

When we think of exceptional feminine voices in the history of music, no composer cuts a greater figure than **Saint Hildegard of Bingen** (c.1098-1179). A German Benedictine abbess who was a writer, philosopher, dramatist, mystic, visionary, medical theorist and practitioner, Hildegard was so ahead of her time she should be considered the forerunner of the archetypal Renaissance man: the Medieval woman. *O viridissima Virga* is a salutation to the Virgin Mary that paints in familiar tropes of natural viridity: the fresh green branch (from which her child blossoms) lavished by windy gusts ('ventoso flabro'), and sunlight's warmth ('calor solis'). Another composer casting a long shadow over the reception of the 'feminine' voice in music is Benjamin Britten. He did so most prominently in *Ceremony of Carols*, a work so impactful it single-handedly sprouted a cottage industry of composition for treble choir and harp. One such example in this lineage is *I Sing of a Maiden* by **Ian Shaw** (b. 1960). Unlike Britten's setting of the text, Shaw's scoring is reduced to a single line, but that melody is spun out in whimsical intervallic leaps and cheeky harmonic kinks. Perhaps less well appreciated was Britten's streak as a mentor to younger musicians, such as Gustav Holst's daughter **Imogen Holst** (1907-1984). Hopefully, the reader will have noticed by now that the treble choir seems to have been the "instrument" of choice for many composers to personify, glorify, and sanctify Mary the mother of Jesus, and by extension served as a channel to depict the nativity story. One early illustration of this is the Advent text *Audivi vocem de caelo* by **John Sheppard** (c.1515-1558). What prayer could better distill the fascination with and reverence for the figure of Mary than the *Ave Maria* ('Hail Mary')? Treble-rich settings of the *Ave Maria* abound, with hundreds of instances from the late middle ages to today. One 21st-century example is the plaintive version by **Cecilia McDowall** (b. 1951), which captures the style of Renaissance chain suspensions in a newer musical vocabulary. We pair McDowall's treatment of the text with a refulgent double-choir version by Imogen's father, **Gustav Holst** (1874-1934). During her time as one of the first female organ scholars at Cambridge, **Joanna Marsh** (b. 1970) cultivated an enduring fascination with the music of Elizabethan composers, such as Weelkes and Byrd. Her *Magnificat* from the 'St Paul's Service' is peppered with keyboard figurations, dance rhythms, and gestures of the viol consort, all prominent features of the Tudor musical lexicon. The reputation enjoyed by **Barbara Strozzi** (1619-1677) in dramatic music (secular cantatas, madrigals, etc.) is well established, but her credentials as a composer of sacred music were long neglected. *O Maria* is Baroque poetic and vocal writing at its most transcendent. Strozzi shapes the line by turns with billowing rapture and rollicking piety. *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree* is the best known of a relatively short list of compositions by **Elizabeth Poston** (1905-1987). Inspired by the words of a New England poem that she happened upon while travelling here, she set the verse to an arresting melody in what could be described as a spare and sincere style inflected by American folk traditions, notably shape-note singing. **Henriette Renié** (1875-1956) was a French harpist, composer, arranger and influential pedagogue, one of the few women composers richly decorated during her own time. The *Ballade Fantastique*, a fantasy inspired by Edgar Allen Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, at first glance would seem a stranger on this program. But, I knew it would offer the perfect foil, a *remise en bouche*, to break up any holiday treacle congealing in our ears. Despite his palpable fondness for the sonorities of the boy soprano, the *Ceremony of Carols* by **Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976) was initially conceived as, in his own words, "7 Christmas Carols for women's voices and Harp! Very sweet and chockfull of charm!" Over time, several performances of *Ceremony* were given by boy choirs, and it is evident in Britten's letters that it was quickly becoming his preferred sound. Regardless of whether *Ceremony* is offered by women, boys, or even mixed choir, as in Julius Harrison's celebrated arrangement, it continues to delight, enchant, lull, awake, and transport the listener. We close the program with a triptych of traditional carols, two by the king of Christmas tunes himself, **John Rutter** (b. 1945). If there is a composer, living or dead, who has written and arranged more Christmas music for choirs, they are unknown to me. Along with his arrangement of *Deck the Hall*, we present the lesser-known *Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day*. And no Christmas program is complete without an arrangement of *Silent Night*. Local organist, composer, and singer **Michael Garrepy** (b. 1990) has become something of a specialist in arrangements of the piece (I believe this is his fourth), and I knew it would be no trouble for him to cook one up for our high voices and harp to round out the program.

Program (no interval)

HILDEGARD VON BINGEN *O viridissima, virga*

IAN SHAW *I sing of maiden*

IMOGEN HOLST 'Welcome Joy & Welcome Sorrow'

i. Welcome Joy and Welcome Sorrow

vi. Shed no tear

JOHN SHEPPARD *Audivi vocem de caelo*

CECILIA MCDOWALL *Ave Maria*

GUSTAV HOLST *Ave Maria*

JOANNA MARSH *Magnificat* from St. Paul's Service

BARBARA STROZZI *O, Maria*

ELIZABETH POSTON *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*

HENRIETTE RENIE *Ballade fantastique* for Harp

BRITTEN *Ceremony of Carols*

i. Procession

ii. Wolcum Yole!

iii. There is no Rose

iv a. That Yongë Child

iv b. Balulalow

v. As Dew in Aprille

vi. This Little Babe

vii. Interlude

viii. In Freezing Winter Night

ix. Spring Carol

x. Adam lay i-bounden

xi. Recession

RUTTER *Deck the Halls*

MICHAEL GARREPY *Silent Night*

RUTTER *Tomorrow Shall be my Dancing Day*