

The Snow Lay Deep on the Ground

December 16 and 17, 2017

Program Notes by Ed Wight, Musicologist

AVE MARIA This Christmas concert opens with the earliest piece on the program. The *Llibre Vermell de Montserrat* was compiled in the late 14th or early 15th century at the Monastery of Montserrat. Located outside of Barcelona in the Catalan region of Spain, it consists of music from the 14th century (and perhaps earlier). It includes some 14th-century songs (Virelais, Rondellus) given Latin texts – after all, they were collected in a church manuscript. It also includes canons and early motets. This setting of *Ave Maria* for the men features unison passages of plainchant style, the quintessential medieval sound. It also contains two-voice counterpoint, with the lower voice on a constant pitch, but often matching the lively rhythm of the upper voice. The four and five-voice climax at the end expands this organum-like texture into multiple pedal points.

RESONET IN LAUDIBUS With over 2000 works, Orlande de Lassus was one of the most prolific and versatile composers of the 16th century. Unlike his great contemporaries Palestrina and Victoria who specialized in sacred music, Lassus wrote “in almost every current genre” (1988 Norton / Grove Encyclopedia), and left behind a great body of secular music in three languages. “In his time, he was the best-known and most widely admired musician in Europe” (2001 New Grove Dictionary), and he received the greatest fame for his sacred motets. Hired in 1556, he became music director (*maestro di capella*) for the Bavarian Court in Munich for the last thirty years of his life, until his death in 1594 (the same year as Palestrina). *Resonet in Laudibus* “has long been one of the most popular of all Christmas songs in Germany” (New Oxford Book of Carols). Lassus draws upon this 14th or 15th-century melody for this 5-voice motet. Known for his expressive word painting, he employs chromaticism to great effect in highlighting the important text ‘Heaven and earth abound with song’ announcing the Savior’s birth.

AVE MARIA While Welsh composer Paul Meall writes the occasional instrumental piece, his output for choral music dwarfs all his other genres. He studied composition privately with William Mathias and John Pickard before earning a Doctorate in Composition from the University of York in 2002. Meall was already well established when the international spotlight fell on him in 2011 - his *Ubi Caritas* was commissioned and performed at the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton. He has mastered that gentle English choral style, and even in its moments of high drama, his 2008 setting of *Ave Maria* provides the longest passage of sustained loveliness on the entire program.

THE ROSE THAT BARE JESU Ron Kean is an award-winning Emeritus professor of Music from Bakersfield College (California). He sets this 14th-century English text (*There is no rose of swych vertu*) in marvelous fashion, with continuously surprising shifts in harmony. Nor are the surprises limited to the harmonic realm. The 3rd verse setting employs three different tempos

for the melody – simultaneously. His independent piano part, along with occasional hand percussion instruments, establishes a wonderfully atmospheric mood in a piece just published this year.

SPOTLESS ROSE Norwegian composer Ola Gjeilo turns to a German Christmas carol of the 15th or early 16th century. The ‘Tree of Jesse’ refers to a rose plant (Mary), with Christ “as a tiny child within the enveloping rose flower” (New Oxford), an image sometimes occurring in Medieval art as well. An appropriate *Alleluia* refrain surrounds the two verses sung in Norwegian, Gjeilo’s native tongue – now that he is an internationally celebrated freelance composer living in New York!

SENEX PUERUM Nico Muhly creates the most striking piece on today’s program. As conductor, editor, and performer of Philip Glass’s works, his minimalist background results in some remarkable effects in this anthem. He writes a single-pitch, continually repetitive-text *ostinato* part for the alto in the first section of the piece, resulting in some breathtaking harmonic effects (echoed in the organ as well in the repetition of this section). Muhly returns to that effect in the final section with a five 8th-note *ostinato* pattern on the word *alleluia*, again in the altos. Other ‘out of phase’ canonic passages an eighth-note apart appear several times, as well as an aleatory (“chance”) passages built on similar mirrored inversions or pedal points.

GLOW American composer Eric Whitacre has become one of the most internationally popular choral writers today. After serving five years as composer-in-residence for Sidney Sussex College of Cambridge University, the Los Angeles Master Chorale appointed him their artist-in-residence in 2016. In 2012, his first album as composer and conductor (*Light and Gold*) – won a Grammy Award and became a top-selling classical album in both the United States and England. In 2013 Disney Studios commissioned *Glow* for their World of Color / Winter Dreams show. Whitacre provided a wonderfully restrained and gentle setting of Edward Esch’s text, as the opening line (‘Softly fall the winter snow’) sets the mood for the entire piece.

HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING Many hands over the centuries contributed to this familiar carol. John Wesley wrote the poem *Hymn to Christmas Day* in 1739, which opens with ‘Hark with all the Welkin Rings’ and was coupled with slow, dramatic music. In 1758, George Whitefield kept most of Wesley’s text, but edited a few details, changing the opening line to ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing.’ Felix Mendelssohn wrote the familiar music in 1840, but with a German text (‘Vaterland in deinem Gauen’) as part of a cantata. In 1856, the English musician William H. Cummings ‘edited’ the music to fit the Wesley / Whitefield text. (Cummings had sung Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* in 1847, with the composer conducting.) In Julian Wachner’s arrangement, listen as that melody gradually takes shape in his majestic organ introduction. It is present in each choral verse, and the final one includes a triumphant descant.

INTERMISSION

NOEL NOUVELET Both text and music for this lively and familiar carol remain shrouded in mystery. The earliest record of the text comes from a French manuscript copied in the late 15th century. “No source gives a reliable text” (New Oxford). It represents an early tradition of the Noel genre, “tracing all or part of the nativity narrative.” The mystery continues, as it wasn’t coupled with the now familiar tune until the 17th century (“though it may well be the original tune”). Philip Lawson’s sparkling arrangement covers verses 1, 4, 6, 5, and 7, respectively of this 15th century text. And after five verses in the minor mode, listen as he closes with a burst of major-mode sunshine on the final chord!

MY LORD HAS COME English composer and jazz pianist Will Todd wrote both words and music for this brief carol. Todd’s career thus far explores both jazz and classical genres for choir, with this simple and effective setting belonging to the latter. He sets it in **A B A** form, giving the first verse (“A” section) to sopranos, and the second to the tenors. The “B” section provides contrast in both music and dynamics, saving the most forceful presentation, and loudest, for “His love will hold me” before returning to the gentle (and varied) opening material to close the work.

OH, CHANUKA Composer Robert Applebaum says this is an arrangement of a traditional Jewish folksong. But another musician suggests that Applebaum is being unduly modest; instead it constitutes “an original composition based on the familiar words and tune” of traditional folksong *Y’mei hachanukah*. He writes an upbeat and delightful setting that includes both English and Hebrew, as well as several nonsense ‘fa-la-la’ passages capturing the sheer delight of Judas Maccabeas’s surprising victory over the Syrians. The colorful modal harmonies add spice to this Chanukah celebration.

EPIPHANY CAROL The usual sacred celebration of Epiphany occurs in January, commemorating the revealing of Jesus as the Son of God. The visiting Magi present such gifts as frankincense and myrrh. However each of the three verses by Joanna L’Estrange and her husband, British composer Alexander L’Estrange, celebrate our planet Earth instead. His background as a jazz pianist and bass player enable Alexander to blend jazz and classical choral genres. This piece combines sweet English choral writing with rich jazz harmony in a very tender, understated epiphany.

AWAY IN A MANGER The Atlantic ocean divides the two most popular versions of this carol, both of which share the same text. The 1887 setting by James Murray dominates the holiday season in America. But today the choir performs the 1895 version of the carol most popular in England, written by William Kirkpatrick. The irony is profound: both men are American composers who fought for the Union during the Civil War. Current American composer and conductor Matthew Culloton gives the first verse to unison sopranos, the second verse to all women in a very effective setting with the men in textless accompaniment, and draws on all voices join for the final verse in this marvelously tender arrangement.

RUNE OF HOSPITALITY This song belongs to the Gaelic-Norse tradition, a combination of Gaelic and Scandinavian culture. The American composer Alf Houkom says that around Christmas 1984 he was “reading a book on old Scandinavian runes. Suddenly this rune of Gaelic origin simply grabbed me.” He was stuck by the openness of the text, suggesting that Christ could appear in any guise. In this context, a rune is “a Finnish poem of folkloric origin” (Merriam Webster Encyclopedia of Literature). Houkom retired from teaching at Cornell College, Iowa, to compose fulltime - and this seemingly simple piece offers the richest, most breathtakingly lush harmonies on the entire program.

THE VERY BEST TIME OF YEAR When the 2001 New Grove Dictionary remarks that John Rutter “has become probably the most popular and widely performed composer of his generation,” they might be understating things a bit. Both his arrangements and original compositions for the Cambridge Singers and City of London Sinfonia proved so popular he formed his own recording company (Collegium Records). He wrote both words and music for ‘The Very Best Time of Year’ in 1985. Both the gentle mood and sweet harmony exemplify the style of his shorter Christmas carols that continue to sustain his popularity.

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD Though the origins remain obscure, both text and tune of ‘Angels’ can be dated at least as far back as 18th-century France. However, the text was French and the tune slightly different. James Chadwick supplied the 19th-century English translation, and Edward Barnes the familiar 20th-century variant of the melody. American composer, conductor, and arranger Julian Wachner takes these modern variants much further in stunning (and delightful) instrumental writing for the introduction, accompaniment, and interlude sections – and once again concluding with a descant.

JOY TO THE WORLD Julian Wachner conducts choirs (Washington Choir, Wall Street Trinity Choir as well as instrumental ensembles (NOVUS NY, a contemporary music orchestra), and Trinity Baroque Orchestra. He drew upon that expertise in two previous arrangements, and does so once again in ‘Joy to the World.’ English hymnist Isaac Watts published an early version of the text in 1719, and it was first coupled with an early version of the music in 1833. Then Lowell Mason slightly revised tune and text three years later, putting an American stamp on this English carol. And Wachner once again clothes another familiar carol in a lively and fresh instrumental setting, providing a festive close to today’s concert.

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