

## Welcome Yule!

Program Notes by Ed Wight, Musicologist

**ESTAMPIE NATALIS** Born in Czechoslovakia in 1919, Vaclav Nelhybel emigrated to the United States in 1957 and became an American citizen five years later. A lifelong supporter of contemporary music, he co-founded the World Premier Composition Series in 1984. Though he wrote more for concert band than any other genre, the 400 works Nelhybel left behind include a rich legacy of concertos and other orchestral works, three ballets, three operas, chamber music, and vocal music. From his Czech heritage, he loved works with a propulsive rhythmic drive “a hallmark of his style” (2001 New Grove Dictionary). *Estampie Natalis* also reflects this in frequent changes of meter and contrasting syncopations between vocal and instrumental parts. His stylized “dance” celebrating Christ’s birth opens the concert in vigorous and lively fashion.

**HODIE CHRISTUS NATUS EST** The 2001 New Grove Dictionary states that Heinrich Schutz “was the greatest German composer of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the first of international stature.” He twice journeyed to Italy to study with the greatest living Italian composers (Giovanni Gabrieli in 1609-12 and Claudio Monteverdi in 1628-29). Schutz wrote the first German opera (*Dafne* in 1627, though the music is lost) and his great historical achievement lay in being the first to “move German music from its peripheral position to one of central importance” (New Grove).

All of his surviving music is vocal, and the bible provides the overwhelming majority of his text settings. Today’s Christmas motet is liturgical – a paraphrase on passages from Luke 2 - for the Vespers performed on Christmas day. Written-out instrumental accompaniment for vocal music became a prominent new feature of the Baroque Era of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – and Schutz provides an improvised, continuo part throughout the motet. He sets the motet as a Rondeau, with an almost dancelike, triple-meter refrain on “Alleluia” recurring throughout the piece. It alternates with episodes for different passages of text, occasional new harmonies, and a closing episode that finally presents “Alleluia” in duple meter. The episodes, frequently imitative, highlight the more dramatic vocal style of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as well as the learned counterpoint that dominated German music for the next 250 years.

**PUER NATUS EST NOBIS** Swiss composer Ivo Antognini is an internationally celebrated choral composer. Winning prizes and commissions in Switzerland, England, and Italy, the commission for *Puer natus est nobis* (‘A Child is born to us’) came from the Atlanta Master Chorale. He fashions a wonderfully warm *a cappella* setting, whose frequent soft passages at times evoke the atmosphere of a lullaby – and also mask the demanding harmonic style. Antognini also studied jazz with pianist Joe Haider. Listen for that rich and sophisticated vocabulary, especially

the prolonged cadence before the final short phrase offers a final recollection of the primary theme in the sopranos.

**AND LO, THE ANGEL** James MacMillan served as both composer-in-residence and conductor for the prestigious BBC Philharmonic from 2000-09. In this professional double life - with over 200 compositions and a conducting career with over 20 prominent international orchestras (including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Washington's National Symphony, Toronto Symphony, Munich Philharmonic) - he has currently become Scotland's pre-eminent figure in classical music. Given these accomplishments, it comes as no surprise that MacMillan writes the most challenging piece on the program. *And lo, the angel* features three a cappella choirs, soloists, dense imitative texture, and a stunning harmonic style capturing the fantastic atmosphere of the encounter depicted in 2<sup>nd</sup> Luke.

**A CHILD IS BORN** The program returns to the celebration mode with this lively setting. First appearing in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the medieval carol *Puer natus in Bethlehem* ("A Boy is born in Bethlehem") remains one of the most venerable of all Christmas carols - and is probably Czech in origin. Norwegian composers and arrangers, including Orjan Matre, often couple the text with a melody written by Ludwig Lindeman in 1871. Matre writes quick, 16<sup>th</sup>-note motives and brief repetition schemes typical of folk-like settings.

**SOMMERSET WASSAIL** This is a nickname for the song *Wassail, O wassail all over town*, a tradition practiced in Somerset and throughout England since the Medieval era. The greeting *Waes hale* is Middle English for "be thou hale" or "be in good health." The house-to-house wanderings of hopeful singers (wassailers) are also known as "luck visits." They're hoping for good luck, in the spirit of "we won't go until we get some." Writing in the light classical style reflected in this setting of *Somerset Wassail*, John Rutter "has become the most popular and widely performed composer of his generation" (New Grove).

**HUSH MY DEAR** English composer Gabriel Jackson, born in Bermuda in 1962, sang as a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral and then studied composition at the Royal College of Music. While making significant contributions to instrumental music, Jackson has become even more prominent as a vocal composer. From 2010-2013 he won the position of associate composer to the BBC Singers. He sets this sweet lullaby to the baby Jesus in four verses. This simple structure masks a soft, understated harmony and free-flowing rhythm that changes meter almost every bar.

**MASTERS IN THIS HALL** Many traditional European carols take a century or more to reach their final shape. The first version of the lyrics for *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* appeared in 1739, Mendelssohn wrote the music (for different lyrics) in 1840, and an English editor first combined them in 1856 for the carol we know today. The reverse happened in *Masters in this Hall*: the music appeared first. The French composer and viol virtuoso Marin Marais wrote the music for a dance tune in his 1706 opera *Alcyone*. The tune proved popular, finding its way into French and English carol collections. In 1860, poet William Morris heard it and wrote the English lyrics. Repertory Singers composer-in-residence Jodi French writes a marvelous and lively arrangement. Her setting of the refrain (which serves as an alternate title) - “Nowell sing we clear...Nowell sing we loud!” – closes the first half of the concert in appropriately festive fashion.

#### INTERMISSION

**WELCOME YULE!** Hubert Parry’s contributions to all major genres of vocal and instrumental music provided “a revitalizing influence on English musical life” (New Grove). He helped create an English musical renaissance after an absence of celebrated native-born composers the previous two centuries. His bright setting of *Welcome Yule!* is the second of two carols (along with *I Sing the Birth*) he submitted to Novello for publication in 1915. The text (*Welcum Yole*) is attributed to 15<sup>th</sup> century English poet John Audelay, but the clever setting is Parry’s own. Throughout his career he showed a “predilection for original structural thinking” (New Grove), reflected in the fact that either a short 2-note motive for “Welcome” or its melismatic flourish occurs in almost every bar of this light-hearted setting.

**CHANUKAH FANTASIA** Coreen Duffy currently holds the post of Director of Choral Activities at the University of Montana School of Music. A composer, conductor and choral clinician, she holds a Doctorate in Musical Arts from USC and is a specialist in Jewish choral music. While on the faculty of the University of Miami, she founded both the Second Avenue Jewish Chorale and Musica Judaica (a professional Jewish music consort). In *Chanukah Fantasia*, she sets the poem “Chanukah Candles” by Jacob Fichman, a Hebrew poet and literary critic. He twice won the Bialik Prize (1945 and 1953), awarded by Israel for “significant accomplishments in Hebrew literature.”

Chanukah (Hanukkah) is the eight-day Jewish holiday also known as the Festival of Lights, celebrating the successful Maccabean revolt against Syria in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE. Duffy writes two main themes, the first in a lively 7/8 meter depicting the spirit of battle. She also writes a softer, more lyrical “Redemption theme” for soprano solo: “wonder flows from candle to

candle.” The wicks of the menorah candles burned for eight days, though with only enough oil for one - “the fantasy of a miracle soaring over the morass of battle” (Duffy).

**CANDLELIGHT CAROL** The concert now turns from the candles of a menorah to the “candle-light, angel light, fire-light and star glow [that] shine on his cradle.” John Rutter himself characterizes his words and music as “gentle,” in this lovely carol from 1984 written for the Church of the Assumption in Pittsburgh. The women sing the first verse, men follow with the second. Then Rutter provides a tender, *a cappella* hymn-like setting for the third verse before the return of the organ accompaniment helps close the piece.

**JINGLE BELLS** Just as Leroy Anderson’s *Sleigh Ride* was not written as Christmas song, neither was *Jingle Bells*. James Pierpont published the tune in 1857 as “One Horse Open Sleigh”, then revised it in 1859 as “Jingle Bells” – and it wasn’t a big hit either time. The first surviving recording of it appeared in 1898 (Edison Male Quartet), and only with regular recordings in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century did its popularity soar, finally becoming perhaps the most famous of modern Christmas carols. Philip Lawson writes a simply delightful arrangement. He passes through a variety of styles and re-harmonizes the “Jingle Bells” refrain – all with tongue firmly in cheek.

**HAVE YOURSELF A MERRY LITTLE CHRISTMAS** Pop artists since the 1950s - including such stylistic diverse stars as Elvis, the Beatles, Michael Jackson, and Taylor Swift, and so many others – place an additional burden on themselves. Besides performing, they often compose part or all of their material. For the singers of the great American songbook – Nat Cole, Rosemary Clooney, Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, *et al.*) – the task was easier: they just concerned themselves with being the best singers possible.

However, Judy Garland stepped out of that performer’s role for *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* in the 1944 movie “Meet Me in St. Louis.” She refused to sing the first draft of that song by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, feeling it was just too dark, too depressing, and would distract from the film. Garland urged them to make it lighter, which they did – and history validated her judgment. This heartfelt and nostalgic ballad has become one of the most performed of all Christmas songs, and the American Film Institute included it in their top list of ALL songs in American film. Ken Neufeld’s rich arrangement includes the seldom-heard introduction.

**RORATE CAELI** On a concert with a welcome share of the gentle warmth of Christmas musical settings, the sheer beauty of this motet shines through. A composer dedicated to sacred music, Leo Nestor holds a special penchant for the “rich American sound of the contemporary Catholic

Church” (music historian Olivia Buthod). Like John Rutter, Nestor built his own professional choir. He is the founder, artistic director, and conductor of the American Repertory Singers. But Nestor also specializes in musicology, Latin literature and the study of ancient writing (paleography). And all of those interests bear fruit in his “Four Motets on Plainsong Themes.” The first of them, *Rorate caeli*, opens with the men offering an accurate, free-flowing presentation of Gregorian chant in the style of Medieval monks. But then the magic starts, as Nestor next presents that chant in luscious, 20<sup>th</sup> century harmony. At times the men will continue the chant simultaneously with Nestor’s harmonization in the women’s parts in this remarkably tender setting of the text “Drop down ye heavens from above.”

**SEE AMID THE WINTER SNOW** Dan Forrest provides the arrangement for this 19<sup>th</sup> century English carol. The Anglican priest John Caswell published the lyrics in 1851, and English composer and organist John Goss set them to music in 1871. Dan Forrest wrote the atmospheric instrumental accompaniment, while setting the first, second and fifth verses. About Goss’s understated composition, the New Oxford Book of Carols writes that this “gem is little perhaps...[but] deserves to survive – as indeed it has.”

**NOEL** Todd Smith is the son and grandson of missionaries to Africa, and as a child lived in Zaire with his family for eight years. He is a singer, composer, and founding member of the contemporary Christian band Selah. Coming as no surprise, Smith’s wonderful, lively setting of *Noel* incorporates African styles of singing and drumming. Sub-Saharan Africa features some of the most complex drum patterns in the world. Smith’s repetitive passages also reflect a central tenet of folk music around the world. This Christmas concert opened with a stylized dance celebration of the birth of Jesus, and closes in stirring fashion with a folk-like homage to the same event.