

## ***Sing We Noel: Christmas Music in Medieval England and Early America*** **Program Notes (2025)**

The music you are about to hear reflects diverse manners of celebrating Christmas through the centuries. Apart from their shared scriptural and religious message, these works, despite their variety, are bound by a shared cultural tradition or mindset of English-speaking peoples. In this tradition, much has persisted from generation to generation — poetic imagery, melodic patterns, ways of hearing polyphonic sound — defying the upheavals of migration and the erosion of time.

While the greater part of the works we will perform for you are "art" music — transcribed from old manuscripts and prints — their means of expression are generally simple and direct. Many evoke the ethos of folk and popular creation. Here is one example: the sixteenth century motet "All sons of Adam" alternates sections of "learned" counterpoint with well-known Christmas tunes, some of them still sung today. You will hear in the middle of the motet a quote from "Sunny Bank." A version of this tune was published in Aberdeen in 1666, continued its life as a folksong, and was collected in this century in the southern United States. Four hundred years old, this carol is still alive; and similar patterns of transmission may be traced for many others.

Most of the music in this program comes from the English Middle Ages. Unique are the charms of fair Albion! Among them is the bilingual, or rather multilingual state of Great Britain during much of the Middle Ages. For multiple generations, the aristocracy spoke Romance (French or Provençal) while the lower orders communicated in Germanic/Saxon or Celtic tongues. As a result, texts can be in French, as with "Veine pleine de ducur", or in other cases, a mixture of several languages. "Exultemus et letemur", an energetic processional in Latin has a refrain in French: "... *et si m'entendez* – do you hear me?" With music of such vintage, it is not always possible to establish direct, documented connections with popular art. What is immediately evident, however, in pieces like "Edi be thu hevene quene", or the untitled instrumental pieces, is a lively, vigorous, and tuneful approach to music-making. Surely close, in some ways, to the taste of ordinary folk, and far from the high world of the cathedrals, exemplified in our program by Dunstable's song/motet, "Quam pulchra es".

We know a vivid instrumental tradition flourished in England, but as usual with medieval instrumental music, so little is left to us. We seek to imagine the missing pieces from the fragments that have come down to us, and the tradition they came out of. The art of instrumental music was almost entirely an improvised one in the Middle Ages; the only way to reawaken that tradition is to improvise, experiment, quote, expand, and compose in the language of the time, as clearly, playfully, and eloquently as we can.

Another appealing characteristic of English medieval works is their rich, full vocal sonority, something that even at the time was much admired on the European continent. And it is hard to resist comparison with the folk-hymns of our own country. These American works were conceived and written down by people who had enough musical literacy to notate the lines, but insufficient formal training to know the "rules" of school-taught composition. Without formal guidelines, our native musicians reached back into collective memory for a compositional style. Their works are astonishingly, atavistically close to the English taste for strong, resonant sonorities, and to the rich folksong tradition of the British Isles. In their untutored strength, these hymns, which can convey the most profound thoughts and feelings of this holiday, far surpass in value the treacly Victoriana of our nineteenth-century urban culture. With such works, we are, as in many of our concert's earlier

selections, straddling between folk expression and "art" music.

Joel Cohen (1978, 1989) with Anne Azéma and Shira Kammen (2025)

### **A Short Production History**

*Sing we Noel* launched The Boston Camerata, together with *A Medieval Christmas*, on a national recognition course in the late 1970s. The eponym LP has been widely heard, emulated, and admired, becoming part of many a Christmas family gathering!

Much time has passed since. Although revived in the late 1980s with tours in the US and concerts for our home audience, *Sing We Noel* hasn't been shared with our public recently. I thought it high time to return to such a foundational Camerata program, with all the knowledge and experience amassed during other, newer projects, recordings, and tours. We share it today with you, somewhat modified, but faithful in spirit and energy. The bridge between high and low worlds is nowhere more apparent than in early English and American repertoires. And, during this time of year, full of wonderment and hope.

Merry Christmas!

Anne Azéma (2025)

The Boston Camerata 1978 recording of *Sing We Noel - Christmas Music from England & Early America* is available for streaming on all major platforms.