

[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)

Introit for a Feast Day
A Savior from on High
A New Song
Shepherd
Jesous Ahatonhia
The Dream Isaiah Saw
Lux Aurumque

Performed December 2005

Today's holiday concert has a decidedly American flavor. It features the first carol written in North America, works by contemporary American composers Gerre Hancock, Stephen Paulus, Eric Whitacre and Glenn Rudolph, and the first performance of a new work by Mendelssohn Club composer-in-residence Donald St. Pierre.



The concert opens with Gerre Hancock's *Introit for a Feast Day*. Hancock (b. 1934) is an acclaimed organist and choral conductor as well as a composer. For more than 30 years, he held the position of Organist and Master of Choristers at St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue in New York City. He has served on the faculties of The Juilliard School, the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale University and the Eastman School of Music. He is currently on the faculty of the University of Texas at Austin, where he is developing a curriculum for sacred music. *Introit for a Feast Day* was written in 1992 for Richard Westenberg and Musica Sacra. Set for brass sextet, organ and chorus, it is a brilliant, extended fanfare built around the single word "alleluia."

Joy to the World is a paraphrase of Psalm 98 written in 1719 by that prodigious hymnist Isaac Watts, whose more than 600 hymns and psalms provided an important avenue for religious musical expression in the early Protestant church. The familiar musical setting was provided in 1830 by the American hymnist Lowell Mason, who adapted an earlier English hymn tune, mistakenly attributing it to Handel.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) was one of the most amazing figures of the 19th century – virtuoso pianist, composer, conductor, musicologist, educator (he founded the Leipzig Conservatory, the first such school for training musicians), labor negotiator (he brokered the first contract for professional musicians between the city of Leipzig and the Gewandhaus Orchestra), talented amateur mathematician and competent water colorist.

The *Ave Maria*, written in 1830, is set for 8-part chorus and a small or semi-chorus. It displays Mendelssohn's considerable melodic gift as well as his ability to effortlessly handle complex musical structure. Tune detectives may notice the similarity of the main theme to the finale of Mendelssohn's *Scottish Symphony*, which he began sketching about the same time.

Mendelssohn did not set out to write a Christmas carol in *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. It was actually the English hymnist William Cummings who, in 1855, matched a text written by Charles Wesley with music from a Mendelssohn cantata written to celebrate Johannes Gutenberg to provide the familiar setting in use today.

Composer Stephen Paulus (b. 1949) holds graduate degrees in music theory and composition from the University of Minnesota, where he studied with Paul Fetler and Dominic Argento. He is co-founder with Libby Larson 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 the Dale Warland Singers. He is currently on the Board of Directors of ASCAP. *A Savior from on High*, written in 1978, is one of his most frequently performed choral works. It is based on a 16th century English carol found in William Ballet's *Lute Book*, *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 Sandy's 1833 *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern*. The melody is so familiar that we don't notice how unusual it is, beginning and ending on the third of the chord rather than the root. It probably represents the descant part to a tune which has since been lost.

In 1898 Mendelssohn Club founder William Wallace Gilchrist wrote this setting of Martin Luther's 1531 carol *From Heaven Above*. Gilchrist was an organist, choral director, and conductor as well as one of the most successful composers of his day. While much of his choral work stands firmly in the Victorian tradition and has not worn well, he had a wonderful gift for melody, as this beautiful unison setting demonstrates.

Deck the Hall is a traditional Welsh New Year's Eve song. The melody was known in the 18th century but it did not appear in print until 1881. The original practice was probably something like a game of forfeits. Singers would dance in a circle around a harpist, providing extemporaneous verses which were answered by the harp. A singer who could not produce a verse when his turn came was excused from the circle. The harp response has become the nonsense "fa la la" syllables in the modern version.



Mendelssohn Club's composer-in-residence Donald St. Pierre has been on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music since

1990. He has served as principal keyboard player for the Milwaukee Symphony and was music director of the Skylight Music Theater in Milwaukee from 1978-1990, where he directed more than 50 productions and composed three chamber operas. He is one of the contributing composers to the *AIDS Quilt Songbook*. He has been head coach of the voice department at the Chautauqua Institution and has held the same post at the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival since 1995. As a recital accompanist, he has appeared at such venues as New York's Lincoln Center, London's Wigmore Hall and the Alameda Theatre, Paris's Théâtre du Chalet, as well as at the Tanglewood, Santa Fe Chamber Music, Bowdoin, Bard, and Grand Teton Music Festivals. *A New Song*, which receives its first performance at these concerts, is St. Pierre's seventh commission for Mendelssohn Club.

St. Pierre has a particular affinity for folk hymns, which form the basis of both *Shepherd* and *A New Song*. There is a wonderful simplicity and lack of affectation in folk hymns which speak directly to the heart. The text of *Shepherd* is a paraphrase of Psalm 23 written by Isaac Watts. St. Pierre has taken the melody, based on an American folk hymn, and created long, sinuous vocal lines which interweave with one another until a unison verse concludes the piece. *A New Song* is based on an interestingly angular Norwegian folk hymn. It opens with a unison verse sung by the tenors. Each succeeding verse sees the hymn tune varied and becoming more elaborate. The text is a paraphrase of Psalm 98 written by Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621). She was the sister of Elizabethan poet Sir Philip Sidney and an accomplished writer, poet, musician, intellectual and patron of the arts in her own right. After her brother's death, she completed the verse translations of the psalms that he had begun, contributing 107 of the 150 psalms herself. These verse translations were published in manuscript and were both widely circulated and widely admired, influencing later poets including John Donne.

Jesous Ahatonhia was the first North American Christmas carol. The text was written in 1641 by Jean de Brébeuf, a French Jesuit missionary who spent more than 20 years among the Hurons in Canada. It was written in Algonquin, the common linguistic stock of the Native Americans of the northeast and was meant to tell the Christmas story in a more understandable idiom. The melody is a 16th century French folk tune called *Une Jeune Pucelle*. 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. The carol persisted in an oral tradition among the Hurons until it was collected by another French Jesuit a century later and translated into French. The familiar English verses are a paraphrase of that French translation, written by J. Edgar Middleton in 1926 for a pageant about de Brébeuf. Middleton (1872-1960) was a journalist and musician who, coincidentally, sang with the Toronto Mendelssohn Choir.

Glenn L. Rudolph has been active as a performer, conductor and composer in the Pittsburgh area since 1978. A graduate of the College-Conservatory of Music, University of Cincinnati, 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 H. 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.



Composer Eric Whitacre was drawn to a career in music through his experiences singing in his college chorus. He went on to receive his M.M. in composition from The Juilliard School, where he studied with John Corigliano and David Diamond. *Lux Aurumque* was written in 2001 for the Master Chorale of Tampa Bay. Whitacre was attracted to what he calls “the genuine, elegant simplicity” of the short poem by Edward Esch. Interestingly, he had it translated from English into Latin in order to set the text in Latin. It is a soft lullaby, with phrases which repeatedly move from consonance to gentle dissonance, like the rocking of a cradle.

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 not 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 actually 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 because the organ was broken and could not be repaired in time for the Christmas service is charming but apocryphal.

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