

Christmas with GCA (Notes)

Welcome to the third annual “Christmas with Griffin Choral Arts.” Tonight’s program features music from a wide variety of historical and cultural sources, in moods varying from exuberant joy to the reflective sorrow that often underlies the holiday season for many people. In whatever complex ways this music speaks to you individually at this holy time of year, may we all join together in the prayer of one of tonight’s carols: “E’en so, Lord Jesus, quickly come.”

NOTES AND TEXTS
Processional: “Once in Royal David’s City”

Perhaps the most famous Christmas Eve processional in English-speaking Christendom, this carol is the traditional opening of the service at King’s College Chapel at Cambridge University in England. A special honor for a boy soprano in the Chapel Choir is to be selected to sing the opening stanza as a solo.

Carol for Chorus and Audience

“Angels We Have Heard on High” Excerpts from A Ceremony of Carols, Op. 28 (1942)

Already a favorite inclusion on yuletide concerts, Britten’s famous suite of carols was a primary source of inspiration for the still more featured work later in tonight’s program: the Susa collection of carols from the American Southwest.

Important background information on the composition of Britten’s famous work is given by Donald Teeters, program annotator for the Cecelia Society of Boston:

A perilous five-week crossing of the North Atlantic during the wartime months of March and April 1942 would hardly seem an auspicious spawning ground for one of the most optimistic of all homages to the Holy Birth. Benjamin Britten had departed his homeland in 1939, in the turbulent first days of [the twentieth] century’s most brutal conflict. His decision to return was as daring and principled as had been his decision to leave. Britten’s career had moved forward in major ways in America. However, his well-known espousal of conscientious pacifism made it unclear what reaction to expect from [his] public and colleagues in those troubled times at home. Approbation? Unlikely. Hostility? Almost certainly. Imprisonment was even a possibility. . . . That a work of such knowing innocence as the Ceremony of Carols could result from that dangerous sea voyage is one of those wondrous mysteries, the sort of contradiction that confounds those who are determined to find logic — a predictable cause-and-effect consistency — in the artistic process.

Britten originally conceived these carols for female voices but later officially scored them for boy trebles (and still later for mixed chorus). The prominence of the harp as accompaniment probably owed to the fact that Britten had texts on harp composition with him on the sea voyage, as reference material for a harp concerto he had been commissioned to write.

To give the carols the resonance of deep history—perhaps because that history and even civilization itself was being threatened by the brutality of war—Britten chose texts from medieval English poetry from an anthology he had chanced upon in a bookstore in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The ancient character of these poems explains the somewhat alien spellings and pronunciation of the texts, most of which are from the period called Middle English (the language of Chaucer), roughly the eleventh through the early sixteenth centuries (the latter especially in the north and northwest of England, from which many of these lyrics come).

Tonight we present three of the original eleven carols: “There Is No Rose,” “Balulalow,” and “This Little Babe.” I. Rose”

Fairly typical of medieval “macaronic” verse, this early lyric contains both English and Latin. As the lyric goes on to make clear, the “rose” referred to in the opening line is a metaphor for Mary’s womb.

There is no rose of such vertu

As is the rose that bare Jesu. Alleluia.

For in this rose containéd was

Heaven and earth in litel space. Res miranda. [Wonderful thing!]

By that rose we may well see

There be one God in persons three. Pares forma. [Equal in (their) nature]

The aungels sungen the shepherds to:

Gloria in excelsis Deo. Gaudeamus [Let us rejoice!]

Leave we all this werldly mirth,

And follow we this joyful birth. Transeamus [Let us go.] Alleluia. Res miranda. Pares forma. Gaudeamus. Transeamus. II.

“Balulalow”

“Balulalow” is an ancient Scottish word for lullaby. Although the spelling in this lyric looks ancient, the text is from relatively “early modern” English, from about 1548—though in this case from Scots poets: the brothers James, John, and Robert Wedderburn. The lyrics may derive from an English translation of Martin Luther’s famous children’s Christmas hymn “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.”

O my deare hert, young Jesu sweet,

Prepare thy credil in my spreit,

And I sall rock thee to my hert,

And never mair from thee depart.

But I sall praise thee evermoir

With sanges sweet unto thy gloire;

The knees of my hert sall I bow,

And sing that richt Balulalow. III.

“This Little Babe”

The text—the most modern of the three Britten carols selected tonight—was written by Robert Southwell (1561-1595), a poet and a religious martyr—hanged, drawn, and quartered for being a (Jesuit) Roman Catholic in the purges of the reign

of the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I.

The memorable lyric—especially the attack against “Satan’s fold”—depicts the ancient trope of Christ’s “Harrowing of Hell.” The warrior-hero leading his troops into battle in the lyric is not the resurrected Christ, however, but instead the newborn Christ Child. This prominent battle imagery surely resonated with Britten’s original listeners in terms not only of their firsthand experience with the horrors of World War II but also of their strong hopes for the eventual triumph of innocent virtue over the forces of evil aggression.

The music imitates this spiritual battle, with jagged rhythms and intensifying complexities in canonic, rapid-fire voice entrances.

This little Babe so few days old,
 Is come to rifle Satan’s fold;
 All hell doth at his presence quake,
 Though he himself for cold do shake;
 For in this weak unarméd wise
 The gates of hell he will surprise.
 With tears he fights and wins the field,
 His naked breast stands for a shield,
 His battering shot are babish cries,
 His arrows looks of weeping eyes,
 His martial ensigns Cold and Need,
 And feeble Flesh his warrior’s steed.
 His camp is pitchéd in a stall,
 His bulwark but a broken wall;
 The crib his trench, haystalks his stakes;
 Of shepherds he his muster makes;
 And thus, as sure his foe to wound,
 The angels’ trumps alarum sound.
 My soul, with Christ join then to fight;
 Stick to the tents that he hath pight.
 Within his crib is surest ward;
 This little Babe will be thy guard.
 If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,

Then flit not from this heavenly Boy. *Carols and Lullabies: Christmas in the Southwest* (1992)

Conrad Susa earned a B.F.A from Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) and an M.S. from The Juilliard School, where he studied with William Bergsma, Vincent Persichetti, and (so he claims) PDQ Bach. He currently serves as chair of the composition department at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

The featured work on tonight’s program, *Carols and Lullabies: Christmas in the Southwest* was commissioned by and dedicated to Philip Brunelle and the Plymouth Music Series of Minnesota (eventually re-named the VocalEssence ensemble). The first performance was given on December 6, 1992, at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis.

The composer himself provides the following background information in the choral score:

Four or five years ago, Philip Brunelle suggested I write him a companion to Britten’s *A Ceremony of Carols*. . . . [A] friend, Gary Holt [Director of the San Diego Men’s Chorus], showed me a collection of traditional Spanish carols he had sung as a boy in Arizona. Excited, I juggled them around to form a narrative. I noted their many connections with Renaissance music along with their homey, artful simplicity. Finally, the overriding image of a Southwestern piñata party for the new baby led me to add guitar and marimba to Britten’s harp and to compose connective music and totally re-conceive the carols.

While all of the texts are in Spanish, the historical, regional, and dialectal variations are numerous: Castilian, Biscayan, Catalanian, Andalusian, Mexican, and Puerto Rican. Variety is also common in performing these languages: conductors often opt for presenting some of the carols (or portions thereof) in English, as is the case this evening. The texts provided below are English translations by Conrad Susa and Paul Guttry.

I. ¡Oh, mi Belén! (Oh, My Bethlehem!) This quiet lullaby opens with alto and eventually tenor soli, perhaps representing the voices of Mary and Joseph as they travel on their way toward Bethlehem. But the lyric also holds the possibility that we all are the pilgrims being guided by the holy light. Especially the surprising B major chord at the end of the movement suggests that the pilgrimage is far from complete, but rather is just beginning.

Oh, my Bethlehem!

Your beloved hour has arrived!

The light you shine so unceasingly

Is like a beacon that guides us

On our way, night and day.

Oh, my Bethlehem!

II. El Desembre Congelat (In Frozen December)

A tune now found in many church hymnals with the title words “Cold December Flies Away,” this is a lively Catalán carol juxtaposing winter’s cold with springtime fecundity and darkness with light. Its three verses may be an implicit anticipation of the soon-to-be three members of the new Holy Family.

In frozen December, our confusion vanishes.

April is crowned with flowers, and all the world adores.

For in this garden, love bears a divine flower.
 It's a beautiful rose, fruitful and fragrant.
 The first Father made the dark night,
 So that sleep might calm our troubled eyes.
 But on this midnight, a sun shines without end.
 With its beautiful light, heaven itself falls in love.
 May blooms here, though far away.
 A lily white and gentle, of rarest fragrance
 Which all the world will enjoy forever.
 All His Sweetness! The fragrance!—And our great good fortune!

III. Alegría (Joy) (sung in both Puerto Rican and English)

Extended passages in a minor key (C# minor) open this carol, featuring two baritone soloists. After the minor-key introduction--the first prominent use of a minor key in the Susa collection--the joyful refrain is made all the more effective when it enters in bright A and E major chords, their exuberance reinforced by the fact that these keys are highly idiomatic for the guitar.

Walking slowly unto Bethlehem,
 Holy Mary and her husband,
 Traveling with them, though in secret,
 Is the Savior of all nations.

Refrain: Joy and pleasure! For the Virgin passes by us with her husband to Bethlehem.

When to Bethlehem they had travelled,
 They were searching for a haven.
 All the innkeepers refused them,
 Dressed so poor and heavy laden. (Refrain)
 As they see Mary and Joseph,
 All the songbirds of the forest

Serenade them with their singing;

Precious gifts come from the poorest. (Refrain) IV. A la Nanita Nana

(Composer's note: "the title phrase, . . . a cooing sound from mother to baby, . . . has no translatable meaning.")

This gentle lullaby is a counterpart to "Bulalalow" in the Britten carols that helped inspire Susa.

A la nanita nana, nanita

Blessed be my child Jesus! Now you must sleep!
 Crystal fountain resounding clearly and brightly,
 Nightingale in the forest, weeping so sweetly,
 Hush! Now the child is sleeping, laid in a cradle.

A la nanita nana, nanita ea bandito sea, nanita ea. V.

Inns)

The Posada is an important custom in Spanish-speaking countries in which during the period December 16-24 candlelight processions travel from house to house, the visitors singing the parts of Mary and Joseph seeking shelter and the householders singing the parts of the innkeeper, at first with the "no vacancy" message but eventually with the welcome.

Susa's setting of this carol mainly for male voices emphasizes the role and viewpoint of Joseph (as well, perhaps, as of the assumed-male innkeepers), as the earthly father of the newborn infant—who paradoxically is also Joseph's "Father, . . . God, . . . and Savior."

Shall I have them open the stable before you?
 Shall I bring the shepherds to praise and adore you?
 Hush, hush now, my darling; see the boy is almost sleeping.
 My beloved Father, my God and my Savior,
 Happily you sleep through the harshness of winter.
 Hush, hush now, my darling; see the boy is almost sleeping. VI.

Campana sobre Campana (Bell after Bell) (

English)

The voices in this exuberant piece clearly imitate bells ringing out the news of the Birth. Even the earliest of Christmas legends depicted the shepherds as bringing their own humble gifts to the Christ Child, paralleling the wealthier gifts of the Magi. In this charming carol the gifts are cheese, wine, and butter.

Bell after bell is heard, gathering all who are able!

Come to the window and hear the word, you'll see a child in a cradle.

Refrain: Ding, dong! Oh, ring the bells of Bethlehem,

What are the angels singing, what news do they bring?

Now that all your flock is gathered, tell me shepherd, what's the matter?

We shall carry to the manger cheese and wine and sweetest butter. (Refrain)

Stars in the heavens are shining, shepherd, where will you go tonight?

Quickly run to the baby. Watch him slumber so sweetly. (Refrain) VII.

En Belén Tocan A Fuego (There's a Fire in

Bethlehem) (sung in Catalán and English)

This is perhaps the most poetically striking of the carols in the collection, brimming with surprising imagery, and made even more joyful by infectious dance rhythms.

There's a fire in Bethlehem,

In the stable see the flames!

For they say that born of a Virgin
From heaven to earth He came!

Refrain: Fish in the river are glistening and dancing,
Dancing and leaping to celebrate his birthday.
In Bethlehem's humble stable
There's a lovely white carnation,
It will grow into a purple Lily.
Greet the Savior of the nations! (Refrain)
Virgin Mary, by the river
Hangs the swaddling clothes of Jesus,
All the birds around her are singing
And the river flows rejoicing! (Refrain) VIII.

El Noi de la Mare (The Child of the Mother) (sung in English, and
This tender carol is the most homophonic (chord-like) in the collection. The humble images convey an arresting irony: the poor gifts to a poor Christ Child are still those he "richly deserves."

What shall we give to the Child of the Mother?

What can we bring that will give him delight?

Bring to him raisins in kingly abundance,

Bring him the offerings he richly deserves. IX.

Chiquiriquitín. (Composer's note: The title word is probably a variant of

chiquero, meaning "stable," manger," or "sty," thus, Ay del chiquiriquitín probably means "Oh, in the manger!")

Much of the charm of this carol lies in the contrast between the lively, almost sound-effect-like "chiquiriquitín" refrains and

the much more stately, declamatory, homophonic verses.

(Refrain) In the manger! He is laid in a manger bed.

Follow us to the manger. Find them all through the doorway,

There in the stable, Mary Joseph, and Jesus, their holy baby.

Ox and mule are His guardians sleeping beside Him,

In the poorest of stables humbly abiding. X.

El Rorro. (Composer's note: El Rorro means "the baby," but is not used in

text of the song. A la ruru is another nonsense sound to lull the baby to sleep.)

Offering further information about the transition from the preceding carol into El Rorro, Conrad

Susa adds, "In an often overlooked detail in the Christmas story, the New Baby bawls loudly as the shepherds leave in

the final bars of Chiquiriquitín. (You may hear him in your mind.) His parents now must dandle and soothe him to sleep.

Tired themselves, they drift off as the angels hover about them in protective adoration."

Like previous movements VII and VIII, this lullaby charmingly surprises with its imagery.

A La ruru, my precious baby, please go to sleep now, my tiny Jesus.

The buzzing bee and elephants that lumber; be silent now, do not disturb His slumber.

Come, oh night of blessing, night of great rejoicing.

We gather to bless the sweet and holy Virgin.

Choirs in heaven, raise your voices now to praise Him,

Sing for joy the blessings that this night has given!

In a beautifully fitting ending not only to this carol but to the entire collection, the chorus sings "Oo," "ah!," and finally a dying-

away hum, growing progressively quieter and moving through interpretive indications in the score such as "calmly flowing,"

"full of wonder and love," and "spaciously, mysteriously." Some listeners may think this almost inaudible, minor-key ending

to be anticlimactic. Yet Susa's parallel to the ending of the Britten "There Is No Rose" carol is deliberate. Both composers

clearly understand the theological and musical power of near-silence in the presence of a cosmic mystery like the

Incarnation. "E'en So, Lord Jesus, Quickly Come" Paul O. Manz (1919-20

Noted Lutheran organist and composer Paul Manz drafted this motet in 1954 as his wife and he took turns keeping vig

at the bedside of their feared-hopelessly ill three-year-old son (who later recovered). Ruth Manz suggested the text

based on an Advent theme from Revelation chapters 1, 4, and 22 (fittingly, ranging from the beginning to the ending of

the book). One of the most-performed pieces in the choral repertoire (including in the Lessons and Carols at King's

College Cambridge), the anthem was sung a little over one month ago today by Manz's family members gathered around

his hospice bed as he passed into the Greater Song. The piece is included on tonight's program in part in tribute to the

composer.

Peace be to you and grace from him who freed us from our sins,

Who loved us all and shed his blood that we might saved be.

Sing holy, holy to our Lord, the Almighty God, who was and is to come;

Sing holy, holy, Lord!

Rejoice in heaven, all ye that dwell therein, rejoice on earth, ye saints below,

For Christ is coming, is coming soon!

E'en so, Lord Jesus, quickly come, and night shall be no more;

They need no light nor lamp nor sun, for Christ will be their All! INTERMISSION

Carol for Chorus and Audience

"O Come, All Ye Faithful" "Do You Hear What I Hear?"

arr. Har

It may surprise that this famous commercial "hit" originated in response to a crisis in world politics. In October 1962 the

then-spousal song-writing team of Noel Regney (1922-2002) and Gloria Shayne (1923-2008) created the song as an

impassioned plea for world peace during the Cuban missile crisis. The Harry Simeone Chorale recorded the piece later in

1962, and this version sold a quarter-million copies in its first week.

While the lyrics may be familiar, they take on shocking new significance when such references as "way up in the sky" and perhaps even the title line "Do you hear what I hear?" may (re)sound as hints of repressed fears of launched nuclear missiles. It is no wonder that the composers' most emphatic line in the text was "Pray for peace, people everywhere!"

Hollywood arranger and choral director Harry Simeone is even better known as the arranger who had in 1958 popularized "The Little Drummer Boy." "Epiphany Carol"

This lovely carol, lush in its simplicity, began twenty years ago (as the composer kindly related in a personal telephone conversation) when Dale Grotenhuis was asked by the then-Augsburg Publishing House to compose a tune for a poem in one of its Christmas miscellany books. The author of the poem, Judith McKay Perry, is virtually unknown even today, but the text was sufficiently compelling to inspire the composer to re-visit it more recently to complete a full anthem setting based upon his original tune. The anthem was published in 2009. Though retired from Dordt College in Iowa since 1994 (having been essentially the entire music faculty for many of the early years since the founding of the College in 1957), Dale Grotenhuis continues as a prolific composer, mostly of church music in the Reformed tradition. (GCA Director Stephen Mulder is an alumnus of Dordt College, where he studied and sang under Dale Grotenhuis, as well as serving as the college choir's manager.)

Kings and poor men o'er the earth come upon this holy birth.

Watch! Come soft! I'll let you see, kneeling in humility.

Who is this gentle Child who sleeps upon my breast?

He is the promised Lord. Hush, You now, and rest.

Who can know a mother's joy when she births a baby boy?

This, my Son, will walk the land, holding all in His great hand.

Shepherds bring You now a rose, thorns protect it as it grows.

Petals falling 'round Your bed, thorns make blooddrops on Your head.

See the brightness of Your star, touching hills both near and far.

Through the breeze tree branches toss, making shadows of a cross. "O Holy Night"

This arrangement for four part chorus of Adolphe Adam's world-famous accompanied vocal solo is by Dr. René Clausen, noted choral composer and arranger, and director of the Concordia College Choir, in Moorhead, Minnesota. (This choir, under Dr. Clausen's direction, will present a concert on February 26, 2010, at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in downtown Atlanta.) "Kas tie tadi" arr. Steven Sametz

From the arranger of this Latvian folk song comes this introduction: "For much of its history, Latvia has been a country occupied by a foreign power. 'Kas tie tadi' is a poignant song of the people which reflects their feeling of being orphaned in their own land."

This somber yet beautiful setting reminds listeners of the plight of all those suffering not only during holiday times of celebration but throughout the year, especially the victims of poverty and political oppression.

The arranger, Dr. Steven Sametz, is Professor of Music and Director of Choral Arts at Lehigh University, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Kas tie tadi kas dziedaja, bez saulites vakar? Tie ir visi bara berni bargu kungu klausitaj.

(Who are they who weep at sunless evening? They are orphans subject to a cruel master.) Kurin ugun silda gaisu slauka gauzas asara, Krimta cietu pelavmaizi avotina mercedam.

(So dry the tear, dip the crust of bread and huddle closer to the fire.) Aaulit lasa uziedkama zelta rasas lasites: Ta nebija zelta rasa, tas barinu asarin's.

(The little sun gathers rising golden dewdrops.

That was not golden dew: those were little orphan's tears.) "Carol of the Bells"

Another Christmas standard, this setting of a Ukrainian carol (originally composed by Mykola Leontovich, 1877-1921) is by famous American music educator and choral conductor Peter Wilhousky, who was himself also of Slavic descent.

Although the original Ukrainian carol celebrated the New Year (especially the Julian calendar's dating of this near mid-January), Wilhousky's suiting of the carol specifically to Christmas is now indelible.

The text of this famous arrangement--so well known as not to need reproduction here-- is also by Wilhousky. "Mary's Little Boy Chile" (Calypso Christmas)

Jester Hairston (1901-2000)

This "original Christmas Spiritual based on West-Indian [Caribbean] Rhythms" was composed by Jester Hairston, whose many talents also included acting. He was best known for recurring roles in the television sitcoms Amos n' Andy and as Deacon Rolly Forbes in Amen.

Long time ago in Bethlehem so de Holy Bible say, Mary boy chile, Jesus Christ, He born on Chrisamas day.

(Refrain) My, my, my Mary boy chile Jesus Christ, He born on Chrisamas day.

While shepherds watched their flocks by night dem see a bright new shining star,

And den dem hear a choir sing de music seemed to come from afar.

When Joseph and he wife Mary came to Bethlehem dat night,

Dem find no place for to born she child, not a single room was in sight. (Refrain)

Den bye and bye der find a little nook in a stable all forlorn,

And in a manger cold and dark Mary little boy was born.

De tree wise men tell old king Herod we hear a new king born today.

We bring he frankensense and myrrh, we come from far away. (Refrain)

When old king Herod him lern dis news, him mad as him can be.

Him tell de wise men find dis chile, so dat I may worship He.

Long time ago in Bethlehem so de Holy Bible say, Mary boy chile Jesus Christ He born on Chrisamas day. "Close Now Thine Eyes"

Daniel E. Gawthrop (b. 1949)

Composer also of the motet "Sing Me to Heaven" performed by GCA last season, Daniel Gawthrop is a prolific composer whose works have been performed by such diverse choral ensembles as the Gregg Smith Singers, the Turtle Creek Chorale, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

The text is by the English poet Francis Quarles (1592-1644), and bears the original title "A Good Night."

Close now thine eyes and rest secure.

Thy soul is safe enough, thy body sure.

He that loves thee, He that keeps and guards thee

Never slumbers, never sleeps.

The smiling conscience in a sleeping breast

Has only peace, has only rest.

The music and mirth of kings

Are all but very discords when she sings.

At this time of year it may be tempting to imagine that the "she" in the final line refers to new mother Mary, singing lullabies to her newborn son. But the actual reference is to the personified "smiling conscience" mentioned in line 5. Less direct but still probable in the English political intrigues of the turn of the seventeenth century is that the "she" is either (or both) the recent memory of Queen Elizabeth I (a benefactress of Quarles' father) or the Princess Elizabeth (eldest daughter of James I), whom Quarles served as a royal cupbearer in his youth. Carols for Chorus and Audience

Joy to the World

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Peace, Peace, Peace" (arr. Fred Bock)

Program notes by Bill Pasch.