

Southern Oregon Repertory Singers
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Program Notes

In Dulci Jubilo
December 19 & 21, 2008

For these Christmas celebrations, what could be more appropriate than opening with a text of “Rejoice, let us rejoice”? In **Jumalisten Joucko**, Stephen Chatman matches the medieval Finnish version of this text with a musical setting that evokes that era of the 12th and 13th centuries. He offers parallel movement in 4ths and 5ths, long passages built on similar mood and counterpoint, and a prolonged pedal on D in the bass section for the entire piece - all reminiscent of medieval choral polyphony.

According to the 1992 New Oxford Book of Carols, **In Dulci Jubilo** “is believed to be the oldest of all German macaronic (mixed-language) carols.” Though this carol could date from two centuries earlier, a University of Leipzig Manuscript, c.1400, contains the earliest publication of its words and music - a single-voice, monophonic version. Popular carols often receive additional verses over the centuries, and this Leipzig edition includes several inauthentic variants that weren’t always followed later. The first harmonized version appeared in another German publication from 1544, all of which pre-date this wonderful setting by Michael Praetorius, published in 1607, with its typically unpredictable three and four-bar phrasing. George Stainer published his English version (“Good Christian Men Rejoice”) in 1871.

After some early success in instrumental music, choral music such as the 1950 anthem **Long, Long Ago** dominated Herbert Howell’s later output. Rich, chromatic harmony and music of sophisticated formal structure characterize his work - both traits are found in abundance in “Long, Long Ago.” It offers the most challenging and complex harmony on the entire program. Listen also for the structure, as many variants of the opening phrase “Long, long ago, Christ was born in Bethlehem to heal the world’s woes” recur throughout the piece.

In similar fashion to Stephen Chatman’s “Jumalisten” which opened the program, Leo Nestor’s setting of the **Magnificat** also attempts to reflect medieval style. It opens with chant, set for a few voices, and such passages occur several times throughout the piece. Nestor’s complex rhythms - 3/4, 4/4, 7/8 and 8/8 in consecutive bars - captures the rhythmic freedom of chant in the passages surrounding it as well. But the held notes - clusters - in the opening chant are wonderfully expressive and inauthentic, and also give the game away. Along with the medieval elements, Nestor’s 1999 setting of this canticle from Luke - a celebration of the Lord - reflects the progressive harmonies and rhythms of late 20th-century tonal writing. This festive celebration for voices and instruments fashions a stirring climax to the first half of the concert.

INTERMISSION

Henry W. Longfellow published this homage to Winter’s despair, with its “soft and silent snow” over barren fields, in 1858. Lane Johnson’s 2006 setting of **Snowflakes** captures the image of softness with a hushed opening and conclusion, reinforced by richly evocative harmonies. The passion of Winter’s grief explodes in dramatic power near the end, rendering the soft conclusion all the more expressive.

Once again, origins of both text and tune for **Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day** are shrouded in the medieval English past. “Cradle prophecy” carols proved particularly popular in the 15th century “in which the infant Christ foretells his future to his Mother” (1992 New Oxford). Also dating back to the medieval era (this time St. Francis & the 13th century), when Christ addresses his “true love” in such texts, the reference signifies the Christian soul - not a beloved fiancée. William Sandy’s 1833 Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern features the earliest coupling of this text and music. But one also finds several other Dorset and Wales carols which open with very similar music.

The music for **Christmas Night** originated as a 16th-century dance tune “Branle de Poitou.” Thoinot Arbeau published it in his invaluable dance collection Orchesographie from 1588. As “the only dance manual published in

France in the second half of the 16th century,” the 2001 New Grove Dictionary also mentions it “correlates dance steps with music more precisely than any other source of its time.” John Rutter added the lyrics and wrote the gentle and charming arrangement, based on the consistent six-bar phrases of the original dance.

With our Christmas trees, we continue the ancient English ritual of decorating our houses with evergreens (**Holly and Ivy**) during the winter solstice. From pagan times holly symbolized ‘goodness,’ and in the medieval era the Virgin Mary - with today’s text certainly evoking the latter imagery. The song may date from the early 18th century, though the first published version with this text appeared in 1864.

After years of teaching and choir directing at Brigham Young University, all the while writing arrangements for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Mac Wilberg was appointed as the conductor of the Tabernacle Choir in 2008. This extensive version of **I Saw Three Ships** comes as no surprise, for his popular choral arrangements have achieved international acclaim. Three ships brought the relics of the Magi to Cologne in 1162, providing the source of this text first published in 1666. The earliest appearance of the text and melody together occurred in William Sandy’s 1833 publication Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern.

Robert Wells wrote lyrics for over 150 songs, including such hits as “From Here to Eternity,” “Country Fair,” and “Born to be Blue.” But he penned his most famous lines on a hot summer afternoon in July 1945. When Mel Torme arrived for a visit at Wells’ California home, Wells wasn’t in the house - it was too warm - but he’d left behind some new Christmas lyrics to stimulate some pleasant cold-weather thoughts. It was the first stanza of **The Christmas Song** - “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire,” and together they finished the song in less than an hour. It has since become one of the most beloved and frequently performed of all modern carols, with Nat King Cole the first to record it in 1946. Jerry Rubino’s rich arrangement opens with the always-effective technique of establishing the accompaniment first (“doo” in the lower voices), then continuing it against the soprano melody.

As is so often the case on today’s program, the text of **Once in Royal David’s City** appeared independently of the music. This time, however, it was written only a year earlier. “The poem was conceived as one of a sequence of Hymns for Little Children, (1848) written by Mrs. Cecil Alexander for her godsons. Henry Gauntlett set it to music in 1849 and published it with some of his other carols. In 1858 he also included it in an entire volume of Mrs. Alexander’s poems for which he created the music.

This favorite Christmas hymn - **O Come all ye Faithful** - bears the influence of many hands. John Francis Wade published the earliest version of the tune and four verses of text in 1760. However, its text was Latin (“Adeste Fidelis”) and the tune was in triple meter. (Abbe E. J. F. Borderies added three more Latin verses around the turn of the 19th century.) Wade may have been responsible for the first 4/4 version of the tune, which appeared in a book published in 1782 which he co-authored with Samuel Webbe. Translated numerous times, the most familiar version (“O Come all ye Faithful”) first appeared in 1852, consisting of Frederick Oakley’s English setting of the first four verses, and William Brooke’s translation of the rest. Wade’s carol proved immediately popular, “the fourth most common tune on church barrel organs built between 1790 and 1860” (1992 New Oxford).

The text for **The First Nowell** may have originated as early as the 15th century. Its first appearance in print (without music) hints at such early origins, as Davies Gilbert titles his 1823 collection Some Ancient Christmas Carols. Once again, William Sandy printed the earliest version of the text and tune together in Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern (1833). In 1871, John Stainer’s modern version of the carol “smoothes away the rough edges of the tune” (1992 New Oxford). The story doesn’t end here, however, because in 1913 the English folk music scholar Cecil Sharp found a slightly different version of both text and tune in Cambourne. Though Stainer’s familiar version receives more performances, several different versions of this carol, including Sharp’s, provide some competition.

If you sought a single example representing the complex history of Christmas carols, **Hark the Herald Angels Sing** would suffice. Felix Mendelssohn wrote “Vaterland in deinem Gauen” for male chorus and brass in 1840 as part of a cantata to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Gutenberg’s printing press. In 1856 W.H.Cummings “edited” Mendelssohn’s music, and combined it with John Wesley’s text “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” from a century earlier (1739). Wesley’s text - Hark, how all the welkin rings, Glory to the King of Kings - “evolved through a series of changes by subsequent editors” (1992 New Oxford). The result is edited versions of both music and text, originally written a century apart. At least the scoring is (somewhat) authentic, however, as we keep the flavor of Mendelssohn’s original brass and choral setting to lend a festive conclusion to today’s concert.

Program notes by Ed Wight