

Humble stories lie at the heart of many grand traditions. Winter holidays in particular celebrate triumph in the face of adversity, as bountiful harvests give way to dormant ground and chill air. The Mesopotamians, who believed that winter was a time in which their chief god, Marduk, battled the monsters of chaos, held a New Year's festival in support of his struggle. At Hanukkah, Jews celebrate the miracle of a lamp that had enough oil for only one day, but burned for eight. And at Christmas, a child is born to a virgin.

In this program, Chorus Director William Jon Gray brings together a rich variety of musical traditions and styles from different eras to illuminate the Christmas narrative. From preparing for the Messiah's birth to rejoicing in its implications, each of the program's eleven segments explores a different aspect of the story. Renaissance works for brass from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries add sparkling decoration throughout, much as they would have done in the churches and courts for which they were written.

In the first section of the program, **Prepare**, we begin with music for the Advent season—getting ready for Christmas and the coming of the Messiah. The earliest Christmas song on the program is the Latin chant, *Veni, redemptor gentium*, probably written by St. Ambrose of Milan in the fourth century. In 1523, Martin Luther adapted the plainsong melody and translated the text into German as *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*. And around the turn of the seventeenth century, German composer Michael Praetorius created his own setting of the text and tune for a *cappella* choir.

As **The Garden** reminds us, other Christmas songs hearken back to the reason humankind needed salvation. Perhaps because of Adam's and Eve's misadventures, trees figure prominently in Christian iconography, and Thomas Ravenscroft's sixteenth-century work, *Remember, O Thou Man*, and Elizabeth Poston's twentieth-century setting of the eighteenth-century poem, *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*, both draw on this symbolism. In Ravenscroft's piece, a series of verses set in poignantly simple harmonies take us from Eden to Christ's birth. *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree* has multiple allusions, from the apple tree in the Song of Solomon 2:3 to Jesus as a "tree of life" in Luke 13:18–19 and elsewhere. The English tradition of wassailing, an exhortation to God for a

good apple harvest on Old Twelfth Night (January 17), may be a loosely related custom.

In **Keep Awake**, works by seventeenth-century composer Claudio Monteverdi and twentieth-century composer Stephen Paulus explore the importance of remaining receptive to what life—and in this case, God—has to offer. In Monteverdi's motet *Ego dormio*, the speaker "sleep[s], but my heart is awake." Monteverdi sets this text as an arioso duet, a type of sung speech often reserved for particularly impassioned moments in secular opera. Taken from his one-act church opera, *The Three Hermits* (based on a story by Tolstoy with a libretto by Michael Dennis Brown), Stephen Paulus's anthem *Pilgrim's Hymn* was sung at the funerals of both Presidents Reagan and Ford. Borrowing heavily from the Russian Orthodox liturgy, the hymn's text puts forth hope in the face of adversity—"Even with darkness sealing us in/We breathe your name." Paulus responds with an achingly sweet melody, slightly tinged with dissonance.

The rose is a symbol of both the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ in **The Peaceable Kingdom**. Johann Sebastian Bach first composed the Magnificat in 1723 for Christmas Vespers in Leipzig, later removing the texts specific to the holiday in order to make it suitable for year-round performance. "Virga Jesse floruit" was one of these interpolated Christmas texts; its heavily ornamented vocal line illustrates the blossoming "rod of Jesse" perfectly. In *A Spotless Rose*, twentieth-century English composer Herbert Howells sets an English translation of the anonymous German poem, *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen*. In what one writer calls "an almost pietist meditation on the Christmas incarnation," the text paints an image of a budding rose that stands for both Mary and Jesus Christ. Although the setting is beautifully austere, the music is evocative—as the text moves between growth and dormancy, the flexible melody gathers momentum but then quickly quiets.

One of the most important chapters in the Christmas sequence is the **Annunciation**, when the Angel Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her that she is to bear a child—an event at once monumental and profoundly intimate. Heinrich Schütz's *Sei gegrüßet, Maria* captures both

aspects in true German Baroque style, framing the scene as a dialogue between Gabriel and Mary with interjections by ensemble and choir. Austrian composer Franz Biebl adopts a reverential tone in his *Ave Maria*, in which he also sets portions of the Angelus. Composed in 1964, Biebl's *Ave Maria* was first brought to the U.S. by the Cornell University Glee Club, and widely popularized by the *a cappella* group Chanticleer. The first half of the program concludes with two different **Angel Fanfares**. In *Hodie Christus natus est*, Heinrich Schütz layers different musical textures to bring complex emotions to life. Writing in the twentieth century, Daniel Pinkham uses a more straightforward approach in *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Set to an almost dancelike melody, the text "Gloria in excelsis Deo" serves as an increasingly triumphant refrain, while the short verses are presented in contrasting yet strikingly simple melodies.

In the second half of the program, we shift to the memorable images of Christ's birth itself: a baby lying in a manger, while shepherds and kings follow the star shining overhead to pay tribute to the child they presume to be the son of God. Instrumental dances from Michael Praetorius's popular collection *Terpsichore* evoke **The Shepherd's Dance**, also known as the *bergamasca*, shepherd's hey, or *Schäfer-tanz* and performed during miracle plays in Europe at Christmas and New Year's. The blurry lines between secular and sacred in the celebration of Christmas are further emphasized in **The Manger**, in which Mateo Flecha's jovial villancico *E la don, don, Verges Maria* is placed alongside Morton Lauridsen's earnest setting of *O magnum mysterium*. The three kings travel with their gifts in **Star and Kings**. A friend of Richard Wagner, nineteenth-century composer Peter Cornelius is perhaps best known today for his Epiphany anthem, *The Three Kings*. A very different kind of king is the subject of *Coventry Carol*, which was part of a sixteenth-century mystery play called *The Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors*. Unlike many Christmas songs heralding Christ's birth, *Coventry Carol* laments an infant's death—referring to the Massacre of the Innocents, when King Herod tried to prevent the Messiah's coming by slaying all male infants in Bethlehem younger than two.

Toward the close of the program, we fittingly celebrate the **Alpha and Omega**, or beginning and end—the duality celebrated in many cultures at the New Year. Two examples of the antiphonal

style that became popular in the sixteenth century (and which must have sounded marvelous in cavernous cathedrals like St. Mark's in Venice), Hans Leo Hassler's *Verbum caro factum est* and Gabrieli's Canzona septimi toni à 8 serve as musical illustration. Finally, we **Rejoice** with the *Te Deum laudamus*, which has served as the conclusion of Music of the Baroque's Holiday Brass and Choral Concerts for decades. The final word is given to Praetorius, whose beautiful setting of *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen*, the German poem on which Howell's *A Spotless Rose* was based, has been beloved since its creation in the early seventeenth century.