



Presents

LIONHEART

Tydings Trew: Feasts of Christmas in Medieval England

Lawrence Lipnik, countertenor ♦ John Olund & Michael Ryan-Wenger, tenors
Jeffrey Johnson & Richard Porterfield, baritones ♦ Kurt-Owen Richards, bass

Saturday, 11 December 2010 at 7:30 ♦ Basilica of Saint Josaphat ♦ Milwaukee, Wisconsin

PROGRAM

Performed Without Intermission

Hymn: A solis ortus cardine

March 25: The Annunciation

Carol: Nowell, nowell . . . Tydings Trew

Carol: Hayl Mary, ful of grace . . . The Holi Goste

Motet: Venter tuus

December 25: The Nativity

Antiphon: Facta est cum angelo

Canticle: Benedicite omnia opera Domini Dominum

Carol: As I outrode this endres night

Carol: Ecce, quod natura . . . Ecce novum gaudium

Motet: Nesciens mater

Carol: A, my dere, a, my dere Son

Carol: Nowel, nowel . . . Owt of your slepe aryse

December 26: Saint Stephen

Hymn: Sancte dei preciose

Carol: Eya, martir Stephane . . . Of this marter make we mende

December 27: Saint John the Evangelist

Responsory: Hic est discipulus

December 28: The Holy Innocents

Carol: Worcepe we this holy day . . . Herode that was bothe wylde and wode

Carol: Lully lulla . . . O sisters too

December 29: Saint Thomas of Canterbury

Carol: Seynt Thomas honour we . . . Al holy chyrch

January 6: The Epiphany

Antiphon: Magi videntes stellam

Carol: Ave Rex angelorum . . . Hayl most myghty in thi werking

Motet: Gaude virgo mater christi

Antiphon: Alleluya, omnes de saba

Canticle: Nunc dimittis

Lionheart is represented exclusively by Bernstein Artists and records for Koch International.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Christmas celebrations throughout the present-day global village owe a great deal to the efforts of monks in medieval England. Followers of Saint Francis of Assisi first arrived in England in 1224. A key element in the success of the missionary Franciscans was their skill in turning native cultural elements to use in Christian observance. One such element was the song-form known as the carol. As difficult as it may seem to imagine, caroling once had nothing to do with Christmas. Dr. Richard Leighton Greene, in his editions of the poetic texts *The Early English Carols* (1935) and *A Selection of English Carols* (1962) presents compelling historical and stylistic evidence that the carol was originally a dance. Participants held hands in a ring or in a line, and as they moved they sang a refrain. The dancers paused while their leader sang a verse, and then they danced again to the refrain. Neither the character of the dance nor that of the lyrics was at all religious, devotional, or even remotely genteel. Caroling was in fact associated with ribaldry, lust, drunkenness and witchcraft.

Dr. Greene surmises that the friars appropriated the form of the carol but replaced content they found offensive with pious sentiments and explications of the Christian faith. Some of the old melodies themselves may have been saved and fitted with new words. What is certain is that in the 14th and 15th centuries England produced a brilliant array of carols not only for Christmas but also for nearly all the high points of the Christian calendar. The musical-poetic form of the missionized carol remains the same as that of its profane ancestor. The chorus sings the refrain (called the burden) before and after each verse. Between repetitions of the burden a soloist or smaller group sings verses to a contrasting but closely related melody, often somewhat more complex and virtuosic. The English carol is therefore similar in form and function to the Italian *lauda spirituale*, also a product of the Franciscan movement.

The carols vary widely in their methods and purpose. Some may have been the property of the common folk, while others bear marks of a more learned origin. For example, the Annunciation carol *Norwell, norwell . . . Tydings trew* has a simple monophonic melody, a rollicking irregular rhythm, and a homespun English text. Its final verse paraphrases the Vulgate of Luke's Gospel with a snatch of church Latin that even a medieval

plowman would know by heart. Many of the English carols incorporate such familiar Latin phrases without losing their essentially vernacular character. *Ecce quod natura*, on the other hand, its lyric entirely in Latin, has in its poetic sentiment and musical style a meditative and austere tenderness that suggest composition by a monk or nun studied in both musical counterpoint and theology.

The twelve days of Christmas run from the Nativity on December 25 up to the January 6 Feast of the Epiphany. By design or accident, the church calendar tempers the joy of the Christmas season by calling to remembrance the death of numerous saints. December 26, the "Feast of Stephen" on which Good King Wenceslas did legendary works of charity, honors the first Christian martyr, whose dying prayer for God to forgive the mob that was stoning him is related in the Book of Acts. The medieval interpretation of this biblical passage tends undeniably and unjustifiably toward anti-Semitism, conflating the Jewish people in general with the synagogue council that tries Stephen on false charges of blasphemy, closes their ears to his notably orthodox defense, and lynches him without so much as passing sentence. Thus the malignant "gentis impie" [nation] in the text of the carol *Eya, martir stephane* and "inimico . . . populo" [people] in the hymn *Sancte del preciose* are both the results of and the perpetuation of a hateful tradition curiously at odds with the intention of the martyr's prayer itself: melodies, more tightly controlled harmonies, and a new focus on human experience.

Agents of King Henry II murdered Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas a Becket in the transept of his cathedral on December 29, 1170. *Seynt Thomas honour we* memorializes his scandalous martyrdom, which provoked a reaction against royal encroachment upon the Church's independence from political and military powers ("temperal lordys all"). Devotion to Thomas was particularly strong in medieval England. Many pilgrims to the shrine of this saint experienced miraculous cures, as Chaucer attests:

to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
Thot hem hoth holpen whon that they were seeke.
(*The Tales of Canterbury*, 16-18)

The Feast of the Epiphany commemorates the offering of gifts to the Christ child by the Magi, astronomers from the East traditionally pictured as three kings. Whereas the verse in every other 15th-century carol setting employs only one or two voices, the Epiphany carol *Ave rex angelorum* is unique in maintaining three parts throughout, even where the text clearly indicates the first person singular (“I offre the gold,” not “we”). This full texture may have symbolic as well as musical significance, its richness suggesting the wealth of the world’s three continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa), which the Magi represent in medieval iconography.

The motets *Venter tuus* and *Nesciens mater* are from the Old Hall Manuscript, an important collection of English sacred polyphony from the 14th and 15th centuries. The musical construction of both motets is based on an improvisational practice, which adds two parts in close counterpoint above a given melody. This technique, called English discant, was the foundation for an unprecedented flowering of music in late medieval England. Taken up by the leading composers of the Continent, the English style became an important step in the evolution of Western music. The elaborate votive antiphon *Gaude Virgo mater Christi*, by Henry VIII’s favorite composer William Cornysh, displays the confidence and splendor of the English style at the

beginning of the 16th century, when the musical techniques developed in the previous century’s carols and motets bore ripe fruit indeed.

Through poetry and song the medieval English cloister is the source of much popular Christmas devotion worldwide. The monastic life however seeks to sanctify not merely one particular season but every moment of earthly time. Its primary method is the careful observance of yearly, weekly, and daily cycles of prayer so that each season, each day, and each hour offers its own particular worship. Psalms and canticles chanted in memorized melodic formulas are an essential part of that process. *Benedicite opera Domini Dominum*, the Cantic of Daniel, is sung on feast days at the early-morning monastic office of Lauds. The antiphon *Facta est cum angelo* is appointed to be sung before and after that Cantic on Christmas morning. The Cantic of Simeon (*Nunc dimittis*) is sung every night at Compline, the final service of the monastic day. *Alleluya, omnes de Saba* is its antiphon on Epiphany, bringing to a close not only the daily round but also the entire Christmas narrative. Its joy is complete:

Isaiah’s prophetic image of rich gifts being brought from the East finds its fulfillment in the Magi’s visit to Bethlehem.

Notes by Richard Porterfield