Program Notes
"Welcome All Wonders"
Holiday Concert - December 2005
Southern Oregon Repertory Singers

VENI CREATOR SPIRITUS

It comes as no surprise that William Mathias dedicated A Babe is Born to the Cardiff Polyphonic Choir in association with the Welsh Arts Council. One of the greatest 20th-century Welsh composers, Mathias grew up in the amateur vocal culture of South Wales. The opening phrases of both the piano and choral parts offer a characteristic Mathias trait - light, jazz-oriented rhythmic syncopations. His setting offers classic choral textures (full points of imitation on an anonymous 15th-century text), a repetitive verse structure nonetheless full of contrast, and a powerful, festive opening for the program.

SONGS OF THE MANGER

The styles of Hodie Christus Natus Est and O Jesu Dulcissime differ so strongly, one could hardly guess the same composer wrote them both. But Giovanni Gabrieli was one of those remarkable composers, like Monteverdi and Beethoven, whose work transcends stylistic eras. Living in Venice, Gabrieli sets Hodie in late 16th-century Renaissance vocal style, with imitative entries for all voices. Listen for the contrasting sections, written in simpler style which dramatize the particular Venetian penchant for double choirs. In striking contrast, the setting of O Jesu heralds the Baroque era and the rise of instrumental music. Gabrieli not only establishes the key with an opening "Intonazione" for organ, but the vocal ornamentation often reflects a more complex and dramatic instrumental style. Coupled with some extraordinary harmonic effects, this passionate new style reflects the more expressive text, yet another typical early Baroque trait.

PRAYERS, SONGS & DANCES

Gaudete, set for male choir by Craig Kingsbury (the Repertory Singer's composer-in-residence), reflects his penchant for rhythmic sophistication. The light, chordal arrangement highlights the constant syncopations which render any time signature irrelevant (and Kingsbury doesn't provide one). The choral refrain accurately reflects the melody and rhythm of the Renaissance source for the piece, a Scandinavian collection of sacred pieces (*Piae Cantiones*) published in 1582. Listen for the verse, as its setting grows throughout the piece - from solo, to duet, and finally to all four voices.

Kingsbury shifts gears for the more complex setting of "O" Antiphons. The rhythmic effects are more sophisticated, changing time signatures in every bar for some passages. Kingsbury also abandons the simple homophonic texture of Gaudete for a greater variety of contrapuntal effects, which include colorful interactions with soloists - flute and soprano. This prayer setting takes us back to yet another earlier style, the Medieval era and its penchant for simultaneous texts in different languages. You often hear both the Latin text and its English translation sung together.

Vaclav Nelhybel established a major American presence in both band and choral

literature. He specializes in complex modal styles in both rhythm and harmony, traits found throughout Estampie Natalis. This dance in honor of Jesus' birth provides myriad rhythmic effects, both in sophisticated melodic lines and lively accompaniment echoes and dialogue. He brings the full chorus together at the conclusion, in a dense, powerful - and very sudden - "Alleluia."

THREE ENGLISH CAROLS

Sir Christemas reveals its 15th-century origins in several respects. Richard Smert, a vicar at Exeter Cathedral in southern England from 1428-66, wrote many carols. He specified this one "on Christmas Day" and according to the New Oxford Book of Carols "may reflect a ceremony of welcoming a personified 'Sir Christmas' into the company." Such characters occur in other carols and in many medieval plays. Smert's setting of both the English text - "Who ys there that syngeth so" - and the French - "Dieus wous garde, byews ser" - reflects 15th-century practice. Mathias kept the lyrics (modernized to 20th-century usage), and wrote new music in a light-hearted style featuring some wonderful interplay between piano and chorus.

Harold Darke wrote the beloved and most familiar musical setting of the Christina Rossetti poem In the Bleak Mid-Winter. However, the great English composer Gustav Holst wrote a very similar tune for this text as well. He called it "Cranham" after his birthplace, and that particular tune is the one heard today in Joel Martinson's wonderful arrangement. Martinson focuses on vocal color. He opens with a vocalese setting (textless humming) and later offers solo sections for single voices and/or soli sections. A verse for women's chorus sets up the seemingly climactic passage for full choir - until his surprising and effectively simple close with another soft soli passage.

William Mathias sets this version of the Bell Carol in a more lyrical, folklike style than his other pieces on the program. The balanced phrasing and light scoring highlight the delightful (and occasionally jazz-tinged) harmonies. Mathias then changes gears in the coda, and lets the ringing run wild, providing a wonderful conclusion to the first half of the program.

INTERMISSION

Philip Lawson wrote Welcome All Wonders for the new millennium celebrations on January 1, 2000. He fashions a warm and richly harmonic style for this *a cappella* work, based on lyrics by Thomas Traherne. He draws some remarkable effects near the conclusion, with a sustained pitch against continually shifting parts of the other voices for the text "earth to heaven." Even the close doesn't rest harmonically, as Lawson shows his skills as an arranger for the Kings Singers throughout this piece.

Serving three years as composer-in-residence for the Fairfax Symphony in Virginia, it's no coincidence that Daniel Gawthrop turns to an instrumental accompaniment for Love Came Down at Christmas. He introduces a simple motive for organ to open the work, and this continues under the first two choral verses. After the choir begins the third verse *a cappella*, the organ rejoins the choir to fashion a gentle conclusion to this lovely setting

of another Christina Rossetti poem.

The setting of the Hebrew prayer Haneirot Halalu sounds like no other work on today's program. The modal harmonic and rhythmic style of Stanley Hoffman's challenging 1999 setting stem from the Jewish musical heritage. This heritage also appears in the cantor's traditional call-and-response for the remarkably colorful tenor solo.

Few carols establish as complex a history as O Little Town of Bethlehem. Lewis Redner wrote the most famous American version in 1868. However, the version performed today is from England, where it's known as "Forest Green." Vaughan Williams wrote this arrangement, based on the folktune "The Ploughboy's Dream" which he heard sung in 1903 by a Mr. Garman, living in Forest Green. (And there is yet another musical version of this Philip Brooks text by Henry Davies...) Don Dicie arranged this setting for chorus and instruments (strings and winds), but recommends that any instrumental ensemble can perform it. So, in yet another departure from the printed score, we enjoy a full wind-section accompaniment today.

As so often happens with Christmas carols, the words and music for Il est ne le devin enfant were written centuries apart. The modern text for this French carol was first published in 1876, while the traditional tune may date as far back as the 15th century. Chester Alwes founded both the Musicra Sacra Ensemble in Louisville and the Baroque Artists of Champagne Illinois. He draws upon this historical background to fashion an arrangement featuring both instrumental and vocal solos, and brings all the forces together with full choir for a powerful climax.

The metaphor linking Mary and the Rose became a common feature of medieval poetry. The earliest published version of There is no Rose dates from the 15th century. The well-known choral composer Z. Randal Swoope creates a sweet and tender opening for this beautiful carol. Listen for its return after the full choral power of "In Excelsis" as Swoope's choral colors effectively shape this arrangement.

Continuing the international flavor of this Christmas program, the Swedish composer and conductor turns to one of the most American of all holiday carols, Jingle Bells. James Pierpont published "One Horse Open Sleigh" in 1857, and reissued it two years later under the title of "Jingle Bells." It was a sleighing song that originally had nothing to do with Christmas, and neither version sold very well. It has since become one of our most celebrated popular carols - and let's see what a renowned European composer does with it!

This premier of Craig Kingsbury's arrangement of White Christmas highlights his harmonic sophistication. His light touch and harmonic richness enliven this pop standard by Irving Berlin. Written for Bing Crosby, the song originally premiered in the 1942 film classic "Holiday Inn." In 1942, with precious little good news yet from World War II, the warmth and nostalgia of the song instantly catapulted it into one of the most popular of all Christmas carols - a role it maintains to this day.

Joy to the World features as complex a history as "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Isaac Watts published the text, based on the 98th Psalm, in 1719. Several English composers, perhaps including Handel, set it to music. The American hymn writer Lionel Mason took the crucial modern step in 1836, linking Watts's text to the tune "Antioch" (which he still attributes to Handel). This became the standard setting in America, but not in England, where other versions of the tune compete with this one. Mack Wilberg, who often arranges for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, provides a lively piccolo and piano accompaniment to this American version, bringing the program to a delightful close.

Program notes by Ed Wight