

PROGRAM NOTES

This program pivots around two texts central to the Christmas story: *Hodie Christus natus est*, the joyful outpouring of celebration that salvation is incarnate on earth; and the *Magnificat*, the prefiguring of this event in the humility of Mary's response to the Annunciation. The latter was (and still is) sung daily as part of the liturgy of the Catholic Church, every evening at Vespers, whereas the former applies only within the octave of Christmas Day itself.

Palestrina's setting of *Hodie Christus natus est* responds with almost feverish excitement to this limited window of opportunity. For one thing, the composer allows himself the luxury of two choirs with contrasting textures, dominated by higher and lower voices respectively. This opens up a wealth of textural possibilities as the choirs alternate. Furthermore, some 'noes' have crept into the otherwise sacred text. This exclamation, of uncertain origin and related to 'noel', is found in a huge number of medieval carols, and often interpolated into sacred works. Palestrina adds groups of them to each line, creating a sense of hardly-contained joy as they ricochet between the two opposing groups of voices. Adding to this feeling are the frequent melisma, or runs of notes, self-reflexively announcing words like *canunt* (singing) or *exultant* (rejoicing). Finally the piece moves from duple rhythm to a swinging, triple-time finale of *noes*.

A Renaissance composer of polyphonic music never allowed hard work to go to waste. In such a carefully worked motet, which included so many deft musical ideas, Palestrina recognized that there was material enough for a *parody mass* – i.e., a musical setting of the Ordinary text of the Mass based on an existing motet. Accordingly, the *Missa Hodie Christus natus est* follows the same double-choir scoring, and its various movements pick up on and rework motivic, melodic, and textural ideas from the source motet.

In the Kyrie we hear some of the ideas from the opening of the motet, and notice how the composer has adapted what were formerly 'noes' to the words *kyrie eleison*. The *Christe* allows for some textural variety by involving just one of the choirs, after which the second Kyrie finds itself returning to the triple-time ending of the motet (indeed, almost all the movements in the mass will find themselves drawn back to this rhythm by their conclusion). The *Gloria* finds emphasis by bringing the choirs together for moments of especial importance, as for example at the mention of *Jesu Christe*, a splendid cadence which would have been accompanied by a reverent bow from the assembled faithful.

In Byrd's *Magnificat* we find a different treatment of the double choir texture. The most obvious difference is a thicker scoring: both of Byrd's choirs include five voices. Like Palestrina, though, Byrd uses the variety of textures to create dramatic moments

of climax and repose. Taken from the collection of music for the Anglican liturgy known as the 'Great Service,' it is on a grander scale than almost any other contemporary English setting of these words. The 'Great Service' remained unpublished until long after Byrd's lifetime, perhaps because of the impracticability of any choir without the resources of Her Majesty's Chapel Royal being able to perform it.

Of John Nesbett's life we know little, save that he worked for a time at Canterbury Cathedral. His **Magnificat**, an attractive and useful setting, is found in the Eton Choirbook, one of the most important sources of early Tudor polyphony to have survived. The piece alternates chanted verses of the canticle with full polyphony, exhibiting the unhurried and virtuosic style common to the pieces in this collection.

The Credo of Palestrina's mass follows a similar pattern to the Gloria, with an especially climactic bringing together of the voices for a resounding endorsement of the established church, at 'Et unam sanctam catholicam.' The Sanctus and Benedictus are able to make appropriate use of the triple rhythm in their ebullient 'Hosanna' sections. A more reflective and expansive Agnus Dei expertly withholds the combined choral forces until the very last phrase.

Byrd's gentle **Lullaby** belongs to the tradition of the consort song, a piece designed for domestic performance either by a group of singers, or a soloist accompanied by instruments such as viols. Like many such Christmas lullabies to the infant Christ – including famously the Coventry Carol – the sweetness and innocent rest of the child is contrasted with the horrors of the Slaughter of the Innocents, in which King Herod, perceiving a threat, orders all young children to be slain. We can imagine this lullaby being sung to the Christ-child as the Holy Family furtively escape to Egypt to avoid Herod's massacre.

A delightful custom of Lutheran Germany was the interpolating of vernacular Christmas carols within the singing of the **Magnificat** on Christmas Day. Evidence exists of Bach doing so with his famous setting, and the same is implied by the publication, in 1662, of Hieronymus Praetorius' lavish double-choir setting, which appears alongside workings of the carols *Joseph lieber, Joseph mein* and *In dulci jubilo*. The swinging, dance-like rhythms of the German carols contrast beautifully with the more four-square setting of the Latin text – which itself eventually gives way to this rhythm, in the *Gloria patri* at the end.

– Program notes by James M. Potter