



A MEDIEVAL CHRISTMAS - HODIE CHRISTUS NATUS EST

2024

O MIRABILIS!

Uterus hodie virginis floruit

Aquitania, 12th c.

Today the belly of the virgin has flourished, and the passion did not overwhelm her as she conceived and became a mother, she who refrained from knowing the man by remaining a virgin. O wonderful birth. This flower of which the writings of David speak, as a bridegroom coming out of the royal brain stem, anointed the world with heavenly balm. O wonderful birth.

SPONSUS

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

Adest Sponsus

He is here, the bridegroom is at hand! Prepare for his coming, ye virgins!

Oiet Virgines

Hear ye virgins, you that are present, what I tell you. He is coming, the Bridegroom. Jesus the Savior is his name, therefore sleep not! He was born in Bethlehem, crucified, and rose from the dead, therefore sleep not! I Gabriel, say it unto you; therefore, sleep not!

Nos virgines

Alas, what shall we become? We have neglected the oil in our lamps. Sorrow and mourning, we have slept too long.

Amen dico

Verily, I say, I know you not. Begone, unfortunate ones, to be delivered to eternal pain.

LUX!

Verbum Patris Humanatur, O!

Aquitania, 11th c.

The word of the father is made man, while a maiden is greeted; the greeted one is fruitful without knowledge of man. Behold, new joys! A new manner of birth, but exceeding in power of nature, when the creator of all things is made creature. Behold, new joys!

Judea et Jerusalem

Chant

Judea and Jerusalem, do not fear; tomorrow, you shall stand forth, and the Lord will be with you.

Dominus veniet Chant
The Lord will come; run to meet him, saying, His kingdom is great, and his reign shall be without end. He is God, Wonderful, Counselor, the Prince of Peace. Alleluia, alleluia.

Lux refulget Aquitania, 12th c.
The Light is shining on this day, and the Church resounds with joy. Emmanuel! Emmanuel! The name shines bright in Israel.

PLEINE DE DUÇUR

Clara sonent organa Aquitania, 12th c.
Instrumental

Mainte Chançon ait fait France, 13th c.
I have made many songs, finely wrought, but I was never satisfied until God was as well. And to sing even better, I have to sing of the Queen, pure, who will lead us to the great eternal joy. Mary was pure and a virgin when the archangel approached her to announce that God would take nourishment from her breast. She lowered her eyes, then looked up and said: 'Friend, how may I give birth when I know no man?' Gabriel said to her: 'Friend, do not worry, you will carry God, for nine months!' And Mary said: 'Friend, when you will depart from me, tell God that I am his servant, and have great joy of it.'

Veine pleine de duçur England, 13th c.
Source full of sweetness, True hope of life, Beloved Mother of the Creator; Help the needy. Ave Maria. You bore Jesus Christ within Yourself, Virgin, utterly pure, Ave Maria.

Edi be thu hevене quene England, 13th c.
Happy be thou, Heavenly Queen, man's comfort and angel's bliss. My sweet Lady, hear me. I cry 'merci', I am bound to thee.

THE STORY

Angelus ad virginem – Gabriel fram heven-king England, 13th c.
Instrumental

Dal ciel venne messo novello Italy, 14th c.
From the heavens came a new messenger, it was the angel Gabriel... He began well, and saluted her: 'Ave Maria; you have been chosen among all women, and the fruit who came out of your womb will save the world'. The lady was disturbed and said: 'How could this be, I know no man, neither old nor young'. The angel said: 'Do not fear, you have found favor with God; he doesn't want any other mother, but you'. The lady said: 'I am his servant, since he is calling me.'

Maravillosos et piadosos Based on a Cantiga attributed to King
Alfonso X "el Sabio", 1221-1284
Instrumental

Sancta Maria graciae -- Dou way, Robin England, 14th c.
Upper voice: *Holy Mother of Grace, to whom Gabriel appeared, be with us.*
Lower voice: *Dou way, Robin, the child will weep.*

In seculum viellatoris
Instrumental

France, 13th c.

Magi videntes stellam

Chant

When the magi saw the star, they rejoiced with great joy!

Pois que dos reys nostre Senhor

Attributed to King Alfonso X
"el Sabio"

After our God descended from heaven To allow the kings to see Him, It was right that he would do them this grace. It was in Bethlehem When he was born of the Virgin Mary, And on the thirteenth day Three kings appeared, Who saw in the star, the coming of the King God. After our God descended...

It was from the islands of Saba and Tarsa Which are in the sea, and from Arabia, Where there are many lands to cross. But however far they might be, He made them arrive quickly to Bethlehem He, who has power on all things. After our God descended...

In the star, He showed them How he was King and God; That is why all of them brought Him presents from their treasures. The star guided them To the land of the Jews, Where Herod asked them: 'Why are you here?' After our God descended...

They answered so: "In the star we saw that a very powerful king was born here Lord of the Jews and of all". Herod said: "Listen to me I shall give you a charge: Go see him and come back here, So I can go and meet him as well". After our God descended...

They went on their way at once and saw the start going rapidly before them, and followed it. And when it reached Bethlehem, it shone directly over where Jesus was lying. After our God descended...

...in the arms of his sorrowing Mother. Then they gave him their gifts: gold, befitting kings; frankincense, which is spiritual; and myrhh, to prevent the body's decay. After our God descended...

Heu, heu, heu

France, 12th c.

Alas, alas, alas, how I was rejoicing Before I saw these bodies deprived of life Until I was shaken By the sight of these entrails strewn about, Oh, how these children will make me cry without end. Oh pain! Oh joy! Reduced to the silence of mothers and fathers! Let forth torrents of tears! Add these to affliction! Cry for the flowers of Judea And the pain of your country.

English Dance
Instrumental

England, 13th c.

Nolite timere

Normandy, 13th c.

Be not afraid, for behold, I bring to you tidings of great joy, which shall be unto all people; for unto you is born this day in the city of David, the Savior of the world. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.

Glory be to God in the highest, and on earth let there be peace to men of good will.

Quem vidistis Pastores?

Chant

Program Notes

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. 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 refulget”). 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, in 'Oiet virgines'; or irreverent and saucy song about whom to marry, the rich or the poor, transformed in a happy song about the visitation to the Virgin Mary: “Mainte chanson.” 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 vene 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 other stylistic aspects, thus giving birth to other forms and other kinds of discourse.

The Aquitanian polyphonic works from the South of France (“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 refulget," 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 queene,” 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)

A Brief Program History:

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 particular appearance at a festival in the 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 of 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-disciplinarily and diversity of sources, still close to

the original in its underlying spirit. Three female voice, 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.

www.bostoncamerata.org