

[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)

A Feast of Carols

Performed December 18, 2004

Fantasia on Christmas Carols

Gaudete

The Dream Isaiah Saw

This evening's concert, *A Feast of Carols*, brings together traditional carols, heard both in familiar and modern arrangements, and a contemporary work, Pittsburgh composer Glenn Rudolph's popular *The Dream Isaiah Saw*.

The name of Alice Parker (b. 1925) is synonymous with choral music in America. Conductor, educator and composer, she has written more than 400 works ranging from operas to song cycles, and in collaboration with the late Robert Shaw produced numerous settings of American folk songs, hymns and spirituals. *Gaudete, Six Latin Christmas Hymns*, was commissioned by Shaw for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus and was premiered by them in 1973. *Corde natus ex Parentis* (Of the Father's love begotten) is the earliest piece in this set, written by Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348-ca 413). Prudentius was a Roman citizen born in Spain. He studied law and served as a judge for a number of years, before a religious awakening late in life inspired him to devote his remaining years to writing hymns. Like many of the pieces in this set, the hymn tune originally appeared in the *Piae Cantiones* (Devout Songs), a remarkable compilation of medieval Latin hymns published in Finland in 1582. Interestingly, the work was unknown in the English-speaking world until the mid-1800's, when an original edition was given to British hymnist James Mason Neale, who translated and published 12 Christmas carols in 1853. Neale's translations, along with compilations of traditional carols by Sir John Stainer, sparked something of a revival of interest in traditional Christmas music and provided many of the now-familiar carols and settings that are in use today.

The anonymous text of *Puer nobis nascitur* (Unto us a boy is born) dates from the 14th century, and the hymn tune again is taken from the *Piae Cantiones*. Parker's setting expands the metrical pattern from four to five to six beats per measure in succeeding verses. The Latin text for *Dormi, Jesu* (Sleep Now, Jesus) was copied from a print that English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge found in a German village. Parker had adapted a melody from Johann König's 1738 hymn *Alles is an Gottes Segen* (All Depends on God's Blessing) into a beautiful lullaby. *Personent hodie* (On this day earth shall ring), another hymn taken from the *Piae Cantiones*, was used for the Feast of the Holy Innocents (December 28), commemorating the young boys slain by Herod in his attempt to kill the

infant Jesus. It was traditionally celebrated by a role reversal, with a boy bishop leading the service and the boys' choir displacing the senior clergy from the choir stalls.

Resonet in laudibus (Let our voices sound with joy) is another 14th century hymn. Parker has adapted a 16th century German melody that is still quite popular today. *Adeste fideles* (O come, all ye faithful) is the odd hymn out in this set. Although it sounds like an ancient Latin hymn and for years was misidentified as such, it was actually written in about 1740 by John Francis Wade (ca. 1711-1786), an English Catholic who fled persecution and settled in Douay, France, where he earned his living as a music engraver and teacher. The English translation was provided in 1841 by Frederick Oakley, an Anglican priest who converted to Catholicism and who was known equally for his poetry and his work among the poor in the Westminster district of London.

Joy to the World is a paraphrase of Psalm 98 written in 1719 by that prolific hymnist Isaac Watts. The music is often misattributed to Handel, but it was the American hymnist Lowell Mason who, in 1836, provided the setting used today, adapting an earlier English hymn tune. *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* was written by an equally prodigious hymnist, Charles Wesley, in 1739. It was the hymnist William Cummings who, in 1855, matched the text with music by Felix Mendelssohn taken from an 1840 cantata celebrating Johannes Gutenberg and the invention of the printing press to create the most familiar setting.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) had a lifelong fascination with English folk music. He began to collect, arrange and publish English folk tunes as early as 1903, which made him a pioneer in the field of ethnomusicology, and he catalogued some 800 folk tunes during his lifetime. His own compositions were heavily influenced both by traditional folk music and the music of the late English Renaissance masters like Thomas Tallis and William Byrd. His 1912 *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* is based on three English carols which Vaughan Williams himself had collected: *The Truth Sent From Above*, *Come All You Worthy Gentlemen*, and *On Christmas Night*.

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear was written in 1849 by Edmund H. Sears, a poet and Unitarian minister. It is a most unusual Christmas carol in that it never actually mentions Jesus or his birth at all. Its message of hope and social justice, however, was well in character for a clergyman who later became an outspoken opponent of slavery. Boston composer Richard Willis wrote the exquisite melody, which he simply called *Carol*.

Organist, conductor and arranger Sir David Willcocks (b. 1919) served as Director of Music, University Organist and Conductor of the Musical Society at King's College, Cambridge from 1957 to 1974 and as Musical Director of the acclaimed Bach Choir of London from 1960 to 1998. *Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day* is a setting of an anonymous traditional English carol which first appeared in William Sandys' 1833 *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern*. The use of secular and somewhat amorous imagery in a sacred context is not at all uncommon in medieval hymns, and melodies as well often did double duty in popular romantic songs as well as sacred ones. The reference to "see the legend of my play" suggests that this carol may have been part of a

medieval mystery play. Willcocks is also heard in the wonderful arrangements of the sing-along carols *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* and *The First Nowell*.

Deck the Hall is a traditional Welsh New Year's Eve song. In the original, a bard would sing extemporaneous verses, each of which would be answered by the harp, which has become the nonsense "fa la la" syllables of the modern version.

Composer Stephen Paulus (b. 1949) holds graduate degrees in music theory and composition from the University of Minnesota. He was co-founder and managing composer of the Minnesota Composers Forum and has served as composer-in-residence for the Minnesota Symphony under Sir Neville Marriner, the Atlanta Symphony under Yoel Levi and Robert Shaw, and the Dale Warland Singers, and is currently on the Board of Directors of ASCAP. *A Savior From on High* is one of his most frequently performed Christmas pieces. Written in 1978, it is based on a carol by the 17th century English composer William Ballet, *Sweet Was the Song the Virgin Sang*.

The First Nowell is thought to date from the 13th or 14th century, but only appeared in print for the first time in William Sandys' 1833 *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern*. It is an unusual melody, beginning and ending on the third of the chord rather than the root, and probably represents the descant part to a tune which has since been lost.

Glenn Rudolph has been active as a performer, conductor and composer in the Pittsburgh area since 1978. He has been a core singer and Conducting Assistant with the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh under Robert Page and an Assistant Conductor with the Pittsburgh Camerata under Gayle Kirkwood. He served as tenor soloist and composer-in-residence at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral and is currently choir director at Grace United Methodist Church in Natrona Heights. *The Dream Isaiah Saw* was commissioned by the Bach Choir of Pittsburgh in 2001. The text is taken from *Lions and Oxen Will Sleep in the Hay*, a poem by Thomas Troeger paraphrasing Isaiah's vision of universal peace and harmony. Rudolph was at work on the piece when the tragic events of September 11 unfolded. This gives an added poignancy to the music, considering the appropriateness of the text, and *The Dream Isaiah Saw* is dedicated to those who lost their lives in that tragedy. Musically, the piece is constructed around a percussion ostinato that represents the presence of God. The choral parts gradually come into synchrony with the percussion, representing the realization of Isaiah's vision.

Silent Night is the most beloved of all Christmas carols. It was written in 1818 by Joseph Mohr and Franz Xaver Gruber, assistant pastor and organist, respectively, of the aptly named St. Nicholas Church in the Austrian village of Oberndorf. It was an immediate success, and although it was never published, it soon entered into the repertoire of several touring folk groups. It is in the form of a ländler, a traditional Austrian folk dance, and for some time was passed off as a Tyrolean folk carol, much to the consternation of Gruber, who never received the proper credit during his lifetime. It was originally written for guitar accompaniment, but the story that this was due to a broken organ which could not be repaired in time for the Christmas service is charming but apocryphal.

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