

The first half of today's program is devoted to the Christmas story: that time, that place, those events.

It opens with a piece for orchestra by Arcangelo Corelli, the sixth and final movement of the eighth concerto ("*Christmas Concerto*") in a set of 12 concerti grossi, published the year after Corelli's death in 1713. It's in 12/8 and an ABA format. Marked Pastorale, it's an allusion to the music of the shepherds on their way to the stable (and, as Edward Downes suggests, to the tradition centuries later by Italian shepherds to serenade at crèches in local churches). The shepherds would have played pipes, so Corelli attempts to create that sound with a kind of droning in the lower strings that underpins the duetting (chiefly in thirds) of the solo violins. The movement ends quietly, as if the shepherds have paid homage and are now heard in the distance, on their way home.

The focus shifts from the secondary characters to the major players in the stable: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Mary is featured in Morten Lauridsen's modern setting of the ancient "O Magnum Mysterium," with the following words: "Blessed is the Virgin whose womb was worthy to bear the Lord Jesus Christ." Here, then, Mary is seen as much a vehicle for bringing the divine Jesus to earth as a "biological" mother. We are thus deep into a holy moment---for Christians, the greatest mystery of all.

"The First Nowell" is a strophic song, so a good arranger constantly tries to vary, if only subtly, the music of each verse. Sometimes a different vocal section is featured; maybe there are minor key flourishes embedded in the major; perhaps a descant draws our attention. David Willcocks provides just such variety in this familiar carol, which brings in another set of characters from the Nativity: the Wise Men.

The following choruses from Handel's *Messiah* introduce yet more characters: believers. "And the Glory of the Lord" is a celebratory dance in ¾, noteworthy for the layering in of voices of ordinary men and women through the ages. Everyone is affected by this arrival. "For Unto Us a Child Is Born" outlines the entire life of this baby, first as child, then as a mighty power, and the dynamics appropriately change from soft (a sense of wonder) to loud (a sense of joy). Finally, "Glory to God" identifies the reason why this baby's arrival is so important: peace on earth is the consequence. Notice how Handel word paints: "in the highest" takes the voice up, up, up, while "on earth" drops them.

The first half of the program concludes with Ola Gjeilo's "Dreamweaver." He writes:

Dreamweaver's text is based on a well-known Norwegian medieval folk poem, *Draumkvedet*, an epic ballad that has a lot in common with Dante's much longer *The Divine Comedy*. The protagonist, Olav Åsteson, falls asleep on Christmas Eve and sleeps until the twelfth day of Christmas. He wakes up and rides to church to describe his dreams to the congregation, about his brave, beautiful, terrifying and ultimately redeeming journey through the afterlife. *Draumkvedet* has for this piece been adapted into a playful version penned by my regular collaborator, poet Charles Anthony Silvestri.

Dreamweaver was commissioned by Halgrim Thon, and premiered by the Manhattan Chorale at Carnegie Hall in 2014.

The second half of today's program is largely a morphing of the religious origins of Christmas into a secular celebration, one that seldom alludes to the original characters of the Christmas story but rather now refers to traditions that have developed based on Christmas themes: family, food, gift-giving (in the spirit of The Magi), and winter weather in the Northern hemisphere!

Like Willcocks's treatment of "The First Nowell," the numbers on this portion are a kind of instructional manual on how to arrange familiar tunes, how to refresh what might otherwise be stale.

"It's Christmastime" presents a medley of familiar songs about Santa Claus, shopping, weather, and home.

The Donald Ripplinger a cappella arrangement of "Jingle Bells" gets a creative treatment with changes from 2/4 to 3/4 and back again, plus some entertaining modulations.

The same might be said for another Christmas chestnut (sorry!): "The Christmas Song." Ed Lojeski's suspensions and close harmonies enable us to hear the Mel Torme standard with appreciation—and maybe, even, simply to listen to it instead of singing along.

"Here We Come A-Caroling" benefits from Brant Adams's setting, where voices run after each other, meters shift, modulations ratchet up the tension, and a modern swing characterizes this English carol from 170 years ago.

Can there be any more iconic song about this season than "White Christmas"? Sing along to the arrangement by Huff & Moss—after, that is, the orchestral introduction and the verse.

And mentally take Craig Courtney's musical quiz as he counts off "The Twelve Days of Christmas." Do you recognize the musical style or composer he's referring to as he playfully reconstructs the familiar song? Hint: he moves chronologically from chant through the Medieval motet through the Baroque, the Classical period, Wagner (the nine maids a-milking are not-so-distant cousins of the Rhinemaidens!) and concludes with JPS. Very clever!

But the concert appropriately ends with music about the original Christmas story. Maestro Flores Caballo and APM have presented the first two suites of carols arranged by Robert Russell Bennett in previous years; today *The Many Moods of Christmas (Suite III)* features four other religious songs, each with inventive touches that lift them from the ordinary to the special. And how apt it is that the shepherds alluded to in the concert's opening Corelli piece appear once again in "Angels We Have Heard on High."

Concert notes by Paul Lamar