

Music Notes for December 9th

Prelude: Louis-Claude Daquin: *Noël III, en musette*

Introit: *Far away, what splendor comes this way?* (Provençal carol, arr. Georges Bizet)

Anthem: *I wonder as I wander* (Appalachian carol, arr. Benjamin Britten)

Offertory: *The Holly and the Ivy* (English carol, arr. Benjamin Britten)

Choral Response: *When Christ the son of Mary* (Neapolitan carol)

Postlude: Andrea Gabrieli: *Capriccio sopra Il Passamezzo Antico*

Last week, the musical focus was on chant and German chorales and their evolution into hymns. This week, the selections are based on folk carols from Europe and America, many of which have their roots in dance.

According to the *New Grove Dictionary*, the French Noël "was used as an expression of Christian Christmastide joy. The term has designated non-liturgical, strophic verse of popular character often sung to the tunes of popular songs or dances." The first example is the organ prelude, like many Noëls, a pastorelle, or depiction of the "shepherds abiding in the fields." It starts with a simple tune meant to imitate shepherd flutes and bagpipes and then goes forth with variations of increasing ornamentation and difficulty.

The second example is a folk tune from Provence that was made famous by Georges Bizet in his ballet music to *L'Arlésienne*. It depicts the stately march of the Magi towards the stable of the infant Jesus, with an old French text translated here into English.

Both the anthem and offertory music are arranged by the great English composer Benjamin Britten. The first, *I wonder as I wander*, is a carol from the Appalachian region of America, first written down in *Songs of the Hill Folk*. It is for unison voices and one instrument. To keep with the shepherd pipe theme, I have chosen to play the interludes on the oboe.

The other is a well-known English carol collected by Cecil Sharp (sort of a British Alan Lomax) in the early 20th century but probably dating back to the 1770s; *The Holly and the Ivy*. Both of these botanical images are used extensively in medieval texts for Christmas. Britten gives the usual song a stately, almost baroque setting, but with his own usual wry twists.

Much like the French Noël, many carols from the Naples region of Italy are very danceable yet pastoral in character. *When Christ the Son of Mary* is also written to imitate shepherd's music, and the last verse serves as a fitting benediction response.

The *passamezzo* (literally "a step and a half" in Italian) is best known to us through the song *What Child is This?* in the Christmas season. While we think of it or its secular counterpart *Greensleeves* as a melody, it was thought of in the Renaissance as a particular chord progression, over which instruments would freely improvise variations for dancing. The chords that go with *What Child is This?* are first published in a book of lute music dating from 1536. This *Capriccio* by Gabrieli is a set of five variations on this same scheme, dating from the late 16th century and intended for the organ at San Marco in Venice.

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