricacy of the Baroque. But progressively, and in large part at the hands of Mozart himself, the contrapuntal complexities of the late Baroque emerged once more, moderated and disciplined by new forms, and adapted to a new aesthetic and social milieu. Mozart was a versatile composer, and wrote in every major genre, including symphony, opera, the solo concerto, chamber music including string quartet and string quintet, and the piano sonata. These forms were not new; but Mozart advanced the technical sophistication and emotional reach of them all. He almost single-handedly developed and popularized the Classical

piano concerto. He wrote a great deal of religious music, including large-scale masses: but also many dances, divertimenti, serenades, and other forms of light entertainment.

The central traits of the Classical style are all present in Mozart's music. Clarity, balance, and transparency are the hallmarks of his work, but any simplistic notion of its delicacy masks the exceptional power of his finest masterpieces, such as the Piano Concerto No. 24 in C minor, K. 491, the Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550, and the opera *Don Giovanni*. Charles Rosen makes the point forcefully:

It is only through recognizing the violence and sensuality at the center of Mozart's work that we can make a start towards a comprehension of his structures and an insight into his magnificence. In a paradoxical way, Schumann's superficial characterization of the G minor Symphony can help us to see Mozart's daemon more steadily. In all of Mozart's supreme expressions of suffering and terror, there is something shockingly voluptuous.

Especially during his last decade, Mozart exploited chromatic harmony to a degree rare at the time, with remarkable assurance and to great artistic effect.

Mozart always had a gift for absorbing and adapting valuable features of others' music. His travels certainly helped in the forging of a unique compositional language. London as a child, he met J.C. Bach and heard his music. In Paris, Mannheim, and Vienna he met with many other compositional influences, as well as the avant-garde capabilities of the Mannheim orchestra. In Italy he encountered the Italian overture and opera buffa, both of which deeply affected the evolution of his own practice. Both in London and Italy, the galant style was in the ascendent: simple, light music with a mania for cadencing; an emphasis on tonic, dominant, and subdominant to the exclusion of other harmonies; symmetrical phrases; and clearly articulated partitions in the overall form of movements. Some of Mozart's early symphonies are Italian overtures, with three movements running into each other; many are homotonal (all three movements having the same key signature, with the slow middle movement being in the relative minor). Others mimic the works of J.C. Bach, and others show the simple rounded binary forms turned out by Viennese composers.

As Mozart matured, he progressively incorporated more features adapted from the Baroque. For example, the Symphony No. 29 in A Major K. 201 has a contrapuntal main theme in its first movement, and experimentation with irregular phrase lengths. Some of his quartets from 1773 have fugal finales: probably influenced by Haydn, who had included three such finales in his recently published Opus 20 set. The influence of the *Sturm und Drang* ("Storm and Stress") period in music, with its brief foreshadowing of the Romantic era to come, is evident in the music of both composers at that time. Mozart's Symphony No. 25 in G minor K. 183 is another excellent example.

Mozart would sometimes switch his focus between operas and instrumental music. He produced operas in each of the prevailing styles: opera buffa, such as *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*; opera seria, such as *Idomeneo*; and Singspiel, of which *Die Zauberflöte* is the most famous example by any composer. In his later operas he employed subtle changes in instrumentation, orchestral texture, and tone color, for emotional depth and to mark

dramatic shifts. Here his advances in opera and instrumental composing interacted: his increasingly sophisticated use of the orchestra in the symphonies and concertos influenced his operatic orchestration, and his developing subtlety in using the orchestra to psychological effect in his operas was in turn reflected in his later non-operatic compositions.

## **Influence**

Mozart's most famous pupil, whom the Mozarts took into their Vienna home for two years as a child, was probably Johann Nepomuk Hummel, a transitional figure between Classical and Romantic eras.

More important is the influence Mozart had on composers of later generations. Ever since the surge in his reputation after his death, studying his scores has been a standard part of the training of classical musicians.

Ludwig van Beethoven, Mozart's junior by fourteen years, esteemed and was deeply influenced by his work, with which he was acquainted as a teenager. He is thought to have played in the court orchestra at Bonn in performance of Mozart's operas, and he traveled to Vienna in 1787 hoping to study the older composer (see above). Some of Beethoven's works have direct models in comparable works by Mozart, and he wrote cadenzas (WoO 58) to Mozart's D minor piano concerto K. 466.

A number of composers have paid homage to Mozart by writing sets of variations on his themes. Beethoven wrote four such sets (Op. 66, WoO 28, WoO 40, WoO 46). Others include Frédéric Chopin's Variations for Piano and Orchestra on "Là ci darem la mano" from *Don Giovanni* (1827) and Max Reger's Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Mozart (1914), based on the variation theme in the piano sonata K. 331. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky wrote his Orchestral Suite No. 4 in G, "Mozartiana" (1887), as a tribute to Mozart.

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## **Audio Links and Discography**

If you subscribe to iTunes, BuyMusic, Rhapsody or a similar service, keyword in "Ave Verum Corpus" where you can listen to a sample from each artist. You can download-buy the song from these sites; and also download-buy it as a single cut from some of the CD Albums listed below.

### **Select YouTubes**

*Andrea Bocelli at Pavarotti's Funeral:*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PL69Z0Ru5Z0&feature=related>

*Vienna Boys Choir:*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TfAyX8l5-g>

*Leonard Bernstein and Choir:*

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KUDs8KJc\\_c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KUDs8KJc_c)

**Select CD Recordings:**

*King's College Choir:*

<http://www.amazon.com/Mozart-Vespers-Cambridge-Hilliard-Ensemble/dp/B000002RQW/>

*Berlin Philharmonic and Choir:*

<http://www.cduniverse.com/search/xx/music/pid/7258474/a/Best+Mozart+100.htm>

*Andrea Bocelli:*

<http://www.amazon.com/Sacred-Arias-Special-Bonus-DVD/dp/B0000CE9VO/>

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**References:**

The above article about the song “Ave Verum Corpus” was extracted from these websites. For more information, please read the articles:

[http://members.macconnect.com/users/j/jimbo/classical/Mozart\\_K618.html](http://members.macconnect.com/users/j/jimbo/classical/Mozart_K618.html)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave\\_verum\\_corpus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ave_verum_corpus)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mozart>