

# *A Feast of Carols: American Musical Traditions*

**Performed December 13, 1997**

In 1843, Charles Dickens dashed off what he considered to be a potboiler to try to earn some quick money. *A Christmas Carol* was an instant success and its characters and story quickly entered the public domain. In 1871, Sir John Stainer published his *Christmas Carols Old and New*, which would become the standard melodies and harmonizations used by generations ever since. It is little wonder that when we think of Christmas, Victorian traditions inevitably spring to mind. There has, however, been a substantial American contribution to the musical traditions of Christmas which has been often overlooked. In this concert, we present a sampling of these wonderful American musical contributions from the colonial times onward.

**Daniel Pinkham** (b. 1923) has been on the faculty of the New England Conservatory of Music since 1959, where he has been chair of the department of early music and is currently on the music history faculty. He studied composition with Walter Piston, Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, Arthur Honegger and Nadia Boulanger, harpsichord with Wanda Landowska and organ with E. Power Biggs.

His 1958 *Christmas Cantata* remains one of his most popular works, and one in which his interest in early music is clearly evident. The Latin texts are taken from the traditional responses of the Christmas Masses. The first movement opens with a rather stentorian exhortation *Shepherds, what have you seen? Tell us!* before moving into a dance-like section, with the melody being passed antiphonally among the voice parts and, in a somewhat more ornamented form, the orchestra as well. This antiphonal form continues in the second movement, with an arched melody being passed between instruments in the brass choir, set against a chant-like vocal line. The final movement is an extended crescendo, with the angels' greeting to the shepherds *Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good will!* alternating with verses from Psalm 100.

*Jesous Ahatonhia*, the first carol composed in North America, was written in 1641 by **Jean de Brébeuf**, a Jesuit missionary who spent more than twenty years among the Hurons in Canada. The text was in Algonquin, the common linguistic stock of the native Americans of northeastern North America and was meant to tell the story of Christmas in a more understandable idiom. de Brébeuf himself was captured in 1649 by the Iroquois, traditional enemies of the Hurons, subjected to particularly gruesome torture and finally killed. He was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church in 1930.

**William Billings** (1746-1800) was one of the first composers of original music in America. He was the most popular composer of his day, widely respected by contemporary musicians and known even in England. Though he had no formal training in music (and in fact was a tanner by profession), his collections of original hymns and

psalm tunes contained extensive instructions on the theory and practice of music which were quite influential. Billings is most closely associated with *fuging tunes*, which characteristically had a homophonic opening section followed by a section in which the voices entered sequentially in a generally imitative fashion, creating a *fuge*. In this set, *Sheffield* (a setting of **Isaac Watts'** familiar paraphrase of Psalm 98) and *Bethlehem* are examples of fuging tunes.

Billings' music lost popularity in New England in favor of the more sophisticated European styles even during his lifetime and his reputation suffered greatly during the 19th century. He had a gift for engaging melody, as in *Judea*, and he is capable of surprising sophistication, such as inversion of the fuging parts in the second verse of *Sheffield*. His unaffected and exuberant style greatly influenced later collections of hymns such as *Southern Harmony* (1835) and lives on today in the music of the *Sacred Harp* or shape note tradition.

Hymn texts and tunes traditionally have evolved separately. Hymn tunes from the 18th and 19th centuries were typically given place names as titles and were indexed in hymnals by their metrical patterns. The same hymn tune could be used for any hymn written with the same metrical pattern, and conversely many hymns were sung to more than one tune. Sometimes, as with *Joy to the World*, it only wanted the right combination of text and music to gain universal popularity. The text was supplied in 1719 by the great hymnist **Isaac Watts** (1674-1748) and over the years was set to a variety of melodies, including the two settings by Billings. It was the American hymnist **Lowell Mason** (1792-1872) who in 1836 provided the setting by which it is known today. With characteristic modesty, he described the melody, which he called *Antioch*, as being arranged from Handel, and it is often attributed solely to Handel in hymn books today. Its connection with Handel, however, is tenuous and seems only to be the similarity of the opening measure to the choruses *Lift up your heads* or *Glory to God* from *Messiah*, and it is most likely of Mason's own composition. His original setting resembles a Billings fuging tune in that the melody is found in the tenor line.

**George F. Root** (1820-1895) was a protégé of Lowell Mason and a champion of choral music both as a composer, teacher and publisher. He and Mason were very influential in introducing music into the public school curriculum. *We Are Watching* is a wonderful example of a camp meeting song. While we tend to think of camp meetings in the context of Southern revivals, they actually originated in New England and were an important part of the religious experience. *Through the Dark the Dreamers Came* is an exquisite carol by **Mabel W. Daniels** (1879-1971), one of America's first prominent women composers. A graduate of Radcliffe, she studied with George Chadwick at the New England Conservatory and with Ludwig Thuille at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Munich. She was a long time director of the Radcliffe Glee Club and also served as music director at Simmons College. During her lifetime she had several instrumental works performed and recorded by the Boston Symphony, but is known mostly for her choral works. In addition to teaching and composition, she was also active in the suffrage movement.

*We Three Kings* is also an American carol, written by Episcopal clergyman **John Henry Hopkins, Jr.** (1820-1891) in 1865, while he was rector of Christ Church in Williamsport, Pa. Here it is performed as Hopkins intended, with solo voices taking the parts of the kings and the chorus joining in only on the refrain.

Spirituals have long been associated with the Black cultural and religious experience, but before they had a spiritual meaning they had an important secular role as well. The words often held a double meaning and the songs were used to help coordinate the escape of slaves along the Underground Railroad. Seen in this light, spirituals like *Rise Up*, *Shepherd* take on an added poignancy, with the subtext urging slaves to leave family and loved ones behind when the opportunity for escape to freedom arose.

An acclaimed organist who has performed around the world, **Gerre Hancock** is also on the faculty of Juilliard and the Eastman School of Music and has served as organist and master of choristers at St. Thomas Church in New York since 1971. *Introit for a Feast Day* was written for Richard Westenberg and Musica Sacra in 1992, and is an extended fanfare for brass, organ and chorus.

**Conrad Susa** (b. 1935) has been variously staff pianist with the Pittsburgh Symphony, Field Director of the Educational Department of Lincoln Center in New York, and is currently on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, resident composer for the Old Globe Theater in San Diego and dramaturge for the O'Neill Center in Connecticut. He has scored documentary films and television and has composed a number of operas. In the first of the *Three Mystical Carols*, Susa pairs a 15th century Latin carol with a poem by the 17th century Welsh clergyman and poet George Herbert. Susa explains the Latin, "Gabriel's salutation (*Ave*) to Mary carries the news (*nova*) that she will be a second Eve (*Eva*), who will redeem the errors of the first. The palindrome is found as early as the ninth century in the Burden of a Hymn from Saint Gall." *This endrys night* (the other night) is a 15th century English carol which features a dialog between the infant Jesus and Mary, sung here in a tenor and alto duet.

*I Heard the Bells* is a setting of **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's** 1864 poem *Christmas Bells* in which he contrasts the Christmas message of "peace on earth" with the somber realities of the Civil War. The two darkest stanzas of the poem are not set in the carol but are reproduced here with the rest of the lyrics. The most widely heard setting is to the hymn tune *Waltham* by **Jean Baptiste Calkin** (1827-1905).

*O Little Town of Bethlehem* was written in 1868 by **Phillips Brooks**, then rector of the Church of the Holy Trinity (where the Sunday concert is taking place), and was inspired by his visit to the Holy Land. The best known setting is its original one, by the church organist **Lewis Redner**. The melody supposedly came to Redner in a dream and he wrote it down upon awakening.

*The Boar's Head* is a macaronic carol, that is one in which English and Latin text are mixed together. It was traditionally sung at Queen's College, Oxford, as the eponymous main course was brought in. (The *Oxford Book of Carols* dutifully notes that the boar's

head was so central to English feasts that the boar was hunted to extinction in England by the 17th century.)

*I Saw Three Ships* is an English carol whose story ultimately derived from the legend that the bodies of the Three Kings were carried on three ships to Constantinople. *O Tannenbaum* is a traditional German carol, but the symbolism of the fir tree predates the Christian era there. The Druids venerated it as a powerful life force which could remain green even during winter. Popular legend has Martin Luther reinventing it as the Christmas tree. *Deck the Hall* is a traditional Welsh New Year's Eve carol. Singers would dance around a harpist, with the verses created extemporaneously and answered by the harp, which over time became the nonsense syllables fa-la-la at the end of each line.

**Nicolas Saboly** (1614-1675) was a Jesuit poet and musician who became *maître de chapelle* at a series of French cathedrals. He is best known for his Christmas carols (thought to include *Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella*), mostly written in Provençal and intended to be sung to popular secular melodies of the day. *Touro-louro-louro* mirrors the pilgrimage of the Holy Family to Bethlehem. *From Heaven Above* is a setting of **Martin Luther's** 1531 carol by Mendelssohn Club founder **William Wallace Gilchrist**. The hymn *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* was written in 1739 by Charles Wesley (1707-1788), a prodigious hymnist (he wrote some 6600 hymns) in addition to being a founder of the Methodist church. In 1855, **William Cummings** set the text to **Felix Mendelssohn's** *Gott ist Licht*, from his 1840 cantata *Festgesang*, to produce the version in universal use today. *The First Nowell* has become so familiar to us that we probably pay little attention to how unusual the melody is, beginning and ending on the third rather than the root tone. It is likely that it represents the descant to a melody which has since been lost. It is heard here in an arrangement by Sir David Willcocks, long time director of the Bach Choir of London.

*A Christmas Carol* was written by **Charles Ives** in 1897. It is an exquisite unison carol which demonstrates not only Ives' wonderful gift for melody but also his delight in rhythmic complexity. *Silent Night* is probably the best known of all Christmas carols, written about 1820 with text by **Joseph Mohr** and melody by **Franz Xaver Gruber**, pastor and organist, respectively, of the church in the little Austrian village of Oberndorf. It was first performed with accompaniment by Gruber on the guitar, although the story that this was because the organ had broken and could not be fixed in time for the Christmas service seems to be apocryphal.

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