

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 18 December 2023
1.00pm

Resonet in Laudibus

The Sixteen

Julie Cooper soprano	Daniel Collins alto	Tom Robson tenor
Alexandra Kidgell soprano	Stephanie Franklin alto	George Pooley tenor
Gwen Martin soprano	Edward McMullan alto	Jonathan Arnold bass
Charlotte Mobbs soprano	Kim Porter alto	Ben Davies bass
Emilia Morton soprano	Jeremy Budd tenor	Tim Jones bass
Ruth Provost soprano	Oscar Golden-Lee tenor	Stuart Young bass

Anon

Resonemus laudibus (by 1360)

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c.1525-1594) Kyrie from *Missa Hodie Christus natus est* (pub. 1601)

William Byrd (c.1540-1623)

Lulla, lullaby, my sweet little baby (1580)

Trad/Basque

Gabriel's Message

William Byrd

This day Christ was born (pub. 1611)

Jacobus Handl (1550-1591)

Resonet in laudibus (pub. 1586)

Trad/Irish

Wexford Carol

Jean Mouton (c.1459-1522)

Nesciens mater virgo virum

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina

Hodie Christus natus est (pub. 1575)

Walter Lambe (c.1450-1504)

Nesciens mater (c.1500-20)

Trad/English

Sans Day Carol

Orlande de Lassus (c.1530-1594)

Resonet in laudibus (pub. 1569)

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina

Gloria from *Missa Hodie Christus natus est*

Anon

Herrick's Carol (pub. 1623)

John Sheppard (c.1515-1558)

Reges Tharsis (pub. c.1575)



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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The call to *resonet in laudibus* – 'let praises resound' – encapsulates the music of Christmas past and present as the birth of Christ is celebrated in song. Through a mix of traditional carols and Renaissance sacred music this programme connects us with Christmas musical traditions of centuries past, while also containing songs that remain popular in our festive repertory today.

The programme opens with the traditional 14th-century carol that inspired the programme title: *Resonemus laudibus*. This exuberant triple time carol is an exhortation to sing to the newborn king. Widely known in medieval times, this carol remained popular in the Renaissance, especially in Germany. In 1550, one of Martin Luther's contemporaries, Georg Witzel, described the carol as 'one of the chief Christmas songs of joy.'

Interspersed throughout the programme are two Renaissance arrangements of this carol. The first, by **Jacobus Handl**, was published in Prague in 1586. Handl's simple but effective chordal setting captures the carol's dance-like feel. By contrast **Orlande de Lassus** (c.1530-94) transforms the tune into a typical Renaissance motet, initially in duple time with the melody used imitatively throughout all voices. The announcements of Gabriel are declaimed by all voices together, while jaunty syncopations and cross rhythms within increasing scalic decoration characterise the recurring 'Eia' sections.

Music for Christmas Day itself often inspired Renaissance composers to their most jubilant music. **Palestrina's** (1525/6-94) *Missa Hodie Christus natus est* is a parody mass designed for use on Christmas Day that reworks his motet of the same name (also performed during this programme). The motet *Hodie Christus natus est* begins with alternating exchanges between the two choirs which gather pace at the exclamations of 'noe, noe'. Soaring scales depicting angelic choirs build to a magnificent, eight-voice 'gloria in excelsis' and a final dance-like 'noe'. The 'Kyrie' from the Mass mirrors the motet's antiphonal opening, while the 'Christe' uses its rising angelic scales, and the final 'Kyrie' combines the falling scales and triple time of the motet's 'gloria'. The 'Gloria' of the Mass remixes the motet again, extending and recombining its motifs. The result is one of Palestrina's most exuberant masses for a stirring celebration of Christmas morning.

English composer **Byrd** (1540-1623) sets the same text *This day Christ was born*, subtitled as 'a Carol for Christmas Day', in his 1611 song collection. Byrd too captures the abundant rejoicing of Christmas morning in merry quavers, rising scales, pitch contrasts between the heights of heaven and the depth of earth, a dance-like 'alleluia'. By contrast, Byrd's *Lulla, lullaby* opens with a soothing rocking feel. Akin to the famous Coventry Carol, the lullaby also mourns Herod's slaughter of the children through its minor mode, poignant flattened sixths and dissonant false relations.

The Virgin Mary was another focal point for these resounding praises. *Gabriel's Message* is a Basque carol itself based on an older medieval Latin one, *Angelus ad Virginem*. The carol tells the story of the angel Gabriel's

visit to Mary and her acceptance of the honour of bearing Christ. The angel's parting address to Mary 'Most highly favour'd lady, Gloria' becomes the carol's refrain.

Renaissance Christmastide tributes to Mary are represented in this programme through two settings of *Nesciens mater*. Both songs are based on the plainchant antiphon of the same name which is heard several times in the Christmas liturgy and recounts Mary's immaculate conception, birth, and nurturing of the Christ child.

Mouton (c.1459-1522), a composer at the French court, places the chant in the tenor voice and builds around it a quadruple canon in which the first choir of four voices are imitated four beats later and a fifth higher by a second choir of four voices. The result is a rich tapestry of interweaving voices. By contrast **Lambe** (1450/1-1504) alternates intricate and highly decorated trios and duos with passages for all six voices in which the chant is heard in sustained notes in the tenor. Lambe's *Nesciens mater* is preserved in the Eton choirbook, one of the few surviving pre-Reformation English illuminated music manuscripts. Long melismas extend the text syllables over several lines, yet Lambe takes a moment to slow the rhythms at *dolore* ('pain') to give the listener time to register his poignant flattening of the harmony.

Sheppard's *Reges Tharsis* marks the end of the Christmas season with the arrival of the Three Wise Men at Epiphany, and dates from the brief restoration of the Catholic Latin rite in England during the reign of Mary I. Although incomplete, it can be reconstructed because the missing tenor sang the chant. As a Respond for liturgical use, *Reges Tharsis* is begun by the cantor and then taken up by the choir, whose interlacing melodies alternate with plainchant verses.

Starkly contrasting with the complex Renaissance textures of composers like Sheppard, Lambe and Mouton are the other traditional carols interspersed throughout the programme. Many have specific regional origins, such as the *Wexford Carol* from Enniscorthy in Ireland or the *Sans Day Carol* from St Day in Cornwall. The *Wexford Carol* tells the Christmas story from the search for lodgings in Bethlehem through the visits of shepherds and kings. The *Sans Day Carol* is closely related to the better-known *The Holly and the Ivy* and combines Christian and pagan imagery to situate the Christmas story in the wider gospel narrative of Christ's birth, death and resurrection.

Herrick's carol was originally performed for Charles I at Whitehall Palace. Poet and clergyman, Herrick (1591-1674) inverted the traditional wintery imagery of Christmas, comparing the coming of Jesus with the transformation of winter to spring, and associating Christ with sunlight, warmth and flowers. Herrick's opening line, however, fittingly sums up the long tradition of Christmas festive songs of praise:

'What sweeter music can we bring
than a carol for to sing?'

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