



THE BOSTON CAMERATA

CREATING TIMELESS MUSICAL JOURNEYS SINCE 1954

ANNE AZÉMA ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

A MEDIEVAL CHRISTMAS 2024

HODIE CHRISTUS NATUS EST

PROPHECIES

Kee yeled yolad lanu (Isaiah's prophecy)

Hebrew Cantillation

Judicii signum (The Sybill's prophecy)

Spanish, 10th c.

SPONSUS

(from the "Sponsus" miracle play, Aquitania, 12th c.)

Adest Sponsus

Oiet Virgines

Nos virgines

Amen dico

Judicii signum (The Sybill's prophecy, reprise)

Spanish, 10th c.

LUX!

Verbum Patris Humanatur, O!

Aquitania, 11th c.

Judea et Jerusalem

Chant

Dominus veniet

Chant

Lux refulgent

Aquitania, 12th c.

PLEINE DE DUÇUR

Clara sonent organa (instrumental)

Aquitania, 12th c.

Veine pleine de duçur

England, 13th c.

Edi be thu hevene quene

England, 13th c.

THE STORY

Uterus hodie virginis floruit	Aquitania, 12 th c.
Angelus ad virginem – Gabriel fram heven-king (instrumental)	England, 13 th c.
Dal ciel venne messo novello	Italy, 14 th c.
Sancta Maria graciae – Dou way, Robin	England, 14 th c.
Magi videntes stellam	Chant
Pois que dos reys nostre Senhor	Attributed to King Alfonso X
Heu, heu, heu	France, 12 th c.
English Dance (instrumental)	England, 13 th c.
Nolite timere	Normandy, 13 th c.
Quem vidistis Pastores?	Chant
Salve, virgo singularis	France, 13 th c.

BENEDICAMUS DOMINO

Por nos virgen madre	Attributed to King Alfonso X
Hodie Christus natus est	Chant
Campanis cum cymbalis/Honoremus Dominam	England, 14 th c.
Gregis pastor	Aquitania, 12 th c.

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Anne Azéma, voice, hurdy gurdy, bells, direction
Camila Parias, voice
Deborah Rentz-Moore, voice
Christa Patton, harp, winds
Shira Kammen, vielle, harp, singing

Our readings are excerpted from King James Bible
This program can be heard on the Harmonia Mundi CD
Available on the [Camerata website](#), most [streaming platforms](#), and here tonight

THE BOSTON CAMERATA

A Medieval Christmas – Hodie Christus Natus Est Program Notes 2024

The deepest Christmas message, of good tidings and of peace on earth, is joyful. But regretfully, in modern times, the social pressures around the season, made ever more intense by the strictures of the consumer society and our pandemic times, can lead to a sense of forced and inauthentic celebration. Was the Christmas holiday in earlier times more organic, and less stressful? None of us were there to bear witness, but the magnificent seasonal music of the Middle Ages would at least suggest that something profound and eternal accompanied that time of year.

The season was never, however, entirely pacific and serene. In Christ's advent there is a measure of feat and anxiety ("Judicii Signum"). This waiting period is given musical and gestural form in the liturgical drama "Sponsus". The medieval persona of the Bridegroom, supreme Judge who will arrive at the moment known only to Him, selecting those chosen to receive salvation and rejecting those who are not ready to follow, is indeed intended to make the believer tremble ("Amen dico"). As the angel Gabriel warns ("Oiet virgines"), we need to remain vigilant, and we must not fall asleep. Both performers and audience understand what is at stake: the salvation of the human soul, or its damnation.

The season's joy flows from the hope of redemption and eternal peace ("Dominus veniet"), of desire for light ("Lux refulgent"). Above all, it was nourished by the presence of Mary, the loving mother, the advocate next to God for suffering humanity, and even an object of amorous desire. Others may discuss and re-discuss the theological question of her virginity. We as musicians, however, are obliged to honor the unique and hopeful place she holds in twelfth and thirteenth century art, poetry, and song, as we construct this program of medieval music for Christmas. The works we present to you today are drawn from different sources, varied both in style and geographical origin. The plethora of available material means that this particular program represents only one possibility, among a myriad of others. In any case, Christmas is a moment when different tastes and manners come together, and, when tongues loosen, so that different languages can be heard, macaronically, in the same piece – Latin and medieval Provençal, for example. The art of storytelling becomes important, staged in a real space as in the "Sponsus" play, or in the mind's eye and ear, in "Dal ciel venne messo novello", or in "Por que dos reyes".

At the root of all this varied creation is the liturgical song of the Church, even though this body of song in Latin could (and did) vary from region to region. Liturgical chant provided the backbone and the musical grammar of medieval musical creation. Progressively, medieval music will take on stylistic aspects, thus giving birth to other forms and other kinds of discourse.

The Aquitanian polyphonic works from the South of France (i.e. "Verbum Patris Humanatur") are prime examples of these new developments. These works, on the surface quite simple, are in fact full of energy, and very innovative. In "Lux refulgent", a virtuosic and energetic composition, the upper part dialogues with the lower line, which in turn, becomes dynamic and active. The exuberant polyphony of the processional "Gregis Pastor" evokes a spontaneous

improvisation, one that some scribe had thought good enough to be written down. With such happy song we are far from the severe and terrifying vision of Christ the Judge.

Other polyphonic songs you will hear are soft and tender, via the sweetening presence of thirds, much appreciated in the British Isles. “Veine pleine de duçur,” for instance, is an English piece despite its French text. Some pieces appear to invoke a different ethos, of which we know very little, that of medieval popular and folk music. When taken at a rapid clip, as we do, “Edi be thu, heven quene,” a melodic tenor line with simple accompanying second part, appears to evoke a dance on the village square more than a monastic meditation.

From the Iberian Peninsula, and the court of King Alfonso X, “The Wise One,” comes a large collection of sacred songs, all in honor of the Virgin. The cantiga “Por Nos Virgen Madre,” whose melody is derived from a Galician/Portuguese love song, describes the deep bonds of love among the Virgin, her Son, and his Father. Through the repetitions and subtle modifications of the short phrases, we experience a moving moment of prayer. These works come down to us with the singing lines and texts notated.

Concerning the possible participation of instruments in this repertoire, we know, simultaneously, quite a bit – and almost nothing. From medieval literary and visual sources, we know that, outside of the church liturgy, some singing was precluded, accompanied, sustained, and commented on by instrumental playing. A handful of purely instrumental pieces have been preserved, but apart from their structure, almost everything needs to be imagined concerning their interpretation.

Together, singer and instrumentalist of today imagine what might have been. We are, of course, products of our own time and place. But by embracing the eternal freshness and energy of these repertoires, so distant from us in time, we discover the constancy, across the centuries, of human emotion, and we re-experience, as new, a profound joy. Nova gaudia! Merry Christmas!

Anne Azéma

(translation: Joel Cohen, 2021)

About This Program

The roots of this production go back to 1974–75, when The Boston Camerata and its director (now Director Emeritus) Joel Cohen performed in concert and then recorded, for the Nonesuch label, a new production entitled *A Medieval Christmas*. That vinyl LP quickly became a best-seller, confirming Camerata’s status as a leading ensemble in the early music world. In the years following, the program remained in Camerata’s repertoire, touring extensively in North America and Europe, including one appearance at a festival in Languedoc. There, Camerata’s present director, Anne Azéma, still a student and aspiring professional, first succumbed as an audience member to the charm of the repertoire, and in particular to the Aquitanian polyphonic pieces! Later, as a Camerata singer, she performed this program many times, as, over the course of the years, it has been re-imagined, augmented, and re-evaluated.

We propose to you now a new version of A Medieval Christmas, quite different in many ways from the 1970s production, but, with its pluri-disciplinarity and diversity of sources, still close to the original in its underlying spirit. Three female voices and one instrumentalist, each with many years of experience performing medieval music, place themselves at the service of these works. We have recently recorded the program and presented it in concert on the East and West coasts of the United States, and in Canada.

October 2024