

MENDELSSOHN CLUB

O F P H I L A D E L P H I A

Alan Harler, Artistic Director
John French, Associate Conductor

PROGRAM

Introit for a Feast Day Gerre Hancock

* *The First Nowell* arr. David Willcocks

A Ceremony of Carols Benjamin Britten

1. *Procession*

2. *Wolcum Yole!*

3. *There is no Rose*

4a. *That yongë child*

Megan McFadden, treble 2

4b. *Balulalow*

Maura Caldwell, treble 1

5. *As des in Aprille*

6. *This little Babe*

7. *Interlude*

8. *In freezing winter night*

Erin Swanson, treble 1

Megan McFadden, treble 2

9. *Spring carol*

Katherine Akinkas, treble 1

Rebecca Thornburgh, treble 2

10. *Deo gratias*

11. *Recession*

Coline-Marie Orliac, harp

* *O Come, All Ye Faithful* John Francis Wade

Songs of Sweet Accord Donald St. Pierre

1. *Albion*

2. *Innocent Sounds*

3. *Captain Kidd*

4. *More Love*

5. *Soldier's Return*

6. *Interlude*

7. *Distress / Flower*
 8a. *Backslider* Cory O'Neill Walker, tenor
 8b. *Columbus* Daniel Matarazzo, tenor
 9. *Contrite Heart* Cory O'Neill Walker, tenor
 Daniel Matarazzo, tenor
 10. *Ninety-third Psalm* Coline-Marie Orliac, harp
- * *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!* Felix Mendelssohn
Three Carols Donald St. Pierre
premiere
- * 1. *Ben Jonson's Carol*
 2. *The Cherry-Tree Carol*
 3. *Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day*
- * *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day* John Baptiste Calkin
A Visit From St. Nicholas Donald St. Pierre
Sleep, Little Baby, Sleep Robert S. Cohen
premiere
- * *Joy to the World* Lowell Mason
Christmas Lullaby arr. Donald St. Pierre
- * *Silent Night* Franz Gruber

Alan Harler, conductor
 Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia
 Michael Stairs, organ
 The Mendelssohn Brass

Sunday, December 11, 2010
 4:30 & 7:30 pm
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church
 Chestnut Hill

* The audience is invited to join in the singing of these carols.

The use of recording or photographic equipment during this concert is strictly prohibited. Please turn off audible cell phones and alarms.

PROGRAM NOTES

This year Mendelssohn Club celebrates the 15th anniversary of Donald St. Pierre as composer-in-residence, and these concerts not only feature the premiere of *Three Carols*, a new commission from St. Pierre, but also reprises of two of his most popular works, the beautiful *Songs of Sweet Accord* and the last year's favorite, *A Visit From St. Nicholas*. And as part of this season's experiments in audience engagement, the audience will participate in the performance of *Three Carols*, as well as joining the chorus in some traditional carol favorites.

Acclaimed organist and composer Gerre Hancock served as Organist and Master of Choristers at the prestigious St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue in New York for more than thirty years. He has been on the faculties of the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music, The Juilliard School, Yale University and the Eastman School of Music and is currently Professor of Organ and Sacred Music at the University of Texas at Austin. *Introit for a Feast Day* is a brilliant fanfare for chorus, brass and organ.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) was an extraordinarily precocious composer who began to write music at the age of five, produced his first major work at fourteen and studied privately with Frank Bridge as a teen. Prospects for a composer in the 1930's were somewhat limited, and after graduation from the Royal College of Music, Britten found himself scoring documentaries produced by the British Post Office. This brought him into contact with the poet W. H. Auden, who was similarly employed in writing the narration. Despondent over the prospects of a career in music and the growing threat of war in Europe (Britten was active in the pacifist movement), he followed Auden to America in 1939, settling in Long Island.



His creativity was revitalized in America, composing important works including his *Violin Concerto* and the orchestral *Sinfonia da Requiem*, but his sense of patriotism and British identity eventually drew him back to England in 1942. It was while on shipboard en route to England that he composed the *Ceremony of Carols*, set for treble voices and harp. The first performance was given with a women's chorus in December, 1942.

Britten selected texts based on medieval English carols and Elizabethan poetry. He conceived of the work as a ceremony, opening and closing with processionals set to the plainsong chant for the Christmas vespers mass, *Hodie Christus natus est* (today Christ is born), thematic material which he also used in the harp interlude.

Despite the limited forces at his disposal, Britten achieves an impressive range of color and textures, making effective use of unison, canon and homophonic singing with varied and imaginative writing for the harp. After the processional, an exuberant *Wolcume Yole* greets the Christmas season, including the feast days of saints celebrated between Christmas and the New Year, Epiphany (Twelfth Day) and Candlemass, the feast of the purification

of Mary. *There is no Rose* is a macaronic carol, one which mixes English and Latin text, the Latin adding affirmation or commentary to the English text. Britten sets the English in close harmony and the Latin in a chant-like unison. *Balulalow* has a harmonic structure that alternates between major and minor keys at each measure. The name is a Scottish word for lullaby, and the text is a paraphrase of verses from Martin Luther's carol *Vom Himmel Hoch* (From Heaven Above).

Two of the most dramatic sections have texts by Robert Southwell (1561-1595), a Jesuit priest and poet who defied Queen Elizabeth's ban on English Catholic priests returning to Britain and was eventually captured, tortured and executed. In *This little Babe*, he contrasts a helpless infant with martial images of the battle against evil. Britten sets this masterfully, with a suitably martial harp accompaniment, building intensity at each verse by moving from unison to a two-part and then a three-part canon. In *freezing winter's night* contrasts the baby Jesus's mean accommodations and the regal accoutrements they represent. Britten heightens the feeling of austerity and cold with harp tremolos and with the increasingly wide intervals sung at the beginning of each phrase. A joyful *Deo gracias*, with its syncopated rhythms celebrating the fall of Adam, without which there would be no Christmas, provides a balance to the opening *Wolcum Yole*, and the work concludes with the opening plainsong chant now serving as a recessional.

Donald St. Pierre's *Songs of Sweet Accord*, set for men's voices and harp, was commissioned and premiered in 1996 as a counterpart for Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*. St. Pierre has been on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music since 1990. He previously 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.



J. L. Shipman

St. Pierre provided these notes for the premier performance: "*Songs of Sweet Accord* is a cycle of settings of American folk-hymns. A 'cycle' because it tells a story of sort. 'Settings' because I prefer that word to one like 'arrangements.' I think it conjures up a jeweler's task: cutting and polishing something given and placing it where one hopes its inherent beauty is more readily apparent. The texts for *Songs of Sweet Accord* are in a sequence moving from the establishment of music as a good, through unreflecting enthusiasm, doubt, petition and grace. I avoided seasonal texts, and hoped to avoid sectarian ones, looking for those it seemed to me anyone thoughtful might enjoy contemplating."

American folk-hymns represent some of the first music written in America, and there is a simple, unaffected, and straightforward quality to them which is both heartfelt and engaging. Composers like William Billings and Jeremiah

Ingalls, who is represented here, were extremely influential, and their music, instructional materials and hymnals were widely disseminated. While this style eventually fell out of favor, replaced by a more sophisticated, European model, it lived on in music of the sacred harp and shape note traditions in the South. In shape note notation, notes of different pitches are represented with different shaped noteheads, a method meant to make music more accessible to singers who lacked more formal musical training. Ingalls' 1805 hymnbook *The Christian Harmony* helped popularize not only the shape note method but also the inclusion of folk melodies as settings for sacred texts.

St. Pierre does a masterful job of selecting moving texts and capturing the various moods of the individual hymns. *Innocent Sounds* and *Soldier's Return* are spirited and exuberant, with St. Pierre deliberately accentuating misplaced word accents. The exotically-named *Captain Kidd* has an unusual meter which matches that of the famous pirate ballad. The beautiful text is set with a long, sinuous melody in close three-part harmony, the three lines weaving in and out of each other. The jewel-like *More Love* features a counter-melody gently laid on top of a lush harmonization. Two of the most introspective hymns, *Distress* and *Contrite Heart*, have texts by the poet and hymnist Anne Steele (1716-1778). She was left an invalid following a hip injury at age 19; two years later her fiancé accidentally drowned the day before they were to be wed. She never married, and many of her hymns have an understandable air of melancholy.

St. Pierre's *A Visit from St. Nicholas* was premiered at last year's holiday concerts. The text is taken from the poem better known by its first line, "*'Twas the Night Before Christmas*." First published anonymously in a Troy, New York newspaper in 1823, it was instantly popular and widely reprinted. It has formed the basis of what has now become our traditional image of Santa Claus, with a sleigh full of toys drawn by reindeer, flying through the sky on Christmas Eve to fill children's stockings with presents. In 1837 the poem was finally attributed to Clement Moore, a distinguished professor of Hebrew and Greek at Columbia College and New York's General Theological Seminary, and Moore himself included it in an 1844 anthology of his poetry. There is some scholarly controversy over the authorship; certainly Moore's other children's poetry is of a distinctly stern and edifying nature. Regardless of authorship, this wonderfully whimsical poem has enthralled children and adults alike for generations. St. Pierre says that "the music for *A Visit from St. Nicholas* was inspired in part by *Jolly Old St. Nicholas*, the Pachelbel canon of carols." He is alluding to the observation that the harmonic pattern for *Jolly Old St. Nicholas* is identical to that of Pachelbel's famous *Canon in D*, both of which make their appearance in St. Pierre's delightful setting, which captures both the beautiful descriptive elements, the drama, and most of all, the whimsy of the original poem.

Three Carols receives its premier at these performances. St. Pierre has turned to three traditional English carols, which he presents in three different formats. *Ben Jonson's Carol* is set as a traditional carol with a four-part harmonization. The audience is invited to participate in this premier by joining in singing the fourth verse, the music for which is printed in the program

booklet. An actor, playwright and poet, Jonson was a sometime employer of Shakespeare the actor and a rival of Shakespeare the playwright. He enjoyed the patronage of King James I and wrote numerous masques and entertainments for the royal court. The text for his eponymous carol was taken from his 1640 collection of poetry *Underwood*.

The Cherry-Tree Carol dates from the early 15th century and is associated with the mystery plays presented at Coventry. It is a most unusual carol, incorporating three separate stories. The story of the cherry tree bending down its fruit-laden branches to Mary is probably derived from one of the apocryphal gospels written in the Middle Ages purporting to relate the story of Jesus' childhood, but it also provides a counterpoint to the story of Adam and the fall of man. St. Pierre's imaginative setting features long, chant-like unison lines in which the voice parts are continually combined and recombined. The words of the baby Jesus are set in three-part harmony for the women's voices.

Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day was first published in 1833 but is thought to be much older. Jesus recounts the story of his life, using the metaphor of life as a dance. While this may seem like a modern idea, it was a popular medieval conceit. The reference to "the legend of my play" suggests that this carol, like *The Cherry-Tree Carol* may have been performed in the context of a masque or play. St. Pierre sets this as a lively and somewhat breathless dance.

Christmas in 1864 held little joy for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The Civil War raged on, his eldest son had been severely wounded in battle, and his wife had tragically died in a household fire. Yet Longfellow was able to write *Christmas Bells*, a remarkable poem of hope and affirmation, and whose words still resonate with us today.

Robert S. Cohen has written music for orchestra, chamber ensemble, dance and theatre. He has been the recipient of many awards and commissions, including a New Jersey State Council on the Arts Fellowship, an American Music Center Grant, a Meet the Composer Award and several grants from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and was the selected winner of the 2008 N.Y. Composer's Circle Award. He co-authored the book and composed the score for the 2000 Richard Rodgers Award winning Off-Broadway musical *Suburb. Sleep, Little Baby, Sleep* is a beautiful lullaby set to an equally beautiful text by the nineteenth century English poet Christina Georgina Rossetti.

We may be surprised to think of singer and actress Peggy Lee as a songwriter, but she published nearly 200 songs, provided songs for a number of movies, and composed the complete vocal score for the animated Disney feature *Lady and the Tramp*. Her simple and touching *Christmas Lullaby* was a collaboration with Tony Award-winning composer Cy Coleman, and is heard here in a choral arrangement by Donald St. Pierre.

– Michael Moore