

# Program Notes

## by David Hoose

For hundreds of years, composers have found myriad ways to evoke the astounding mystery of Christmas. Few, however, have captured the event's unique strangeness as vividly as the Renaissance composer Jacobus Gallus Handl did in his five-voice motet ***Mirabile mysterium***. This is quietly cataclysmic music—as if order and knowledge were being discovered anew. Even more disorienting than Lassus's visionary *Prophetiae sibyllarum*, the disquieting harmonic turns of Handl's motet, while following the accepted practices of 16<sup>th</sup>-century voice-leading, anticipate those of Ralph Vaughan Williams' music.

Handl, or Gallus (it is unclear what his real name was), was born in Carniola, part of the Habsburg lands. He worked in Bohemia, was a member of the Viennese court chapel, and was choirmaster to the bishop of Olmütz, now part of the Czech Republic. Although his musical output was enormous—including 374 sacred motets and 20 masses—relatively little of it is as convention-shattering as *Mirabile mysterium*.

Heinrich Schütz's collection of forty motets, *Cantiones sacrae*, represents the pinnacle of 17<sup>th</sup>-century expressive counterpoint. The texts of the collection were drawn from a 1553 prayer book of Andreas Musculus, a German Lutheran theologian who was part of the Protestant Reformation. The motets, all for four unaccompanied voices, were written for private devotion, and many of their texts and consequent musical intensity make them best suited to the meditations of Lent. A few, however, including the bittersweet ***Dulcissime et benignissime Christe*** (as well as *Supereminet omnem scientiam*, sung by Cantata Singers in the 2017-18 concert season), are appropriate to the season of Christmas.

The motet's intimate bearing arises from a language in which individual, yearning lines, often reaching beyond their anticipated destinations, create a penetrating chromaticism. While the harmonic motion in Handl's *Mirabile mysterium* is at times jarring, the chromaticism of *Dulcissime benignissime Christe* is poignant and coherent, and the motet manages to speak both inwardly and outwardly. The astonishing motets of *Cantiones sacrae* were Schütz's first-published sacred work. For all of the enormous breadth and depth of his compositional output over the next nearly fifty years, these motets searching, personal expression would never be surpassed.

Giovanni Gabrieli, student of Orlande de Lassus and teacher of Heinrich Schütz, set the standard for Venetian polychoral music. Today, our image of his music may be of majestic gatherings of brass instruments playing loudly at each other across cavernous spaces. While it is true that his music has grandeur, the late 16<sup>th</sup>-century idea of loud was surely quieter than today's, and even a modest group of voices could provide the requisite splendor. It was in the marriage of public expression and

contemplative texts that Gabrieli found his deepest musical voice, one never more exquisite than in his double-chorus motet ***O magnum mysterium***.

One of the motet's two four-voice choruses is pitched high—two sopranos, alto, and high bass—as if sung from heaven. The other, for low voices—alto, two tenors, and bass—responds from below. The high and low often call toward each other, but it is their refined and graceful interweaving that generates the most impressive warmth. The musical language here, too, is chromatic, although more understated than Schütz's and certainly subtler than Handl's. A rhythmically captivating Alleluia interrupts the rich dialogue, and it catapults back and forth between the two choruses until all join together in a spacious close.



Dieterich Buxtehude, whose music the twenty-year old J.S. Bach considered so important that he walked(!) 250 miles “to comprehend one thing and another about his art,” was renowned, and is known today, primarily as a composer of works for organ. But his large body of sacred vocal music is also impressive, including a wide array of concertos with voice, arias and cantatas.

His tender ***In dulci jubilo***, for three voices, two violins, and continuo, sets a macaronic text—the intermingling of two languages—from the Middle Ages. The gracious tune on which it is based has appealed to many composers, from Praetorius and Bach (who based several works on the melody), to Liszt and Holst. Buxtehude's own response to the text is pastoral and reflective, a four-verse jewel that flows with nuanced simplicity. The second and third verses bring subtle changes, but little hints of the glittering joy of angels that breaks forth in the last verse, before this little cantata comes to a wistful and modest close.

The miniature oratorio ***Das neugeborne Kindelein***, based on lyrics from 1597 by Cyriakus Schneegass, a Protestant pastor in Thuringia, is for slightly larger forces than *In dulci jubilo*: four voices, three violins, cello (or bassoon), bass, and organ. Although in one movement, its contrasting sections make the work feel larger than its modest dimensions might suggest. Like *In dulci jubilo*, this is youthful, open-hearted music, and its declamatory style is particularly engaging.



William Byrd, student of Thomas Tallis and teacher of Thomas Morley, Peter Philips and Thomas Tomkins, was one of the most prolific and gifted composers of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. His compositions—nearly 500 inventive and sophisticated works for solo voices, harpsichord, virginal, viol consort (some with voice), and chorus—virtually defined English music of his day, and his influence can be heard in British music for hundreds of years after. Byrd was Catholic, so many of his vocal works are in Latin, but he also composed music in English, designed for Anglican services.

Byrd's four-voice motet ***Vidimus stellam*** imaginatively captures the image of

the magi traveling from the East, following the star, to bring gifts for the baby Jesus. Most of the vocal lines flow horizontally, but the octave leap, first in the top part and then in the bass, graphically depicts the heavens' startling light. Byrd's song for voice and viol consort ***Out of the Orient Crystal Skies***—here arranged for voice and string quartet—is peculiar in its unusual leaps (“crystal skies,” the first among them), asymmetrical phrase lengths, and quick shifts in tonality. The song's touching lightheartedness reaches a peak in the final, giddy measures.

Byrd's ***Fantasia in G***, was originally for harpsichord, as found in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*. It is heard here for string quartet, violone, and organ. When played on harpsichord, the music becomes more adventurous as it progresses, its initial dignity gradually set aside by a volatile capriciousness. In this version for six instruments, the quickening momentum sounds increasingly modern, as if Benjamin Britten had somehow snuck in. ***Surge, illuminare, Jerusalem***, also for four unaccompanied voices, sweeps by with an irresistible exhilaration, with the Alleluias toward the end rising in wide-eyed wonder.



Henry Purcell's Italianate verse anthem ***O Sing Unto the Lord*** is for strings, continuo, four soloists, and four-part chorus. Like Buxtehude's *Das neugeborne Kindelein*, it is in one movement divided into sections, but here with a design both grander and more intricate. Solos, duets and quartets abut florid choral passages, and lilting instrumental *ritornelli* separate the music into its large sections. The tone is both celebratory and contemplative, and the final Alleluias glide to the end with uncommon gentleness. This is both detailed and spacious music whose poignant acidity ties it to the English heritage of Byrd, while hinting at a path for Vaughan Williams, Bax, Holst, Britten, and Maxwell Davies, three centuries later.

The far less familiar Robert Parsons, a contemporary and acquaintance of William Byrd, composed a large and excellent body of Anglican music. But his Latin setting of ***Ave Maria*** may most clearly reveal his heart, and it is the music likely known today. With graceful restraint, the vocal lines of this *Ave Maria* arch gently against each other, the highest of the five voices gradually rising to the top before nestling back into the plush texture. In the hands of Handl, Schütz, Gabrieli, Byrd, or even Purcell, dissonance could be sharp-edged. But in Parsons' music, dissonance becomes malleable, less overt than suggested, less startling than caressing. When the “amen” emerges—one voice at a time—it unfurls expansively, gliding to a close with entrancing compassion.