

Celestial Seasons

Performed December 1996

Celestial Seasons features the music of two of the most significant composers of vocal music of the twentieth century, Francis Poulenc and Benjamin Britten. They are represented by what are likely their most popular and enduring choral works: Poulenc's *Gloria* and Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*.

Francis Poulenc: *Gloria*

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) had a rather improbable rise to musical prominence. With no formal training in composition at all, he attracted considerable attention with his first work, a nonsensical novelty piece for baritone, string quartet and winds called *Rhapsodie negre*, written in 1917. These rather slender credentials also earned him a place in Les Six, a group of young French composers whose music was influenced by the irreverent Erik Satie (who labeled his first work *Op. 62* and titled a later work *Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear*) and the absurdist writer Jean Cocteau. Les Six was really a journalistic creation rather than a defined school of composition, and the composers were only briefly associated with each other during the 1920's. Of the six, only Poulenc, Arthur Honegger and Darius Milhaud had significant careers in music.

Much of Poulenc's music was colored by his eccentric personality and eclectic style. He produced film scores and music for theatrical productions, frequently in collaboration with Cocteau, as well as a surrealist opera with the memorable title *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (*The Breasts of Tiresias*) and the ballet *Les Biches* (*The Little Darlings*). Like many a composer before and since, Poulenc's association with theatrical music earned him the reputation of a less than serious composer.

It was after the death of a close friend in 1936 that Poulenc experienced a reawakening of his Catholic faith. He began to compose a steady stream of sacred choral music which forms perhaps the most significant part of his musical output, works including the *Litanies à la Vierge Noire* (1936), *Mass in G* (1937), *Quatre motets pour un temps de pénitance* (1939), *Exultate Deo* (1941), *Salve Regina* (1941), *Stabat Mater* (1950), *Quatre motets pour le temps de Noël* (1952) and the *Gloria* (1959).

While the text of the *Gloria* is taken from the Latin mass, Poulenc does not so much set the text but rather adds its sounds and rhythms to his musical palette. Poulenc deliberately contrasts the word and musical accents, clearly heard in the opening phrase "Gloria in **excelsis** Deo." The most idiosyncratic music belongs to the bouncy, rhythmic *Laudamus te*, which created quite a bit of controversy and was denounced by critics as irreverent. Poulenc responded, "In writing it, I simply thought of those frescoes of Gozzoli in which the angels are sticking out their tongues and also of those serious Benedictine monks whom I spotted one day playing soccer." The third and fifth sections

feature the soprano solo in beautiful but quite angular melodic lines with treacherously wide intervals, lines which are almost mirror images of each other. The final section is punctuated by restatements of the opening orchestral fanfare, leading into a wonderful *a cappella* "Amen" for the soprano solo (the melody is recycled from his virtuosic *Mass in G*) and ending with the most exquisitely lovely melody in the entire work, appended as a sort of coda before the final "Amen."

Poulenc's writing was fundamentally tonal, but his concept of key signature was a fluid one, and his music abounds with sudden changes in dynamic, rhythmic and harmonic structure. He often works in short musical phrases, repeating them with subtle variation. Above all, he continually combines and recombines groups of voices and instruments, affording him not only a wide variety of musical color but also a sound of wonderful clarity and precision.

Benjamin Britten: *Ceremony of Carols*

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) is undoubtedly the pre-eminent composer of vocal music in the English language, but he too had an unlikely beginning. A precocious musician who studied as a boy with Frank Bridge, he had a much less satisfactory experience at the Royal College of Music studying composition with John Ireland. After graduation he found work scoring documentaries for the British Post Office. This brought him into contact with the poet W. H. Auden, who was similarly employed in writing the narration. Britten became increasingly despondent over his prospects as a composer in England and depressed about the growing threat of war in Europe. In 1939, he followed Auden to America.

Britten's creativity was revitalized in America, but his sense of patriotism and British identity ultimately overcame his strong pacifist feelings, and he returned to England in 1942. (After a formal hearing, Britten was granted conscientious objector status and spent the war years organizing and performing concerts to boost morale. And as many a civilian was to discover, remaining in London was often just as dangerous as being on a battlefield.) It was while on shipboard en route back to England that he composed *A Ceremony of Carols*, set for treble voices and harp. The first performance was given with a women's chorus in December, 1942.

Britten selected texts based on old English carols and poems, many anonymous and mostly dating from the 15th and 16th centuries. Britten conceived of the work as a ceremony, and it opens and closes with processional set to the plainsong chant "Hodie Christus natus est" in unison voices. This chant also forms the basis of the harp Interlude.

Despite the limited forces at his disposal, Britten achieves an impressive range of color and texture, making effective use of unison, canon and homophonic sections and varied and imaginative harp accompaniments. After the processional comes an exuberant *Wolcum Yole!* (No. 2). *There is no Rose* (No. 3) is a macaronic carol, that is one in which English and Latin texts are intermixed. The English is set in close harmony while the Latin phrases are set in a chant-like unison. *That yongë child* (No. 4a), which was added

later at the time of publication, features a plaintive, almost melancholy harp accompaniment. *Balulalow* (No. 4b) has a harmonic structure which alternates between major and minor keys at each measure. The most dramatic section is *This little Babe* (No. 6) with its martial accompaniment. Britten builds intensity by moving at each successive verse from one voice to a two-voice and then a three-voice canon. Britten does a masterful job of creating a sense of austere cold in No. 8 (*In freezing winter night*), heightened by the harp tremolos and the increasingly wide intervals sung at the beginning of each phrase. A joyful *Deo gracias* (No. 10), with its syncopated rhythms, provides a balance to *Wolcum Yole!*, and the work ends with a recessional set to the same opening plainsong chant.

Donald St. Pierre: *Songs of Sweet Accord*

Songs of Sweet Accord was commissioned for performance at this concert. Composer Donald St. Pierre provides the following notes:

"This work was written in the summer and fall of 1996 for the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia (Alan Harler, conductor) as an adult male counterpart to Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*. All resemblances between it and the Britten are purely intentional. When performed as designed, the composer requests that *Songs* precede *Ceremony* so that the uninformed in the audience may presume Britten was influenced by him.

"*Songs of Sweet Accord* is a cycle of settings of American folk-hymns. A 'cycle' because it tells a story of sorts. 'Settings' because I prefer that word to one like 'arrangements'. I think it conjures up a jeweler's task: cutting and polishing something given and placing it where one hopes its inherent beauty is more readily apparent.

"The texts and tunes are drawn from our extraordinary musical heritage. I use the word 'extraordinary' advisedly. When I was younger, I was led to believe that there really wasn't any American music before 1910 or so. Often that was qualified by adding the word 'serious': there really wasn't any serious American music before 1910 or so.

"The idea was that music could (and should) be divided into two categories: Serious (sometimes called 'cultivated') and Popular ('vernacular'). One's task was to keep them separate, appreciate the serious and disdain the popular. Evidence for serious music in our country would've been the founding of the Puritan Philharmonic Orchestra some hundreds of years ago. Since there was no PPO, there was no music. And yet, they sang.

"Now I think some distinction can be useful. For music, one might borrow from Horace's *Art of Poetry*. (If you're old enough, you'll remember that music is a genre of poetry.) The aim of the poet is to delight or to instruct, or to do both. There's a wonderful letter Mozart wrote to his father. He talks about what he has just finished composing, pointing out what will please the amateurs (delight) and what the connoisseurs (instruct). Child of the Enlightenment that Mozart was, Horace was in the air for him, and he took as a natural goal the blending of delight and instruction in his work. I find thinking along those lines far more useful than thinking about seriousness and popularity.

"Just as I think the aesthetic is a primary part of being human, so do I think the spiritual is. The texts for *Songs of Sweet Accord* are in a sequence moving from the establishment of music as a good, through unreflecting enthusiasm, doubt, petition and grace. I avoided seasonal texts, and hoped to avoid sectarian ones, looking for those it seemed to me anyone thoughtful might enjoy contemplating."

Carol Settings

The *Feast of Carols* {the final set in the concert program} features four of the texts from *A Ceremony of Carols* in settings by the contemporary English composer John Joubert; the 16th century composer B. Waldis, a contemporary of William Cornish, who composed the original setting of *Pleasure it is*; and Peter Warlock, the pseudonym of writer and composer Philip Heseltine (1884-1930), who is perhaps best known for his *Capriol Suite*, based on 16th century courtly dances. *A Saviour From on High* was written by American composer Stephen Paulus, who has served as composer in residence for the Minnesota Orchestra under Sir Neville Marriner, for the Atlanta Symphony under Yoel Levi and Robert Shaw, and for the Dale Warland Singers. The traditional carols *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* and *The First Nowell* are heard in wonderful arrangements by Sir David Willcocks, long time director of the Bach Choir of London.

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[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)