

I. OVERTURE

We hear the voice of John the Baptist in the distance singing the ancient hymn, *Veni Domine* — “O Come, Lord, and visit us in peace: that we may rejoice in Thy presence with a perfect heart.”

A long introduction follows, with several Advent melodies superimposed on one another: *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence; Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus; Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying; and O Come, Emmanuel.*

II. TEMPLE SCENE

The priest, Zechariah, intones verses from Psalm 141: “O Lord, I cry unto Thee.” It is the hour of the incense offering. The chorus sings verses from Psalm 80: *Hear, O Shepherd of Israel.* It is a plea for the Lord to turn his anger away from the people of Israel and cause His face to shine on them in their distress.

The angel Gabriel appears and tells Zechariah that his prayer has been heard: “Your wife, Elizabeth, shall bear you a son, and you shall call him John; he will bring back the people of Israel to the Lord, and he shall be great. He will prepare the way for the Messiah.”

Zechariah is doubtful: “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is very old.”

Gabriel answers: “I am Gabriel and have been sent to you to bring you this news. Since you do not believe me, you will be struck dumb until what I have said comes true.”

III. The ANNUNCIATION

The angel Gabriel appears to Mary saying “Hail, Most Favor’d One! The Lord is with you!” He tells her that she will conceive a son, and his name will be Jesus. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his Kingdom shall have no end.

Mary replies, "How can this be? I am a virgin!" We hear the voice of John singing the ancient hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus (Come, Holy Spirit)* as Gabriel answers: "The Holy Spirit will come to you and the power of the Most High shall enter into you." Mary answers, "I am the Servant of the Lord; let it be according to His Word." The choir joins Mary in singing *Come, Holy Spirit, Our Souls Inspire* and the hymn, *Come, Holy Spirit, Heav'nly Dove!*

IV. The VISITATION

Mary is visited by her cousin, Elizabeth, who tells of her joy at the news that Mary will give birth to the Messiah. She tells Mary that the child in her own womb leapt for joy at the news.

V. The MAGNIFICAT

Mary sings, "My Soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour." As she sings, Elizabeth and the chorus sing, "Ave Maria, gratia plena! (Hail, Mary, full, of grace!)."

In response to the people's pleading in the temple, God has delivered his people, Israel, as was promis'd to Abraham and Sarah and their children forever.

VI. EPILOGUE

The children's chorus joins John in singing, *O Welcome, Lord!* and the chorus sings a more contemporary variation of *O Come, Emmanuel*; John sings "Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to Thee, O Israel."

VII. FINALE

All the soloists and choirs join in singing *O Come, All Ye Faithful*.

Program Notes

Benjamin Britten, whose birth centenary we celebrate, wrote *A Ceremony of Carols* in the spring of 1942 while on board a Swedish cargo vessel en route to the United Kingdom from the United States, where he had lived since 1939. He had obtained a volume of early English poetry when the ship called at Halifax, Nova Scotia and, “to alleviate the boredom” aboard the “miserable” vessel, he wrote these charming settings of medieval carols for treble voices and harp. After the premiere of the cycle, Britten made provision for piano accompaniment and an arrangement for full chorus, which is the version we perform this afternoon.

My Advent cantata was commissioned by Union Theological Seminary in New York City to honor its 150th anniversary. It received its first performance at the seminary on December 9, 1986. Today's performance is only the second presentation. I have made a few revisions and written a new ending, an arrangement of *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, which brings together all of the solo singers and chorus.

It is said that choral music consists of Christmas music and everything else. Although this a bit of an exaggeration, it is certainly true that the Christmas season is when choral groups always perform. Within the vast choral literature celebrating this important time in the Christian calendar, however, there are hardly any works having to do with the Advent story. I have attempted to fill this void, taking as my text most of the first chapter of the Gospel According to Luke, and weaving many traditional Advent hymns into the music.

— Thomas Beveridge