

Christmas Music 2007

“And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all people of good will!”

[Luke 2:13-14, NRSV]

On December 16, 2007, the Jarvis Chancel Choir will present two very different works inspired by one of most colorful and memorable passages in all of scripture: the gathering of angels to celebrate Christ’s birth as told in the book of Luke.

8. x. c.

G Ló-ri-a in excélsis Dé- o. Et in tér-ra pax ho-
mí-nibus bó-nae vo-luntá-tis. Laudá-mus te. Benedí-cimus
te. Adorá-mus te. Glo-ri-fi-cá-mus te. Grá-ti-as
ágimus tí-bi propter má-gnam gló-ri-am tú-am. Dó-mi-

The early church considered the angel’s song to be God-given, the perfect song of praise. It was incorporated into Christian worship wherever Christians met. Initially it was sung in Greek, and to this day, Christians of the Greek Orthodox faith (who place much more emphasis on angels than western Christians), include the angel’s song in their catechism. So loved was this text that it, along with the words of institution and a declaration of faith or creed, became the central elements of any celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Each community added its own special elements to the angel’s song: here a declaration of faith, there a more expansive state of praise or words of contrition or a recognition of the Trinity. Ultimately, a specific group of texts became standardized, and the “Gloria” has become one of the few acts of worship shared by nearly all Christians: Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox.

While the Gloria is sung by Christians throughout the year, it has never lost its identification with Christmas. In fact, one of the earliest papal decrees (second century A.D.) required that the Gloria be sung at masses during the advent and Christmas season. It wasn't until the 4th century that the requirement was expanded to include masses throughout the year except during Lent.

Beginning with the Protestant Reformation, the Gloria, sung in the vernacular of the people, became a regular part of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Church of England began singing the Gloria in English as early as 1562 with publication of the first "Book of Common Prayer". For this reason, it was included in the Communion liturgy used by John Wesley from the beginning of his ministry.

In the full form of the United Methodist Communion service, the Gloria is sung by choir and congregation. You'll find it in your hymnal at #82. The text is as follows, beginning of course with the angel's song at Christ's birth:

Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace good will to all.
We praise Thee. We bless Thee. We worship Thee. We glorify Thee.
We give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory.

O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty.

O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us. Thou that takest away the sins of the world, receive our prayer. Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy upon us. For Thou only art holy. Thou only art the Lord.

Thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father.

II. "Gloria in D Major" by Antonio Vivaldi.

The Vivaldi "Gloria" is a unique work. It is not part of a mass, and, because of its length, was probably never intended to be sung during the celebration of the Lord's Supper. There is no other work exactly like it, and, from a worship standpoint, we may never know exactly what Vivaldi intended it for when he composed it. While Antonio Vivaldi and Johann Sebastian Bach never met, they knew and respected each other's work. Like the "Gloria", Bach's monumental "Mass in B Minor" was certainly never intended to be sung during the celebration of the mass. It has been theorized that it was Bach's supreme act of faith: a work of the highest artistic achievement intended only for God and not for human ears. Was that Vivaldi's intent? All one can say is that the "Gloria" stands out among all of Vivaldi's work for the beauty of its melodies and its dramatic power which carries us along from first note to last. A testament to its power is the fact that the Vivaldi "Gloria" is performed today in America almost as often as Handel's Messiah.



Antonio
Vivaldi

Antonio Vivaldi, 1678-1741, was born and lived most of his life in Venice. Vivaldi's father, a shoemaker and part-time musician, taught Antonio to play the violin. From early childhood and throughout his life, Vivaldi was plagued by asthma, but this did not stop him from becoming one of the premier violin virtuosi of his day. Initially, however, Vivaldi felt his principal call was not to music, but the church. At the age of 15, he began to study for the priesthood, and was ordained in 1704. A family trait which Antonio inherited was red hair, and early on he became known as "il pretto rosso", *the red-haired priest*.

For reasons unknown, not long after his ordination, Vivaldi was relieved of the responsibility of performing mass and assigned to teach music at the Pieta. One needs to understand that in those times, cities like Venice and Naples had huge numbers of orphans, so many that it was common for unwanted children to be thrown in the river by parents unable or unwilling to care for them. The church tried to address this problem by setting up charitable asylums where orphans were lodged and fed and taught life skills. Boys were apprenticed in a trade, while girls were often given instruction in music. A French traveler, Charles de Brosses, described the Pieta this way in 1739: "The transcendent music is that of the asylums...made up of illegitimate and orphaned girls. They are brought up at the expense of the state and trained solely to excel in music. Moreover, they sing like angels and play the violin, the flute, the organ, the oboe, the cello, and the bassoon; in short, there is no instrument, however unwieldy that can frighten them. They are cloistered like nuns. It is they alone who perform, and about forty girls take part in each concert." The 18th century sequence in the recent movie, "The Red Violin", is clearly inspired by Vivaldi's work at the Pieta and provides a colorful image of what it must have been like.

It has been suggested that Vivaldi's "Gloria" was written for the orphan girls of the Pieta to be sung as a sacred concert piece. While it is written for mixed voices, male and female, the bass and tenor parts could have been sung by music faculty and singers from the cathedral choir. The fact that all solo parts are for female voices gives credence to the theory that it was written for use at the Pieta. If indeed the Gloria grew out of the charitable work of the cathedral, one can imagine perhaps the joy and exhilaration with which the young girls sang, caught up in glory of God's gift of music and saved from a dark fate on the streets of Venice.

The music of Antonio Vivaldi, including his Gloria, is a staple of sacred and concert music today. His "Four Seasons" regularly appears on concert programs across America and references to it are common in movie soundtracks. His concerti for violin and other instruments are among the works every student must master if he or she wishes to pursue a career as a performer. In addition to the Gloria, a number of shorter works and motets are sung by church choirs everywhere.

For that reason, it is hard to believe that his music was practically unknown just 70 years ago, and, but for a quirk of history, would never have been re-discovered. Vivaldi, because of his reputation as a performer and the popularity of his compositions, enjoyed huge success and accumulated some wealth during his lifetime. Unfortunately he squandered most that wealth due to extravagant living in the latter years and died a

pauper in 1741. This was also a time of musical transition in Italy. As opera became more and more the rage in Italy, led by Piccini and Pergolesi, and later by Mozart, Rossini, and Verdi, the music of Vivaldi and his contemporaries went out of fashion.

Twice it was thought that a large part of Vivaldi's work had been irretrievably lost, first, after the Napoleonic wars, and later because of the Allied bombing during World War II. In the autumn of 1926, after a detective-like search by researchers, 14 folios of Vivaldi's music including previously unknown religious works (the "Gloria" among them) were found in the library of a monastery in Piedmont. In October 1930, additional volumes of manuscripts were found to be with the descendants of the Grand Duke Durazzo. All of this music was moved to the Library at Turin. A first performance in modern times of Vivaldi's Gloria, in a severely edited and arranged version, was mounted in 1939 by Alfredo Cassella. (We actually have his edition of the Gloria in our Jarvis Music Library). After the performance, the manuscripts were put away to be studied at a later time. Fortunately for us, while the Turin library was seriously damaged in the final year of the Second World War, the Vivaldi collection survived.

First movement: *Gloria in excelsis Deo* (tr. *Glory to God in the highest*). The music is appropriately bright and joyous using the full orchestra including trumpet and oboe in a rhythmic, fanfare-like explosion of praise.

Second Movement: *Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis* (tr. *And on earth, peace to all people of good will*) Vivaldi surprises us with a profound change in expression. The jubilant D major of the first movement is replaced by a darkened B minor accompanied by strings and organ. The chorus repeats the text in long, lyric phrases suggesting that the peace heralded by the angels is not yet realized, but needed desperately. The movement starts softly, building gradually to a heart-wrenching forte, before finally dying away.

Third Movement: *Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te* (tr. *We praise you. We bless you. We adore you. We glorify you*). The dark mood disappears with a sunny G major duet for two sopranos – a warm, rhythmic song of divine praise.

Fourth Movement: *Gratias agimus tibi* (tr. *We give thanks to you...*) Again, the texture shifts, this time to E minor. Previous movements have been elaborate and rhythmic, but here Vivaldi elects a straightforward incantation of the words, almost like a hymn.

Fifth Movement: *Propter magnam gloriam* (tr. *for your great glory*). Another radical change in texture. Sections of the chorus enter independently in the form of a fugal exposition, expressions imitating each other and come from both sides of the Chancel. Very dramatic!

Sixth Movement: *Domine Deus, Rex coelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens* (tr. *O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty*). A beautiful C major aria for soprano with oboe obligato. A devotional expression of praise with one Vivaldi's most memorable and lyric melodies.

Seventh Movement: *Domine Fili Unigenite, Jesu Christe* (tr. O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ) Vivaldi at his rhythmic best. The chorus ascends to a new level of jubilation in this song of praise which literally “gallops” across the page.

Eighth Movement: *Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis* (tr. Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us!) The somber text draws us back to God’s sacrifice of His Son for our redemption. Appropriately, the key returns to minor and the solo lines are taken up by a dark contralto voice with choir responding in hymn-like fashion.

Ninth Movement: *Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram* (tr. Thou who takes away the sin of the world, hear our prayer.)

Tenth Movement: *Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, Miserere nobis.* (tr. Thou who sits at the right hand of the Father, have mercy upon us.) The somber mood continues first with a choral prayer, and then a fervent aria for contralto.

Eleventh Movement: *Quoniam tu solus sanctus, tu solus Dominus, tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe!*) For you only are holy, you only are the Lord, you only are highest, Jesus Christ... The jubilation of the first movement returns

Twelfth Movement: *Cum sancto Spiritu, in Gloria Dei Patris, Amen.* (tr. with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.) Vivaldi closes his Gloria with grand fugue recognizing the Trinity and a closing with a joyous amen.

III. “In Terra Pax” by Gerald Finzi (1901-1956)



Gerald Finzi
(1901-1956)

In 1952, the British composer Gerald Finzi began work on a musical composition he had long planned to write, a setting of the poem “Noel: Christmas Eve 1913” by English poet laureate, Robert Bridges (1844-1930). He chose to title it, “*In Terra Pax*” (or “*on earth peace*”, after the song of the angels at Christ’s birth: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all people of good will*”). “*In Terra Pax*” would prove to be one of his most ambitious and successful works of choral music. With its frequent references to the familiar carol, “The First Noel”, and its lush, heartwarming orchestration, it is an ideal work to welcome in the Christmas season.

Finzi was a lover of poetry. Over the course of his life, he amassed a huge collection of 20th century British poetry which was willed to the University of Reading at the time of his death and now forms the core of their poetry collection.

This love of poetry and the written word is reflected in all Finzi’s masterful song settings which now are standard fare in voice recitals around the world. (For example, “Let Us Garlands Bring”, a five-song cycle of Shakespeare poetry and many settings of poetry by Thomas Hardy).

The complete poem of Robert Bridges follows:

Noël: Christmas Eve 1913

*A frosty Christmas Eve when the stars were shining
Fared I forth alone where westward falls the hill,
And from many a village in the water'd valley
Distant music reach'd me peals of bells aringing:*

*The constellated sounds ran sprinkling on earth's floor
As the dark vault above with stars was spangled o'er.
Then sped my thoughts to keep that first Christmas of all
When the shepherds watching by their folds ere the dawn
Heard music in the fields and marvelling could not tell
Whether it were angels or the bright stars singing.*

*Now blessed be the towers that crown England so fair
That stand up strong in prayer unto God for our souls
Blessed be their founders (said I) an' our country folk
Who are ringing for Christ in the belfries tonight
With arms lifted to clutch the rattling ropes that race
Into the dark above and the mad romping din.*

*But to me heard afar it was starry music
Angels' song, comforting as the comfort of Christ
When he spake tenderley to his sorrowful flock:
The old words came to me by the riches of time
Mellow'd and transfigured as I stood on the hill
Heark'ning in the aspect of th' eternal silence*

-- Robert Bridges, Poet Laureat, United Kingdom (1913)

Finzi, in composing "In Terra Pax:", chose to set the all but the third stanza of Bridges' poem, and there to insert the familiar nativity text from St. Luke 2:8-14.

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch ^{es} over their flock by night. **9** And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. **10** And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. **11** For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. **12** And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. **13** And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, **14** Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to all. [King James version, altered]



Robert Bridges
(1844-1930)

The work concludes with Bridges' haunting words, "*The old words came to me by the riches of time, mellowed and transfigured as I stood on the hill hearkening in the aspect of the eternal silence...*" after which time inserts a final reference to the scriptures: "...and on earth peace, good will to all".

What are we to make of this work by a composer with a strange name, of whom many, no doubt, have never heard? It can be appreciated simply as a beautiful work of the holiday season. But to appreciate its true depth, one must understand a bit more about its origins and its composer.



Finzi as a boy

The composer, Gerald Finzi (1901-1956), was born into a Jewish family in London. His mother and father were English Jews, his father's family from Italy, and his mother's from Germany. Finzi authority, George Jochowitz writes, "If we concluded from Finzi's surname that he was Jewish, Finzi would no doubt have felt we were wrong. If we concluded that he was Jewish because his mother and father were Jewish, Finzi would still have felt we were wrong. Finzi considered himself simply 'English'." The years following World War I were a time of nationalistic pride in England. Not an easy time to be Jewish. Finzi was exactly the same age as Harold Abrahams, the Jewish runner in the movie, "Chariots of Fire". Abrahams, you will recall, wants to be accepted as both Jewish and English, and, to accomplish this, is extremely competitive. Despite his success as an athlete, however, Abrahams, as portrayed in the movie, is still viewed to the end as an 'outsider'.

We Christians, for whom religion is a choice, have difficulty understanding Judaism, which combines a belief system with a national and racial identity. Unlike Abrahams, Finzi dealt with this by sublimating his Jewishness. To our knowledge, he never practiced his faith and never told even his most intimate friends of his Jewish upbringing. Finzi's childhood was not a happy one. He was a shy, very sensitive, introspective child that was repeatedly shaken by personal tragedy in his early years. His father died when he was seven, and by the age of eighteen he had experienced the death of all three of his older brothers. Just as tragic for Finzi was the death of his beloved piano teacher, Edward Farrar, who replaced his father as mentor and role model. Farrar's death, as an enlistee who was killed in the First World War, profoundly affected Gerald and shaped his life-long conviction regarding the "futility of war".

Futile or not, Finzi's devotion to his beloved England never wavered during the Second World War. He wrote letters warning of and deploring the reports of holocaust in Germany long before the world press was willing to acknowledge there was a problem. He served actively in local Civil Defense units, and in 1940 accepted a high post as an administrator in the British Merchant Marine.

It is interesting to note that Gerald Finzi's sacred music, all of it written for Christian use, was written during the last ten years of his life, 1946-1956. His anthem, "God Is Gone Up" (1951) is regarded to this day as one of the finest English anthems of the 20th century. He wrote a masterful setting of Mary's song of praise, The Magnificat, in 1952. His "Lo, the Full Final Sacrifice" (1946) is also an important staple of English cathedral music. Finzi's Christmas scene, "In Terra Pax", the focus of this article, was begun in 1952 and completed in 1954, just over a year before his death from Hodgkin's Disease. Did Finzi become a Christian in his final years? No, at least not officially. But there is no question that he continued search for meaning to the very end of his life, and that the love personified in Jesus Christ had a huge impact on him. The 'peace' of which the angels sang, after decades of war, suffering and loss, may have seemed unattainable, and yet in their song he found hope, if not for "world peace", at least for the peace of the human heart that comes through faith.

And what of the origins of "In Terra Pax"? It goes much deeper than a poem which Gerald Finzi knew and loved. The poem's opening lines brought back memories of one of the most happy times of his youth.

*A frosty Christmas Eve when the stars were shining
 Fared I forth alone where westward falls the hill,
 And from many a village in the water'd valley
 Distant music reach'd me peals of bells aringing:*

In 1925, Gerald Finzi was living in Gloucestershire, lonely and facing a move back to London where he could better pursue a career as a composer and musician. A group of friends planned a “going away” party for Gerald at a simple sexton’s cottage on top of a hill in nearby Chosen Hill. At midnight, the partiers moved to the porch, wassail glasses in hand, to listen to the pealing of bells across the valley. For Finzi, it was a rare moment in his life when he felt completely accepted and completely at peace.

If the Chosen Hill experience was an “introit” to Finzi’s life as a composer, “In Terra Pax” would also prove to be its “benediction”. In 1951, just after starting the work, Gerald Finzi was diagnosed with Hodgkins Disease and informed he had less than ten years to live. Unfortunately, however, the disease progressed rapidly, and in late 1954, just as Finzi was completing “In Terra Pax”, he was informed he would need a splenectomy. From his hospital bed in early January 1955, he heard the BBC Symphony and Chorus perform the world premier of “In Terra Pax” on the radio. Once the surgery was done, Finzi seemed to rebound, gaining strength and resuming some of his musical activities including composing and conducting. His close friend, Ralph Vaughan Williams, who was deeply moved by “In Terra Pax”, insisted he re-orchestrate it for full symphony orchestra. Finzi obliged while also completing his last published work, his Cello Concerto. In early September 1956, Finzi himself was invited to conduct the premier of his newly orchestrated “In Terra Pax” at the mammoth “Three Rivers Choir Festival”. He was in rare form, and in his wife Joy’s memoir, she recalled choir singers exclaiming how much they enjoyed working under Gerald and that “he got what he wanted out of them.” It was a heady time and, following the concert, Vaughan Williams and his wife Ursula insisted the Finzi’s take them to that lovely sexton’s cottage in Chosen Hill where the idea for “In Terra Pax” was born.

Of the trip, Ursula Vaughan Williams would later write: “We had a wonderful Sunday when the Finzi’s drove us out to Chosen Hill, and Gerald described how he had been there as a young man on Christmas Eve at a party in the tiny house where the sexton lived and how they had all come out into the frosty midnight and heard bells ringing across Gloucestershire from beside the Severn to the hill villages of the Cotswalds.” This time, however, the sexton and his wife were home and roundly welcomed their musician visitors. Tea was served, but unfortunately the sexton’s children were in a back room ailing with chicken pox, and the visit needed to be cut short. Unknown to the Finzi’s, it would be the chicken pox that killed Gerald. His immune system had been compromised by the splenectomy, and it was no match for the infectious disease. Just two weeks after his triumphal appearance at the Three Choirs Festival, he breathed his last.