Music for Christmas Eve from Journey to Bethlehem: 17th-century German Music for Advent and Christmas

This week's video features two selections by Michael Praetorius (1571-1621) from Journey to Bethlehem. While the full program also featured music by Dietrich Buxtehude and Melchior Vulpius (among others), Praetorius' music was at the heart of the concert. Praetorius was an extraordinarily prolific composer, particularly of liturgical music. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Praetorius' life was well-documented and his works unusually well-preserved, giving modern-day scholars and performers ample primary sources to inspire research and concert programs. Among Praetorius' most poignant and well-known surviving works are the pieces he composed for Advent and Christmas, including “Ein Kind geborn zu Bethlehem” and “In dulci jubilo.”

“Ein Kind geborn zu Bethlehem” (“A Child is born in Bethlehem”) is a festive, four-voiced motet performed here with a full complement of wind instruments by The Whole Noyse. The rather simplistic text tells an abridged version of the Christmas Story, with Jesus' birth, the stable animals, and the Adoration of the Magi mentioned in turn. Only in the final verse does the author’s Catholic sentiment reveal itself, with the line, “Wir loben die heilig Dreifaltigkeit/ Von nun an bis in Ewigkeit.” Translation: “We praise the Holy Trinity/ from now to eternity. Rejoice in the Lord. Alleluja.” Here, Praetorius' mastery of polyphony is on full display, with each voice's line simultaneously crystal clear and part of a greater, textural effect.

The second featured excerpt, “In dulci jubilo,” is Praetorius' setting of a 14th century tune originally composed by Dominican Friar and mystic Heinrich Seuse (d. 1366). The earliest extant version of the tune is in Codex 1305, a manuscript dated 1400 that now resides in Leipzig University. The tune spread throughout Europe during the 16th century, making appearances in both Lutheran and Catholic hymn collections. Praetorius returned to the tune again and again, arranging “In dulci jubilo” for 2, 3, 4, and 5 voices, and a host of even more elaborate settings, including multi-choral arrangements with large instrumental ensembles attached. The hymn, with the image of Jesus in the manger at its center, was clearly of some special significance to Praetorius and his public. The version featured on this program begins with an all-instrumental version of the tune, then the soprano, alto, and tenor taking turns with a solo verse before the full quartet of singers joins with the instrumental ensemble to give voice to the final, jubilant lines:

"Joys are there
As in no other place
There the angels sing
New songs,
And the bells ring out
In the court of the king:
O that we were there!"

We hope you enjoy this week’s special Christmas iteration of #NCGreatPerformances! Wishing you all the best for a happy and safe holiday season. We’ll be back on January 1st with a special New Year’s release featuring Artistic Co-Directors Ellen Hargis and David Douglass with acclaimed lutenist Paul O’Dette! Check out newberryconsort.org for the full list of upcoming virtual events and a link to the #NCGreatPerformances playlist.

These program notes were composed by Hannah De Priest as a companion to #NCGreatPerformances Vol. 25.