

Music Notes for December 21st

Prelude: G.F. Handel: *Pifa (Pastoral Symphony)* from *Messiah*

Introit: Anonymous English: *There is no rose* (MS 1420)

Anthem: Elizabeth Poston: *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*

Offertory: Benjamin Britten: *There is no rose* from *A Ceremony of Carols*

Response: Michael Praetorius: *Lo, how a rose e'er blooming*

Postlude: J.S. Bach: *Pastorale (Shepherd's Music)* from *Christmas Oratorio*

The theme for this week's worship is symbols of nature in music for Advent and Christmas, specifically of roses and of other plants, such as the beautiful American carol *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*. The organ music is all in the form of the *Pastorale*, a slow Baroque dance in 12/8 meter that is used to evoke the image of shepherds.

The introit and response are both rose pieces. The first comes from an English manuscript from around 1420 and is a setting of a middle English text: "There is no rose of such vertu/As is the rose that bare Jhesu." The rose is often used in literature and art as an allegorical representation of the Virgin Mary, though in Praetorius' most famous carol *Lo, how a rose e'er blooming* the text directs us to think of the rose as the Baby Jesus Himself. The symbolism is beautiful and in ways romantic, and still used today to commemorate the birth of a child. The text "There is no rose" was also used by Benjamin Britten in his *Ceremony of Carols* for three-part boy's choir and harp; today we perform this movement as an offertory with the ladies of the choir and piano.

There is no rose is a bilingual or *macaronic* text, that is to say one that utilizes two languages in a pattern, in this case each verse ends with a Latin word or phrase. In this piece, the five Latin ends are *Alleluia*, *Res miranda* (a wonderful or miraculous thing), *Pari forma* (of the same form), *Gaudeamus* (let us rejoice), and *Transeamus* (let us go).

Elizabeth Poston was a British composer, primarily of radio, television, and film scores, many for the BBC. She also wrote a setting of an anonymous text first published in New Hampshire in the late 18th century called *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*. The carol feels very much like early American folk carols such as those found in the Appalachian region, and found its way into the *Oxford Carols for Choirs* series. Its five verses start with a single section (sopranos) and move through a four-part women's harmonization to full choir, ending with the entire choir singing in unison, a kind of life-cycle representation.

The two *Pastorales* that I will play today come from England and Germany. Handel's *Pastoral Symphony* or *Pifa* (the latter term being short for *piffaro*, a type of shepherd's pipe or shawm with a double reed, like an oboe) comes from *Messiah* and is played before the words "there were shepherds abiding in the field." Bach's famous *Shepherd's Music* is also played before these words, though in German, to begin the second of six parts of his *Christmas Oratorio*. The original orchestration is strings and flutes for the more lilting opening part, with four oboe-family instruments playing the interludes, representing the shepherds themselves. The oboe stop on the organ gives a good imitation of this sound, alternating with the flutes of the other keyboard.

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