

## **Program Notes**

**By Ed Wight**

### **"What Sweeter Music" December 14 and 16, 2007**

Giovanni Gabrieli was one of those rare composers with accomplishments in two different eras. He "represents the highest point of the High Renaissance Venetian School" according to the 1990 Norton/Grove Encyclopedia. Yet he proved influential to the first generation of 17th-century Baroque composers as well. In 1585, after becoming organist at St. Marks Cathedral in Venice, he continued the divided, multi-choir tradition (*cori spezzati*) especially suited for that building. Listen for the frequent echoes and warmth of color in this Magnificat, as the melodies pass between the high-voiced choir and the lower voiced one. Then imagine the drama of those effects in a spacious, reverberative cathedral.

The antiphon is a liturgical chant including a text associated with the psalms. According to the 1990 Norton/Grove Encyclopedia of Music "...its melodies are often simple and syllabic." However, in the hands of Martha Sullivan, they are anything but simple or syllabic! She is known as a performer of new music, and her complex and rewarding compositions reflect this. Each of the O Antiphons begins with the word "O" and originates in the Advent season. Listen for the marvelous contrast between melody and continual hemiola syncopations of the lively accompaniment in "O Morgenstern." Fluid metric challenges abound in most of the other movements. Sullivan also has the gift of writing complex yet tonal harmony without extensive chromaticism, as in "O Spross." The Repertory Singers are proud to offer the premiere of this progressive, 21st-century choral work set in the Christmas season.

The Medieval era witnessed the veneration of women in courtly poetry, chivalry epics, the cult of the Virgin Mary and the names of Cathedrals (Notre Dame). One of the favorite poetic conceits was the analogy of the rose with Mary, still seen in the 15th century carol *There Is No Rose*. The carol also mixes English and Latin throughout. This composition by Craig Kingsbury provides a textural crescendo in each verse, beginning in English with a few voices, and ending with full choral polyphony for the Latin.

The text of *I Saw Three Ships* relates to the relics of the magi, which traveled the Mediterranean for hundreds of years, until three ships brought them to Cologne in 1162. The 1992 *New Oxford Book of Carols* states that the relics remain there to this day. The earliest known version of the text was published in 1666; it was joined with the current melody 200 years later. John Rutter provides a different vocal color for each verse. Early verses alternate between men and women, saving the full choir and descant for the conclusion.

The joyous major mode of the previous carol reinforces Rutter's darker, minor mode setting of *Down in Yon Forest*. As with Mozart and many others, minor keys provide special opportunities for harmonic richness. Rutter is "probably the most popular and widely performed composer of his generation" according to the 2001 *New Grove Dictionary*, and he does not disappoint. The

cross-relations already appear in the first phrase in his setting of this traditional English carol, heralding the riches ahead.

The old cliché says "If you like laws or sausages, don't watch either being made!" That may apply to some Christmas carols as well. The 17th-century French text of *Quelle est cette odeur* is based on the Annunciation to the shepherds in Luke 1. But the tune first appeared in several drinking songs a century later, including John Gay's *The Beggars Opera* of 1728. John Rutter writes a lovely piano prelude and accompaniment in the early verses for tenor and soprano. Its absence renders the a cappella final verse for full choir all the more effective.

The *Twelve Days of Christmas* derives from a clever game called "forfeits" played (surprise!) on the twelfth day of Christmas. According to the 1992 *New Oxford*, "each player has to remember and recite the objects named by previous players." A variety of texts has appeared since the 18th century, with one version stipulating "8 deer a-running" instead of "8 maids a-milking." The modern version of tune and text appeared in the 1860s, and provides any decent arranger with ample opportunities for fun.

The "Ground Bass" first appeared in the 16th century, as a melody "usually in the bass, recurring many times." (1990 Norton/Grove). Such a repetitive (4-bar) bass line appears throughout *Funky Dreidl*. But you can throw the rest of that history lesson out the window with Robert Applebaum's marvelous piece! Few songs reflect their title so accurately. Applebaum combines this very hip bass line with lively syncopations and swing harmony in the other voices. He also provides street jive texts in Yiddish and English ("Whadja get?" "Hey, dreidl, hey!") in a spirited conclusion to the first half of the concert.

## INTERMISSION

When not busy composing, Brian Holmes teaches physics at San Jose State University. His major interests at times wonderfully overlap, as he also publishes articles on the physics of musical instruments. So it's no surprise that *The Shepherd and the King* includes a prominent instrumental part. Holmes's light-hearted setting captures the pastoral spirit of Eleanor Farjeon's poetry, a British children's writer known for "magical but unsentimental tales... which often mock adults" (1995 Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia).

Robert Herrick mastered a wide variety of 17th-century poetic genres. His 1648 book *Hesperides* contains over 1400 poems, including "elegies, satires, epigrams, love and marriage songs and ecclesiastical celebrations." (1996 Merriam Webster Encyclopedia) Herrick was also an ordained cleric, a career reflected in today's text "What sweeter music... than a carol for the birth of our heavenly King?" His text receives an understated, yet warm and harmonically rich setting by John Rutter. He gives that opening line in unison to the women - and be ready for its striking full harmonization as the conclusion.

The text is familiar - but the music is not. Paul Lohman takes the one of the most celebrated Christmas carol texts - "Angels we have heard on high" - but writes an entirely original musical setting for it. The song initially appeared as an 18th-century French noel (1992 *New Oxford*), and received its current English translation in the 1860s. Lohman not only keeps the text, but

even his new music refers to both sections of the familiar carol. He sets the verse ("Angels") homophonically, with all voices primarily moving together, while the refrain ("Gloria") has the familiar, flowing style of contrapuntal 8th-note melodies). Old wine in a wonderful new bottle, especially with the distinctive introduction making a surprise recurrence late in the piece.

Alan Bullard bases his 2002 composition Scots Nativity on a Scottish folk text. His setting effectively captures that folk spirit throughout, as he employs one of the most typical elements of European folksong - the flat seventh. That harmony appears in the opening choral phrase on the word "blessed" - a distinctive coloring for perhaps the most important idea of the text. The piano also helps fashion this gentle setting. Listen for the piano's evocative - yet simple - 8th-note figuration that concludes several choral phrases.

Like "Scots Nativity," The Holly and the Ivy also draws upon a traditional folk text. This time the text is not Scottish but English, and so is the arranger. Sir Walford Davies was a church organist, and sacred compositions feature prominently in his output. He sets each verse as a solo concluded by the choral refrain. Listen for the final refrain, which Davies extends through lyrical, flowing 8th-note counterpoint.

Listening to this setting of the Spiritual Children, Go Where I Send Thee, it comes as no surprise to learn that Robert Morris wrote choral arrangements for Duke Ellington. His arrangement swings with constant, lively syncopation. Morris says he also enlivens this piece with later progressive harmonies (the "blue note" modal borrowings of flat thirds, sevenths and thirteenth). He nonetheless maintains the heritage of the spiritual, and the text's haunting analogy of Christ (never directly mentioned) with freedom.

One of the best of all the pop Christmas carols, Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas first appeared in the 1944 movie "Meet me in St. Louis." The movie starred Judy Garland, and she apparently played a prominent role in creating the song. The first version of the song was much bleaker and sadder, and she didn't want to sing it. She urged Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane to lighten the mood, and they did - adding more warmth without sacrificing the poignancy. Ken Neufeld captures that same spirit with some sophisticated jazz harmony. At one point the women are in C Major and the men are in D Minor. His conclusion reminds us that some of the greatest effects in any ballad come quietly.

The concert's joyous conclusion also offers a tour-de-force of sophisticated composition technique. Andre Thomas introduces the central motives of African Noel in simple fashion. They appear in short, repetitive, modular units, dramatically enlivened by surprising contrasts in dynamics. After offering more concentrated variants of "Sing we all Noel," Thomas creates a contrasting middle section ("Come, ye people") in flexible meter and honeycombed with rich seventh chords. The opening motives return as accompaniment to new soprano and alto lines, as he concludes in dramatic fashion with the richest texture and dynamics of the piece.

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