

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 8 December 2023
7.30pm

This joyful birth

Stile Antico

Helen Ashby soprano	Emma Ashby alto	Andrew Griffiths tenor	James Arthur bass
Kate Ashby soprano	Cara Curran alto	Matthew Howard tenor	Nathan Harrison bass
Rebecca Hickey soprano	Hannah King alto	Will Wright tenor	Gareth Thomas bass

Plainchant

John Taverner (c.1490-1545)

Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672)

William Byrd (c.1540-1623)

A voice from heaven

Conditor alme siderum

Audivi vocem de caelo

O lieber Herre Gott from *Geistliche Chormusic* Op. 11 (pub. 1648)

Laetentur coeli (pub. 1589)

Sebastián de Vivanco (c.1551-1622)

Anon

Joannes Eccard (1553-1611)

The obedience of Mary

Ave Maria

There is no rose (c.1420)

Übers Gebirg Maria geht (pub. 1585)

Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548-1611)

Mateo Flecha (1481-1553)

Michael Praetorius (c.1571-1621)

The joy of the angels

O magnum mysterium (1592)

El jubilate

Ein Kind geboren zu Bethlehem (pub. 1607)

Interval

Jacobus Clemens non Papa
(c.1510-1555)

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)

Richard Dering (c.1580-1630)

The eagerness of the shepherds

Pastores quidnam vidistis (1554)

Rutilante in nocte SV86 (pub. 1603)

Quem vidistis (pub. 1618)

Luca Marenzio (1553-1599)

Francisco Guerrero (1528-1599)

John Sheppard (c.1515-1558)

The perseverance of the Wise Men

Tribus miraculis (pub. 1585)

A un niño llorando (pub. 1589)

Reges Tharsis (pub. c.1575)

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina

(c.1525-1594)

Joannes Eccard

William Byrd

Orlande de Lassus (c.1530-1594)

The peace of the Christ Child

Senex puerum portabat (pub. 1569)

Maria wallt zum Heiligtum

Nunc dimittis from *The Great Service* (by 1606)

Resonet in Laudibus (pub. 1569)

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Tonight's programme not only traces the familiar Christmas story, but also offers a wonderful opportunity to compare the different styles of sacred music which flourished across early modern Europe.

With the exception of the 7th-century plainchant hymn *Conditor alme siderum*, the oldest music that we perform is an **anonymous** *There is no rose*, found in the Trinity Carol Roll (c.1420) – the earliest surviving source for English-texted polyphonic music. Its simplicity contrasts sharply with the sophisticated music of Taverner and Sheppard, writing just over a century later, during the reign of Henry VIII. **Taverner's** *Audivi vocem de caelo* was probably intended for upper voices – perhaps a nod to the 'wise virgins' described in the text – and weaves supple polyphony around a plainsong line. Chant is also the foundation of **Sheppard's** magisterial *Reges Tharsis*, which boasts a rich six-part texture ranging from low bass to high treble – the quintessential sonority of pre-Reformation English music.

Byrd would have grown to love Sheppard's music as a choirboy during Queen Mary's reign, but such monumental sonorities had no place in Elizabeth's Protestant church. Perhaps a certain amount of musical latitude was permitted at the Chapel Royal where Byrd worked; his lavish *Great Service*, from which we perform the 'Nunc dimittis', comes as close as any piece of Anglican music to the richness of the earlier style, but even here Byrd is careful to ensure that the English words are clearly audible. Latin-texted music did however live on in England, intended not for Anglican worship, but for the enjoyment of musical cognoscenti. Byrd – a lifelong Catholic – seized on this pretext to publish motets whose texts can be read as a bitter commentary on the state of English Catholicism. *Laetentur coeli* comes from his most obviously subversive collection, the 1589 *Cantiones sacrae*; perhaps its ebullient melismas reflect Byrd's own confidence that 'our Lord will come, and will show mercy to his poor'.

Byrd's fellow Catholic **Dering** chose to emigrate in order to practise his faith openly. *Quem vidistis pastores*, published in 1618 shortly after his arrival in Brussels, shows how quickly he adapted his style in response to the new vogue for Italianate music. Prior to this shift in taste, it had been Dering's adopted homeland of the Low Countries which had led the way in musical progress, producing successive generations of hugely influential figures such as Ockeghem, Josquin and **Clemens non Papa**, whose beautifully balanced style is heard in *Pastores quidnam vidistis*. Many Franco-Flemish composers had enjoyed illustrious careers abroad. **Lassus** spent most of his life in Munich at the Bavarian court, where he wrote his vivacious 1569 *Resonet in laudibus* based on a traditional carol melody, best known as 'Josef lieber, Josef mein'.

Though Munich remained Catholic, many other German states embraced the Lutheran religion, which – unlike many other forms of Protestantism – retained a special affection for music. **Eccard**, who had studied with Lassus

as a young man, made his career in Lutheran Königsberg. His charming motets *Übers Gebirg Maria geht* and *Maria wahl't zum Heiligtum* employ simple textures so as to speak directly to the listener. The prolific composer and theorist **Michael Praetorius** worked chiefly in Wolfenbüttel; his 1607 *Ein Kind geboren zu Bethlehem* is an energetic dance, building sequentially from two to six voices. **Schütz**, who studied in Italy at different times with Giovanni Gabrieli and Monteverdi, spent almost his entire life in Dresden, where he forged a deeply satisfying fusion of German and Italian styles. His reactionary 1648 collection *Geistliche Chormusik*, from which *O lieber Herre Gott* is taken, eschewed the use of instruments; he wrote that

'I was occasioned to undertake once again a slight work of this kind without basso continuo, and perhaps in this way to encourage a few – especially some of the novice German composers – that, before they proceed to the concerted [modern Italianate] style, they might first crack this hard nut (wherein is to be found the true kernel and the very foundation of good counterpoint)...'

During the later Renaissance the centre of musical gravity shifted inexorably southwards. The exquisitely crafted music of the Roman master **Palestrina**, represented here by the motet *Senex puerum portabit* (1569), was so admired that later generations codified it as the exemplar of the 'stile antico'. **Marenzio**, who worked in Rome and Florence, was most famous for his madrigals, but his sacred music is no less attractive: *Tribus miraculis* (1585) shows his flair for text-setting. Madrigals were a stock-in-trade for **Monteverdi**; his friend the musician and poet Aquilino Coppini – convinced that all good music could be made 'commendable to God and to his saints' – furnished many of them with new texts, expertly tailored to Monteverdi's musical effects. *Rutilante in nocte*, which relates the angels' appearance to the shepherds, began life as *Io mi son giovinetta*, a light-hearted love dialogue from the Fourth Book of madrigals (1603).

Palestrina's closest Spanish counterpart is **Victoria**, who spent his formative years working in Rome; his rapt *O magnum mysterium* epitomises the directness and emotional intensity of his style. As a boy at Ávila Cathedral he would have sung alongside **Vivanco**, whose sunny *Ave Maria* paraphrases the traditional plainsong. The music of **Francisco Guerrero** is often earthier in character, as in his *villancico* (Spanish-language carol) *A un niño llorando* (1589), which describes the visit of the Magi to the stable in an irresistible dance meter. Yet even this music seems straight-laced next to **Flecha's** remarkable *El jubilate* – one of his so-called *ensaladas* (literally, 'salads') which mix together different languages and clashing musical styles and meters. It is an absurd and immensely entertaining account of the Virgin Mary fighting off the devil with the words 'French lazybones, leave me in peace!'

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