

 OTTAWA **CHAMBERFEST**

The Tallis Scholars: In Dulci Jubilo

Friday, December 13, 2024 7:00 PM

Programme Note

Now this same angel came up to the Servant brightly, and said that God had sent him down to him, to bring him heavenly joys amid his sufferings; adding that he must cast off all his sorrows from his mind and bear them company, and that he must also dance with them in heavenly fashion. Then they drew the Servant by the hand into the dance, and the youth began a joyous song about the infant Jesus, which runs thus: 'In dulci jubilo...'

Thus does legend recount the composition of the medieval carol *In dulci jubilo*. The story, of a melody divinely communicated to its composer, echoes that of Pope Gregory I, who, it is said, wrote down the melodies of plainsong as they were dictated to him by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. As Peter Philips writes, 'the most traditional way to celebrate Christmas is to turn to Gregorian chant' – and this programme explores chant and chant-inspired music from nearly a thousand years of sacred music.

In dulci jubilo is a 'macaronic' carol, meaning its text combines vernacular language (here, German) with Latin refrains. In the Lutheran Germany of Hieronymus Praetorius, this carol was so popular that it was interpolated into performances of the *Magnificat* at Vespers on Christmas Day. Accordingly, Praetorius' version shares the ebullient rhythms and lavish double-choir spread of the liturgical setting it originally sat alongside.

More ancient still than *In dulci jubilo* are the plainchant-inspired melodies of 12th-century abbess Hildegard of Bingen. An extraordinary figure, Hildegard was a poet, scientist, and theologian, as well as a composer inspired by her own visions, who described herself as 'a feather on the breath of God'. Monastic communities had been using plainchant for hundreds of years, but Hildegard's music, while remaining monodic (that is, consisting of a single vocal line, unaccompanied), expanded it with a much larger range, the better to communicate her ecstatic love of God.

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In principio belongs to the end of Hildegard's musical 'morality play', *Ordo Virtutum*. The action over, the singers bid the listener join them on their knees to receive the outstretched hand of God – a stretching-out which is musically illustrated by the long melisma which concludes the passage.

The *Salve regina* is one of four antiphons appointed to be sung to the Blessed Virgin Mary in various seasons of the Church year. The strength of the medieval cult of Mary meant that chants associated with her were among the most well-known of all. The familiarity of the *Salve regina* was no doubt bolstered by the distinctive opening of the plainchant in the 'solemn' form, which provided composers with a useful and memorable four-note motif to scatter through their music.

When Jacob Obrecht wrote his version, the use of as many as six different musical parts was quite rare. His setting alternates unadorned plainchant with polyphonic sections which adapt the chant melody and use it as the basis for imitation between the parts.

Hildegard's *O virtus Sapientie* hymns wisdom as a three-winged gift of God. We can hear her escaping the narrow compass of plainchant, giving the word *altum*, 'high', the highest note of the composition – a level of 'word-painting' that the composers of liturgical plainchant largely eschewed.

Ut queant laxis is a Hymn appointed to be sung on the Feast of St John the Baptist, its self-referential words concerning the opening of the lips and the act of singing. In another form, this hymn was also famous for teaching the notes of the hexachord in the music theory of the Middle Ages. Palestrina's polyphony alternates with the chant on which it is based. He saves a sprinkling of extra contrapuntal glamour for the doxology at the end, by adding a further voice-part which follows the highest part in canon.

The luminous sounds of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt are an example of the continued relevance of chant in contemporary music. His style makes highly distinctive use of the interaction between the horizontal – melody, usually minimalistic and chant-inspired – and the vertical – harmony, built off the sonority of the triad. Pärt likens the effect to the overtones of a bell, hence its name: *tintinnabuli*. His setting of the *Magnificat* draws out both the majesty and mystery of the words, even while remaining always within F minor.

In *O ignis spiritus* Hildegard pays expansive tribute to the Holy Spirit, the conduit for her visions and bearer of heavenly wisdom.

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Pärt's *Da pacem* was written in response to the terrorist bombings in Madrid in 2004. The form is based on an earlier, instrumental piece entitled *Pari intervallo*, meaning 'equal intervals'. The bass and alto parts move in parallel, with the other parts sounding out a D minor arpeggio in bell-like fashion – a characteristic expression of the composer's *tintinnabuli* process. Here, though, the alto part is intoning the 9th-century plainchant melody of the antiphon *Da pacem, Domine*.

The *Salve regina* was of great importance across the Catholic world, but especially in Spanish Catholic practice, to the extent that its use became the focus of the independent, devotional 'Salve service'. This custom was enthusiastically taken up by the colonies in the New World. A manuscript from Guatemala holds a great many settings of the antiphon, of which no fewer than five are composed by Hernando Franco, a Spaniard who spent time in Guatemala before becoming *maestro de capilla* at the new Mexico City Cathedral.

Palestrina's setting is also redolent of a particular time and place: specifically the Rome which revelled in the 'polychoral' style in which different choral groups were pitted antiphonally against each other. This was a confident, declamatory style which brought the words to the fore. The composer saves the full power of his combined forces for moments of special emphasis, such as the name of Jesus, which rings out in the middle of the piece, as if to reinforce his centrality even in an ostensibly Marian motet.

The *Magnificat*, Mary's hymn of praise on receiving the news that she is to bear the Christ, is not merely a Christmas text, but one used daily in Christian liturgy as evidence of God's word made manifest. This accounts for Tomás Luis de Victoria's eighteen settings of the text, designed to be performed at the evening service of Vespers. This *Magnificat primi toni* – meaning it is based on the 'first tone' of plainchant psalmody – would have been appropriate for a high feast day, perhaps Christmas itself. Unlike most of the other settings, in which verses set to polyphony alternate with simple plainchant, here the music is polyphonic throughout, and set for not one but two four-part choirs, with fragments and outlines of the psalm-tone plainchant emerging as motifs passed between the voices.

Robert Lucas Pearsall, though an amateur composer, was instrumental in the nineteenth-century revival of older musical traditions, including plainsong and Renaissance music. His setting of *In dulci jubilo* brings this programme to a close, fittingly lending an English, madrigalian sensibility to the well-known German medieval song. The result is a joyful and popular setting, which introduced the beloved carol to new generations of choristers.