

A Rose in Winter

Performed December 15/16, 2000

The Rose in Winter has become one of the most enduring of all Christmas symbols and has given rise to an entire genre of Christmas song. The image originally derived from the allegorical prophecy of Isaiah that the Messiah would be a new shoot arising from the stem of Jesse, father of David the King. This new shoot became a rose in the anonymous medieval poem that Michael Praetorius set in the hauntingly beautiful carol *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen* (*Lo, how a rose e'er blooming*) and in Herbert Howells' setting of a similar medieval text, *A Spotless Rose*. In the Middle Ages the rose also began to be associated with the Virgin Mary as well. It was a symbol of joy, and the name *rosarium*, literally a rose garden, was applied to an early practice of the rosary in which a litany of fifty joys of Mary were recited alternating with Aves. *There is no rose*, another anonymous medieval text heard here in settings by Benjamin Britten and John Joubert, is a Marian rose carol. The Rose in Winter also figures prominently in Christmas miracles. There is the story of the shepherd girl who was embarrassed that she had no gift to offer the Baby Jesus. An angel, seeing her distress, bent down and swept aside the snow to reveal roses. That story is recapitulated in what Catholic tradition holds is a miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary in Mexico in December, 1531, in which she directed an Indian peasant to a place where he found roses blooming in the middle of winter.

Arthur Honegger (1892-1955) was born in France of Swiss parents but was raised in Switzerland and retained his Swiss citizenship. He studied at the Zurich Conservatory before returning to France at the age of 21 to study at the Paris Conservatory. Honegger was one of *Les Six*, a group of young composers who rejected Romanticism and were mentored by the irreverent Erik Satie and the absurdist playwright Jean Cocteau. *Les Six* was really a journalistic creation rather than a stylistic school and Honegger soon drifted away from that circle.



He achieved success with two early works, *Le Roi David* (1921) and *Pacific 231* (1923) which remain his two best known compositions. Neither is totally representative of his full body of work, which includes chamber music, operas, concertos, symphonies and more than forty film scores. Honegger was active in the Catholic revivalist movement in France and there is a religious aspect to much of his music, even instrumental works like his *Symphony No. 3*,

subtitled *Liturgical* and featuring movements titled *Dies iræ*, *De profundis clamavi*, and *Dona nobis pacem*. Honegger's music was also greatly influenced both by Stravinsky and by jazz, and he made frequent use of dissonance and polytonality. But he also believed that music was only successful if it was accepted by the listeners. He wrote, "My efforts have always been directed toward the ideal of writing music that is understandable by the great mass of listeners but sufficiently free of banality to interest music lovers." Throughout his career he struggled with the balance between accessibility and artistic expression.

Honegger began work on *Une Cantate de Noel* in 1940 in collaboration with the Swiss poet Caesar von Arx, whose *La Passion de Selzach* formed the basis of the libretto. When von Arx committed suicide following the death of his wife, Honegger put the work aside until 1953, when he received a commission from the Basel Chamber Orchestra. Scored for baritone, chorus, children's chorus and orchestra, the work was premiered in December, 1953 and was to be Honegger's last composition.

Honegger imbued the cantata with a dramatic sweep, viewing it as the progression of man from darkness into light. After a somewhat dissonant instrumental introduction, the chorus enters with a wordless lament, like a longing for something imperfectly perceived, something which cannot be put into words. When it is finally articulated, Honegger uses the opening lines of Psalm 130, "Out of the depths I cry unto thee; O Lord, hear my voice." It seems an unusual text for a Christmas cantata, especially since that text is used liturgically in remembrances of the dead, but the psalm continues, in text which Honegger does not set but rather implies, "Let Israel wait for the Lord, for with the Lord is mercy, and he will redeem Israel from all their sins." This becomes explicit as the chorus builds to an anguished cry *O viens Emmanuel!* (O come, Emmanuel!) The children's chorus, like a choir of distant angels, provides a reassuring reply while the baritone solo sings the words the angel spoke to the shepherds announcing the birth of Christ.

The middle section of *Une Cantate de Noel* is in the form of a quodlibet, with five different Christmas carols being freely quoted. The effect is unusual, though, for the carols are sung simultaneously, with phrases or even single words being passed from voice to voice within the chorus. At one point carols in both duple and triple meters are being sung simultaneously. Honegger was a great admirer of the polyphonic style of Bach and this section represents polyphony in a thoroughly 20th-century idiom. The carols are each sung in their own language — *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen*, *Stille Nacht* and *O du fröhliche* in German, *Il est né* in French and *From Heaven on High* in English.

This not only serves to clarify the music but also represents the universality of the Christmas experience for Honegger.

The final section opens with the children's chorus singing another universal hymn of praise, the opening of Psalm 117 (Praise the Lord, all ye nations), in plainsong chant. The chorus picks up this text in an exuberant and joyous waltz, with the children's choir floating above with a chorale-like tune. An instrumental postlude reprises some of the carol music, bringing *Une Cantate de Noel* to a conclusion.

The Rosarium presents three contrasting treatments of the *Ave Maria* text. Anton Bruckner's (1824-1896) setting was composed in 1861, the same year that the thirty-five year old composer finally received his diploma from the Vienna Conservatory. His legendary shyness and diffidence did not carry over into his composition, and this *Ave* shows his very effective use of voicing and dynamics to create a richly textured work. Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) experienced a religious rebirth in the late 1920's, returning to the Orthodox church which he had left at eighteen. This influenced much of the music of this period, which includes the *Symphony of Psalms* (1930) and this *Ave*, which was originally written in Russian in 1934. He reset it to the Latin text in 1949. Like his other sacred music, it is somewhat austere and impersonal rather than emotional in character, spinning out the text in a simple, chant-like style. Felix Mendelssohn's (1809-1847) *Ave* is from his 1830 *Three Sacred Pieces*. This is the same period that he began work on his "Druid" cantata *Die Erste Walpurgisnacht*, and there is more than a passing thematic similarity between the two works. Mendelssohn's *Ave* is the longest and most intricate in this set, with contrasting homophonic sections, unison singing, and even the polyphony of a fugue to conclude the middle section.

There is no rose is a traditional style of English carol called macaronic, that is, one in which both English and Latin text are used. Benjamin Britten's (1913-1976) setting comes from his 1942 *A Ceremony of Carols*, originally scored for women's voices and harp but arranged here for mixed chorus. Britten sets the English text in close harmony and the Latin in a chant-like unison. The South Africa-born John Joubert (b. 1927) has created a two-part setting with a melody and a countersubject, which alternate between women's and men's voices. Herbert Howells (1892-1983) was considered one of England's most promising young composers in the years immediately following World War I. Notoriously oversensitive to criticism, he virtually stopped composing in the mid-20's and only began to write again after the tragic death of his nine-year old son, when he turned to sacred music for consolation. *A Spotless Rose*, written between 1918 and 1920, is one of his best known works, with its sinuous, undulating

melody harmonized in parallel thirds and fourths, a very Impressionistic touch. *A Christmas Carol*, an exquisitely beautiful unison carol by Charles Ives (1874-1954), displays his considerable gift for lyricism as well as his love of unusual rhythmic patterns.

When Mendelssohn composed the music of *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, he had no idea about writing a Christmas carol. The tune was actually taken from a cantata he wrote in celebration of Johann Gutenberg, the inventor of the printing press, and it was the hymnist William Cummings who set Charles Wesley's text to it in 1855. The often misheard "Sun of Righteousness" in the second verse is actually one of the most ancient titles given to Jesus, dating to the third century. The Roman emperor Aurelian had proclaimed the worship of the Persian sun-god Mithra as the official state religion in 274 and Mithra's feast of Solis Invicti, the Unconquerable Sun, was celebrated on the winter solstice, December 25th in the Julian calendar. The widespread cult of Mithra not only seems to have inspired the appellation "Sun of Righteousness" in response but it also contributed to fixing the date of December 25th to commemorate the birth of Jesus.

O Come, All Ye Faithful has an interesting history. Although it sounds like an ancient Latin hymn and is often identified as such, both the words and music were actually written about 1741 by John Francis Wade, an English music engraver and teacher who had emigrated to a Catholic community in Douay, France. The English translation was provided about a century later by Frederick Oakeley, an Anglican priest who later converted to Roman Catholicism and ministered to the poor in London. *The First Nowell* has become so familiar to us that we probably don't notice how unusual the melody is, beginning and ending on the third of the chord rather than the root. It is likely that it is actually the descant part to a melody which has since been lost. *Deck the Hall* is a traditional Welsh song, celebrating not Christmas but New Year's Eve. The original format would have been a series of extemporaneous verses, each line of which was answered by the harp. In the modern arrangement, the harp has become the nonsense "fa la la" syllables at the end of each line. *Silent Night* is perhaps the most beloved of all Christmas carols. Written about 1820 for a children's Christmas pageant by Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber, pastor and organist of the church in the little Austrian village of Oberndorf, it is in the form of a *ländler* or traditional Austrian folk dance. In fact *Silent Night* was passed off as an Austrian folk carol for a number of years. The story that it had to be played on guitar because the church organ had broken and could not be repaired in time for the Christmas service is charming but apocryphal.

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