

YORK

EARLY MUSIC
CHRISTMAS
FESTIVAL

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National Centre for Early Music

THE ILLYRIA CONSORT

Bojan Čičić *violin*

Steven Devine *organ, harpsichord*

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HOW BRIGHTLY SHINES THE MORNING STAR

Capriccio fatto sopra la Pastorale

Girolamo Frescobaldi

1583–1643

Sonata 'La Pastorella'

Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber

1644–1704

Mystery Sonata III in B minor,
'The Nativity'

Biber

Sonata-Presto

Courante-Double

Adagio

Wie schön leuchtet die Morgenstern

Dietrich Buxtehude

c.1637–1707

Variations on 'Wie schön leuchtet
die Morgenstern'

?Nicolaus Adam Strungk

1640–1700

Sonata VIII in G major
Largo-Andante-Largo
Allegro
Allegro
Largo

Giovanni Stefano Carbonelli
1699/1700–1773

Sonata 'Pastorale'
Adagio
Allegro
Largo-Presto-Andante

Giuseppe Tartini
1692–1770

Christmas in baroque times was a festival of light. In both Italian and German-speaking lands hundreds of candles were lit in churches during the dark, cold months of winter. In Germany there is still a tradition of illuminating windows and tables during the season of Advent and Christmas, using candle-holders decorated with wooden figurines of angels and pastoral characters. Some of these contraptions rotate with the heat of the candle flames, spinning in circles, with the tinkling of tiny bells. In eighteenth-century Venice torches would hang from the façades of the palaces and villas, and their light would shimmer and be reflected in the canals and lagunas of the city. The role of light was so much more significant than our well-lit twenty-first century eyes can ever hope to understand.

Our programme focuses on music inspired by this season of Advent, using melodies from chorales and musical representations of pastoral imagery tied to Christmas. We begin with Girolamo Frescobaldi, the greatest organist of his time, admired not only in Italy, but also abroad, especially in France and Germany. His *Capriccio fatto sopra la Pastorale* imitates the melodies played by the bagpipers of central-southern Italy during the Christmas period, a tradition still in existence today. The melody is sometimes accompanied by long notes, imitating drones of the bagpipes, and sometimes with trills, sounding like the Christmas bells.

Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber was among the most famous of the violin virtuosos of the seventeenth century. His *Sonata 'La Pastorella'* exists in manuscript form at the Minorite Monastery in Vienna and shares musical material with the *Sonata 'Pastorella'* for two violins composed by Biber's teacher Schmelzer. Whether this was a homage paid by Biber to his teacher, or whether both composers simply used musical motives that existed in folk tradition is not certain, but it is interesting that the same melody heard at the end of this sonata can be found in Biber's famous *Battalia*.

Biber's sonata 'The Nativity' is a very different take on the Christmas subject. It belongs to the Five Joyful Mysteries, which are, in turn, part of his most famous work for the violin, the Mystery Sonatas. These sonatas are meditations on important moments in the life of Christ or the Virgin Mary, using scordatura tuning (literally 'mis-tuning') of the violin in the most extraordinary way. Though this sonata depicts the birth of Christ, it is far removed from any pastoral calmness found elsewhere in this programme. Biber chooses a minor key and writes intense, dramatic music, as if to foreshadow the end of Christ's life by using here the same musical motives found later in the cycle, when Christ's is nearing the end of his life (the material at the end of this sonata is also heard in the Sonata X 'The Crucifixion').

Dietrich Buxtehude's choral fantasy is based on one of the best loved Lutheran chorales *Wie schön leuchtet die Morgenstern*, which tells of the star that guided the three wise men to find Jesus:

How brightly shines the morning star,
full of grace and truth from the Lord,
the sweet root of Jesse!
Thou son of David from the stem of Jacob,
my king and my bridegroom,
you have possessed my heart;
lovely, friendly, beautiful and great,
powerful and honourable, rich in gifts,
elevated, and rich in splendour.

The first two parts of Buxtehude's piece present the chorale melody, first in the bass and then in the soprano voice. The music then grows more complex, first into a fantasy and then a fugue based on the chorale melody. The last section is a brilliant finale, full of rapid notes.

Johann Gottfried's Walther's famous 1732 dictionary (*Musicalisches Lexicon*) contains an anecdote about an encounter between Nicolaus Adam Strungk and Arcangelo Corelli. To prove to Corelli that he was a musician, Strungk accompanied him on the harpsichord, and then demonstrated his ability on the violin. Upon hearing his virtuoso technique of double-stopping, Corelli was so amazed that he cried: 'Sir, if I am called Arcangelo, you should be called Arcidiavolo'. The variations on *Wie schön leuchtet die Morgenstern* is an extraordinary work, composed by someone worthy of the title that Corelli gave to Strungk that day.

Giovanni Stefano Carbonelli came to London in the 1720s from his native Italy and soon established himself as the leader of the band at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, leaving in 1728 to become a freelance musician. This was a year before the publication of his only surviving work, a set of twelve *Sonate da camera*. His Sonata VIII begins with a gentle pastorale-like Largo, complete with a bagpipe drone effect accompanying the top line, before moving on to the virtuosic Andante section. This is followed by a brisk allemanda and gavotte, and the sonata ends with the extended pastorale we heard at the beginning. The decision to number this sonata as the eighth is deliberate; Corelli's ever-popular concerto grosso 'fatto per la notte di Natale' is no. 8 in his opus of concerti grossi.

We finish the programme with Giuseppe Tartini's *Sonata 'Pastorale'*. The violin needs to be tuned in A-major scordatura tuning, with the bottom two strings tuned up a tone. This means that the violin reverberates in A major, with both bottom and top strings tuned to A and E, creating a sound that shares its brightness and light with the Advent season. The opening movement is an evocation of an idyllic

countryside, before embarking on a boisterous, march-like second movement. The last movement finishes in the same way as the Carbonelli sonata, with that familiar lilt of a pastorale and bagpipe drones, bringing this sonata – and this programme – to a calm and hopeful end.

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