

PROGRAM NOTES

Our concert, “Narození Pána Krista” (The birth of the Lord Christ), is a bit of a potpourri, offering mainly seasonal music from three lands, England, Bohemia, and Germany. The title comes from one of the Czech songs on the program, *Opět jiná o Narození Pána Krista*. All of the pieces were composed during the 16th and 17th centuries with one notable exception, a 21st-century piece in debut by the English composer, Joel Rust, presently at NYU and a member of the Teares! In our world of multiple crises, let’s enjoy a brief respite listening to music written by men no less stressed by the stark realities that pressed in on them as they created works of great beauty. Perhaps for an hour the music will bring us closer to understanding the meaning of “peace on earth.”

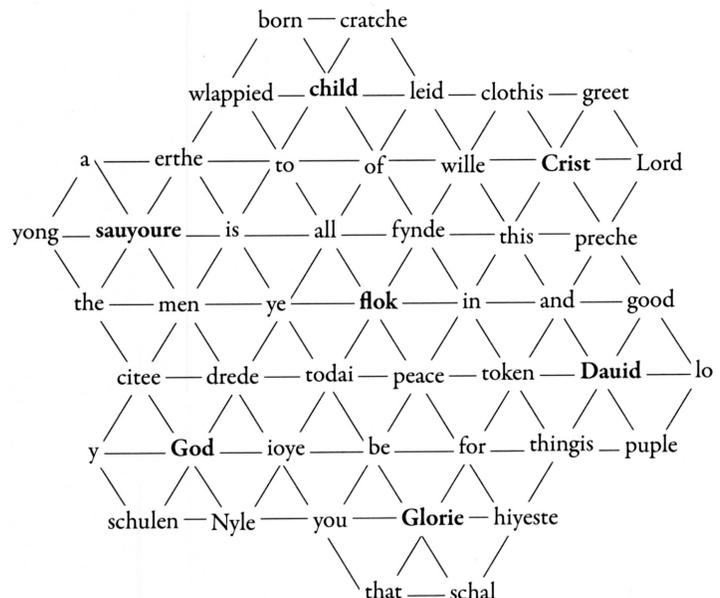
The English viol fantasies by Matthew Locke, John Philips, and Orlando Gibbons stand years apart in their dates of composition. In fact, Locke’s birth c. 1621 falls close to the others’ death dates. And yet, all three fantasies adhere to the definition offered by the composer Christopher Simpson in 1667, who emphasizes the freedom and variety of the genre: “In this sort of Musick the Composer ... doth employ all his Art and Invention about the bringing in and carrying on of ... Fuges.... When he has tryed all the several ways which he thinks fit to be used therein; he takes some other point, and does the like with it: or else, for variety, introduces some Chromatick Notes ... or what else his fancy should lead him to....”

Matthew Locke worked for Charles II as organist and principal composer. His *Flatt Consorts* “for my cousin Kemble” are multi-movement dance numbers with extra fantasies to give the performer a choice in fashioning a customized suite. Locke’s long career writing stage music undoubtedly contributed to the operatic flair of these consort pieces. True to the title, the *Flatt Consorts* are in flat keys. They are also exceptionally chromatic: observe these stepwise notes, taken from an ascending treble line in the Courant: G, A, B^b, B[♮], C, D, E^b, E[♮], F, F[♯], G, A^b.

John Dowland’s consort song *In this trembling shadow* appears in his final publication, *A Pilgrimes Solace*. More than any of his contemporaries, Dowland wallowed in the fashionable melancholia of the day—even writing a viol pavan whose title is a pun on his own name: *Semper Dowland, semper dolens* (always Dowland, always doleful). He had some cause: he failed to land the coveted job of lutenist at Queen Elizabeth’s court and subsequently worked abroad for many years. The delicate pastoral poetry of the first two verses culminates in the third verse in which the composer admits that no music can entirely evoke God’s mighty power.

For maximum variety, we have paired **Peter Philips’s** serene fantasy, *Trio de la troisesme mode*, with a lively fantasy by Orlando Gibbons. Philips led an unsettled life after being exiled from England for his Catholic beliefs. He worked in Flanders and Italy, and eventually in Brussels as organist at the chapel of Albert VII, Archduke of Austria. After his wife’s death, he was ordained a priest. The original Frankfurt publication from 1615 contains the interesting spelling, “troisesme,” and the mode is Dorian. **Orlando Gibbons’s** *Third fantasy* from his set of nine *Royal Fantasies* is a masterful example of elegant, tightly overlapping counterpoint. He plays one voice against the others through sections bursting with quick scales and leaping eighth notes. Then a sudden calm delights and surprises players and listeners alike. At the height of his career, Gibbons served King James I as Gentleman of the Chapel Royal until his sudden death at age forty-one.

Joel Rust, born in 1989 in London, wrote *Flock* for the Teares of the Muses, and specifically for this concert. He describes his own compositions as encompassing “kaleidoscopic textures, disintegrating mechanical systems, and a rich harmonic language that draws on spectralism, jazz, and the English pastoral school.” *Flock’s* text comes directly from Luke 2:10-14 in John Wycliffe’s translation. But the order of the words changes for every performance. The singer begins at the center of the Christmas star on the word “flok” and expands from there, following adjacent lines anywhere on the grid. *Flock* dwells on the mystery of that night—the shepherds’ fear and awe in the face of a revelation. And the sheep are ever present, rustling about within the flock.



Adam Václav Michna z Otradovic, commonly known as Adam Michna, came from an aristocratic family of musicians, many of them trumpeters. Michna spent almost his entire life in his home town of Jindřichův Hradec, in northern Bohemia near Prague. In addition to his musical career as organist and choir director, the wealthy Michna also ran a successful wine business. The five **Advent and Christmas carols** are from his *Česká Mariánska Musika* (Czech Music for the Virgin Mary), published in 1647. He composed the simple strophic songs to meet the needs of both (in his own words) “accomplished musicians in noble cities and humble cantors in the smallest towns.” The lovely melodies with three accompanying parts are set to his own expressively flamboyant poetry. The carols became instant hits that traveled beyond the confines of the church to be reprinted in later songbooks. Some grew immensely popular as folksongs. The first song in the first Czech set is an Advent carol, and the four that follow celebrate Jesus’ birth. The Teares of the Muses delights in the interpretive freedom allowed by baroque performance practice, adding its own floridly ornamented instrumental verses and percussion accompaniment.

The carol *K Ježíškovi miláčkovi* (To my beloved little Jesus), played on the treble viol, introduces the Bohemian composer **Vačláv Karel Holan Rovenský**. Born in Rovensko in northern Bohemia not far from Prague, he grew up in a Moravian Brethren (Protestant) family but converted to Catholicism when he attended the Jesuit school in Jičín. He held several posts as an organist and teacher in various towns near his native Rovensko. His greatest contribution is the valuable anthology, *Capella Regia Musicalis*, of 1693, which contains a huge variety of secular and sacred music from medieval songs to secular cantatas and pastorales. *Veselým hlasem zpívejme* (Let us sing with joyous voices), played instrumentally, is from the hymnal *Slaviček Rajský* of 1719 by the priest **Jan Josef Bozan**. It is written in a syncopated, earlier Renaissance style. Although the tune and harmony are simple, the lively rhythmic pattern is irresistible.

A few pieces by **Michael Praetorius** alternate with the Czech songs. He was not a Bohemian but came from German Thuringia. A devout Lutheran, the esteemed musician, theorist, and organist wrote an extraordinary amount of varied music during his forty-nine years, much of it sacred. The immensely popular “In dulce júbilo” tune with its German/Latin macaronic text was composed by the medieval Dominican mystic Heinrich Seuse. Even though we perform two verses on viols alone, the text would be translated somewhat loosely as follows: “In sweet rejoicing, now sing and be glad! Our hearts’ joy lies in the manger; and it shines like the sun in the mother’s lap. You are the alpha and omega!”

We pair the *Fantasia* from **Johann Michael Nicolai’s Sonata in C Major** with his affecting *Ciaconi adagio* from his *Sonata in A Minor*. Written for three bass viols and continuo, the pieces’ unusually low-pitched *tessitura* is plausibly explained by Nicolai’s profession as a double-bass player in the Stuttgart court orchestra. Moreover, the use of multiple bass viols was much favored in 17th-century Germany. In the *Fantasia*, the viols enter one at a time with rhetorical flourishes before joining together in rollicking, paired phrases. The chaconne, a set of variations in triple-meter over an *ostinato* bass, was a favorite model throughout Europe. Although purely instrumental, Nicolai’s piece resembles a vocal lamentation as the four-tone, descending minor scale repeats over and over—a motif frequently heard in 17th-century dramatic music where it is invariably associated with tragic outcomes.

The chorale *Vater unser im Himmelreich* is followed by settings of it by **Samuel Scheidt**, the distinguished composer and organist from the German town of Halle. The settings come from his monumental keyboard collection, *Tabulatura Nova*, of 1624. The chorale uses the text of The Lord’s Prayer as paraphrased by Martin Luther and is liturgically appropriate for any time during the Church Year, including Christmas. First we hear the chorale tune alone. Then the organ plays the second rendition, which has the chorale tune in the top line, the three-part texture made up of virtuosic figuration in the two lines that accompany the slow-moving melody. In tried-and-true baroque fashion, we have adapted the perfectly suited keyboard writing of the third piece to fit our instrumentation. The chorale tune is in the tenor line, doubled by the voice at the octave, as the accompanying viols play lyrical melodies of their own around it.

Samuel Capricornus, whose piece could have fit just as easily in the program’s Bohemian set, led a short and rather dreary existence that began in Bohemia; his family soon fled to Hungary to escape persecution and the devastation of the Thirty Years War. He held various posts in Germany, eventually attaining the prestigious appointment of Kapellmeister to the Württemberg court at Stuttgart. The text of the Christmas ode, *Adesto multitudo*, from Capricornus’s *Theatrum Musicum*, is in flowery Latin; the piece shows strong Italian influence reminiscent of the music of Giacomo Carissimi, his idol. The scoring for treble and bass viols to accompany the soprano soloist is anachronistic, and a decidedly German choice. What better way to end this holiday concert than on a burst of cheerful “Noés.”

—Margaret Panofsky