

Music and the Christmas story have long gone hand in hand. In the medieval era, the tale came to life through poignantly simple plainchant and rhythmically charged carols. Renaissance composers used music in a more patently dramatic way, interweaving new textures and timbres to bring out emotional nuances. And in the baroque era, composers took these techniques to even greater extremes. The music in this program comes from all of these points in history, highlighting the unique features of each era while bringing out the common narrative that unites them. The intensely personal emotions of the Virgin Mary, the archetypal story of the Magi guided by a star, the wondrous contradiction implicit in the Son of God lying in a manger—each work lends a distinct voice to the musical retelling of the Christmas story.

In the simplest musical genres, the text says it all. Plainchant, the tradition of monophonic (or single melody) singing that flourished in the medieval era and survives to this day, is the earliest type of music associated with Christmas—most commonly in services like the Mass and Divine Offices. The early Christian hymn *Te Deum laudamus* was appropriate to many important days in the liturgical calendar, and is still frequently used in worship today. The Italian *lauda* began life in the late medieval era as a type of sacred vernacular song, and gradually evolved into multi-part music. Because of their simplicity—which O *Maria diana stella* and *Ecco il Messia* demonstrate laudably—*laude* became extremely popular during the Counter-Reformation, a time when the desire to understand and project text took center stage. Michael Praetorius's setting of Martin Luther's 1524 chorale, *Christus wir sollen loben schon* (which is itself an adaptation of an early Latin hymn, "A solis artus cardine"), might have been used as a processional in the Lutheran Mass.

Around the turn of the seventeenth century—especially in Venice—composers marshaled all available resources to create high musical drama, particularly with contrasting timbres and textures. The works of Giovanni Gabrieli and Giovanni Bassano, both significant figures in music at St. Mark's Cathedral during that period, provide a good example. In Bassano's *Hodie Christus natus est* and Gabrieli's *Audite principes* and *O magnum mysterium*, multiple choirs alternate in impressive masses of sound, and must have showed off the cavernous church to great advantage. Composed a decade or two later, Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi's five-voice motet, *Exultent caeli*, uses this *concertato* style in an even more heterogeneous way, mixing choral, solo, and trio throughout the tribute to the Virgin Mary. In contrast, Monteverdi's two-voice motet, *Venite, siccientes*—with a text based on Isaiah 55:1—is striking in its gentleness. Seventeenth-century German composers Heinrich Schütz (who studied with Gabrieli) and Samuel Scheidt rely on these contrasts as well in their respective settings of Psalm 150 and *Angelus ad pastores ait*.

Other Christmas tunes have more secular roots. According to some accounts, the carol may have begun life as part of the pagan celebration of the winter solstice. Although it was gradually appropriated by Christians, the genre retained its rhythmic energy as the term itself came to define a song consisting of a burden (or refrain) alternating with a series of verses. Like many carols, *Nowell sing we, both all and some*, is macaronic, or set in two languages—in this case English and Latin. *In dulci jubilo*, known most popularly today as "Good Christian Men, Rejoice" and here set by seventeenth-century composer Hieronymus Praetorius (no relation to his more famous countryman, Michael Praetorius), is another example of a macaronic carol.

Although composers didn't begin writing music specifically intended for instruments alone until the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, brass instruments add a special panache to holiday storytelling. With their associations of wealth and grandeur, brass instruments were frequently used in churches and courts as musical "decoration." In Germany, the trumpet had such an exalted status that players were required to become members of an exclusive guild in order to play the instrument, and received many special privileges and higher salaries as a result. Johann Vierdanck's *Capriccio* for 3 cornetti showcases the brilliance that was expected from these musicians. The Italian master Gabrieli's canzonas and sonatas for brass use carefully notated dynamics and instrumentation along with spatially separated groups of instruments in order to create early modern stereophonic effects. His student Hans Leo Hassler achieved a similar result in his *Canzon noni toni*.