

# MENDELSSOHN CLUB



Alan Harler, Artistic Director  
John French, Associate Conductor

## *Laud to the Nativity*

December 16, 2006  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
Chestnut Hill

Ottorino Respighi - *Lauda per la Natività del Signore*  
Anton Bruckner - *Ave Maria*  
Pietro Yon - *Gesu Bambino*  
Donald St. Pierre - *little tree (world premiere)*

### PROGRAM NOTES

by Michael Moore

The centerpiece of these holiday concerts is Respighi's rarely performed masterpiece *Lauda per la Natività del Signore* (*Laud to the Nativity of the Lord*.) If you only know Respighi from his massive orchestral works like *The Pines of Rome*, the *Laud to the Nativity* may come as somewhat of a revelation, with its delicate scoring and simple lyricism. The program also includes the premiere of a work by Mendelssohn Club Composer-in-Residence Donald St. Pierre and carols, some familiar and some less so, all of which emphasize the words the angel spoke to the shepherds on that first Christmas night: "Peace on earth, good will towards men."

The *Laud to the Nativity* is bracketed by two familiar carols, both of which reflect something of each other as well as the *Laud*. *O Come, All Ye Faithful* (*Adeste Fideles*) is often identified as an old Latin hymn but was actually written in the mid-18th century by John Francis Wade (c1711-1786), a music engraver and publisher who had fled to the Catholic émigré community in Douay, France following the last, unsuccessful attempt of the Stuarts to regain the English throne in 1745. The English translation was provided in 1841 by Frederick Oakley, an Anglican clergyman turned Catholic priest who was known equally for his poetry and his work among the poor of London.

The Italian-American Pietro Yon (1886-1943) was known primarily as a virtuoso organist. He held positions at the Vatican and later served as organist and choir director at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York for nearly twenty years. His most fa-

mous work, the lovely carol *Gesù Bambino* (1917), resembles an old Italian pastoral carol, with its long melodic line, dotted rhythms and triple meter. And it borrows the refrain from *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, now also transformed into triple meter. It is heard first in the original version, and then later in an arrangement by St. Pierre. And of course Pietro Yon has a Philadelphia connection as well. He premiered his *Concerto Gregoriano* in 1920 on the Wanamaker Grand Court Organ with Leopold Stokowski and The Philadelphia Orchestra, a concert which drew an audience of thousands and was covered by *Time* magazine.

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936) was a versatile instrumentalist, educator, musicologist and composer. Although he is known today mainly for his large-scale tone poems *The Fountains of Rome* and *The Pines of Rome*, he composed in a wide variety of forms and styles. He had a life-long fascination with music from the Renaissance and Baroque eras which heavily influenced his own music. This found expression in such diverse works as *Ancient Airs and Dances* (1916), the ballet *La boutique fantastique* (1918), based on melodies of Rossini, and *The Birds* (1928), loosely based on Baroque keyboard music that imitated bird-song.



His most charming and successful composition of music in the antique style is undoubtedly the *Laud to the Nativity* (1930). Scored for soprano, alto and tenor solos, chorus, and wind sextet, it is music of wonderful clarity and lyricism. It is suffused throughout with Renaissance touches, unusual harmonic progressions, whole tone cadences, dance-like madrigals, and melodies suggesting medieval Italian carols. The *Laud to the Nativity* presents the story of Christ's birth from the viewpoint of the humble shepherds and unfolds like a masque or play, with the soloists taking the parts of the angel, shepherd and Virgin Mary, and the chorus portraying shepherds or angels in turn.

Respighi turned to the 13th century poet and Franciscan monk Jacopone da Todi for the text. Born Jacopo di Benedetti, he was a wealthy and successful lawyer. After the accidental death of his young wife, for which he blamed himself, he underwent a radical change in lifestyle, giving away all his possessions, living as a beggar in the streets, and engaging in increasingly bizarre behavior designed to mortify himself, earning him the nickname Jacopone (Crazy Jim) in the process. After ten years of this penance, he joined the Franciscan order. He soon became a leading figure in the Spiritualist movement, which sought to return the order to the ideals of poverty and simplicity. When Pope Boniface VIII refused to sanction the reforms, Jacopone signed a letter defying the Pope's authority. Boniface had Jacopone arrested, excommunicated and imprisoned, and although Jacopone eventually recanted, he was not released until after Boniface's death. He retired to a Franciscan convent and died on Christmas Day, 1306.

During his time as a Franciscan, Jacopone wrote more than 200 lauds, or sacred poems. His poetry was very straightforward and unaffected, written mostly in his native Umbrian dialect, and had a great appeal to the common people. Many of his lauds were set to music to be used in religious services, the most famous being the *Stabat mater*.

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) is a study in contrasts: a shy, diffident man; a virtuoso organist of legendary improvisational ability; a compulsive student who collected diplomas until he was 40; the composer of some of the most intricate and complex music ever written. This *Ave Maria* was written in 1861 while Bruckner was cathedral organist in Linz. It was his first masterpiece and demonstrates his very effective use of voicing and dynamics to create a richly textured work.

*Watchman, Tell Us of the Night* is in the form of a dialog between the watchman and a traveler. The text was written by the remarkable John Bowring (1792-1872), an amazing linguist (he was said to speak over 100 languages), translator, writer, editor, political reformer and diplomat. He served as Commissioner to France, Consul to Canton, Governor of Hong Kong, trade ambassador to Siam and, after retiring from the British foreign service, representative of the Kingdom of Hawaii to the courts of Europe. The carol is set to a melody by George Elvey called *St. George's Windsor*, more familiar as the setting for *Come, Ye Thankful People, Come*. Elvey (1816-1893) served as organist and choir master at St. George's Chapel at Windsor for more than 50 years.

During the 1860's the holidays held little joy for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882). The Civil War was raging, Longfellow's wife of 18 years was fatally burned in a household accident and his son was seriously wounded in battle. And yet he was able to write *Christmas Bells*, a moving poem of hope and reassurance in the face of despair, on Christmas Day in 1864. The best known setting, the hymn tune *Waltham* by organist and composer John Baptiste Calkin, omits two verses which dealt explicitly with the Civil War.

Mendelssohn Club 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 Milwaukee's Skylight Music Theater from 1978-1990, where he directed more than 50 productions and composed three chamber operas. He is a contributor to the *AIDS Quilt Songbook* and has served as head coach of the voice department at the Chautauqua Institution and the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival. He is also a much sought after recital accompanist and has appeared at New York's Lincoln Center, London's Wigmore Hall and Almeida Theatre, Paris' Theatre du Chalet, and at the Tanglewood, Santa Fe Chamber Music, Bowdoin, Bard and Grand Teton Music Festivals. *little tree* is a charming poem by e. e. cummings about two children welcoming the Christmas tree into their family. St. Pierre set the text with an engaging simplicity, perfectly matching the tone of the poem. The scoring, for chorus, wind quartet and triangle, and the ornamentation in the orchestral line also subtly reflect the music of the *Laud to the Nativity*.



J. L. Shipman

Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) was a noted preacher, an influential opponent of slavery and Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts. It was while he was rector of the Church of the Holy Trinity on Rittenhouse Square that he wrote the words for *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, drawing on experiences from a visit to Palestine in 1865. He asked the church organist and music director Lewis Redner to set the poem for a children's pageant. Redner struggled with the task until the day before the

pageant, when the now familiar melody reportedly came to him in a dream. (Incidentally, Redner's position is now held by Mendelssohn Club Associate Conductor John French.)

It was the English hymnist William Cummings who in 1857 set a text by Charles Wesley to music adapted from a Mendelssohn cantata celebrating Johann Gutenberg and the printing press to produce *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks* is another pairing in which a melody was adapted from music written for an altogether different purpose, in this case an operatic aria of Handel's. The text is a paraphrase of the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke and was written by Irish poet and playwright Nahum Tate (1652-1715), who was later named Poet Laureate of England.

*The Boar's Head Carol* dates to the 15th century and is associated with Queen's College, Oxford, where it is traditionally sung on Christmas Day as the eponymous main course is carried in. Legend has it that an Oxford student was attacked by a wild boar while strolling about, reading a volume of Aristotle. He saved himself by shoving the tome into the boar's mouth, saying "It's Greek; it's indigestible!" It is an example of a macaronic carol, that is, one in which English and Latin words are mixed together, and is heard here in an arrangement by Stephen Caldwell, who is currently studying for his masters degree in voice at Temple University.

*Silent Night* 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. Although it was not published, it achieved instant popularity and soon entered 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 annoyance of Gruber, who never received 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 Christmas is charming but apocryphal.

– Michael Moore

Program notes copyright © 2006 Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia. All rights reserved.

***Return to Mendelssohn Club program notes page***