

Sacrum Mysterium: A Celtic Christmas Vespers | Program Notes

At the Sacred Crossroads of Art & Tradition

by Jeannette Sorrell

The sacred mysteries of both pagan and Christian traditions are especially intertwined in the Celtic lands — Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea.

As Christianity came to these isles after the fall of Rome, the proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God was gently woven into the existing pagan fabric. The old Celtic legends of druids, gods and goddesses were gradually reworked as episodes from the lives of Christian saints. The pagan reverence for the divinity of Nature continued to infuse and inspire the artistic traditions — poetry, storytelling, and music — throughout the Renaissance and beyond. The traditional music of Scotland and Ireland — especially the Christmas carols — celebrates pagan deities and Christian saints with little distinction between the two.

In addition to the blend of paganism and Christianity, the fusion of art music and traditional (folk) music is also a distinctive feature of Celtic culture. Great renaissance composers of the British Isles wrote artful variations on popular street tunes. The *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* is full of popular songs and ballads that have been transformed into complex, contrapuntal renaissance keyboard works. The Scots were proud of the fact that their music was lighter and more accessible than the “dull Italian lays” which “canna please a Highland taste,” according to the 18th-century Scotsman Rev. John Skinner (*Drummond Castle MS*, 1734). Skinner mocks the fancy “variorums” of Continental baroque music, finding them “douff and dowie” (dull and boring) in comparison with the folk-infused Scottish music.

When Sylvain Bergeron and I set out to explore the music of the Celtic Christmas traditions, we knew we would straddle the crossroads — not only the crossroads of art music and traditional music, but also the crossroads of paganism and Christianity. The intermingling of these traditions is so vibrant in the Celtic cultures that it would be impossible to make a Christmas recording — or should we call it a Winter Solstice recording? — without celebrating this delightful *mélange*.

One of the more prominent figures working in the art-music arena during the Renaissance was the Scottish monk and composer Robert Carver. His 1513 Mass *Dum Sacrum Mysterium* evokes the sense of unknowable miracles, and served as the inspiration for the title of our program.

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The first part of the program is called “A Light in the Darkness” — a central metaphor in both pagan and Christian imagery, as it recalls the spirit of the weeks leading up to Christmas. The pre-Christian Celtic peoples marked the approach of the Winter Solstice by watching and waiting for the return of light during the darkest days of the year. Christians devote these weeks before Christmas (the liturgical season of Advent) to watching and waiting for the birth of the Savior — He who will bring the light.

Thus, we begin with a watchful procession — the Manx Gaelic carol “Oikan ayns Bethlehem” — the Babe in Bethlehem. This is followed by the ecstatic pagan/Christian carol “Duan Nollaig,” which is Scots Gaelic. This chant encapsulates the medieval and renaissance Celtic spirit, where Nature and Christ are seen as one:

... Christ was born, King of Kings and Lord of Lords,
Son of Dawn, Son of Clouds, Son of Planets, Son of Stars.

A Note on the Songs by Meredith Hall

By the ninth century, the marriage of Christian mysticism and Celtic artistic tradition had produced the glowing, intricate illuminations of the Book of Kells. Although we have no comparable musical monument to that spectacular merging of faith and culture, for me, many of the pieces on this CD evoke a similar sense of wonder. The colours of the Christ story seem more vivid against the backdrop of Celtic musical heritage.

With utter simplicity, the Manx carol *Oikan Ayns Bethlehem* (The Babe in Bethlehem) marvels at the humility of the Christ child descending from the courts of heaven to a lowly manger. The stark, restrained melody beseeches us to “keep with pure hearts this festival, in memory of Jesus Christ, an infant in Bethlehem.” By contrast, the brisk chanting of *Duan Nollaig* (Christmas Song) is reminiscent of the waulking songs which accompany the making of woolen cloth in the Hebrides. The *bannag* (bannock) it salutes could be either a Christmas cake or a Christmas present, but is certainly also a reference to Christ, whose lineage is traced to the natural universe - he is the “son of the dawn, the planets, the stars, the dew, the rivers and the the sky.”

Also from the Scottish Isles, the *Taladh Chriosta* (Christ Child’s Lullaby) depicts the rapture of Mary as she nurses her child, the first to worship the newborn Christ. The exuberant *Seven Rejoyces* of

Near the beginning of any Vespers service is the dramatic moment of the Invocation. The Celtic pagan invocation (presented as dramatic spoken word in the concert version of this program) comes from the ancient text *Duan Amhairghin* (Song of Amhairghin). With these words, the druid Amhairghin, Chief Poet of the Milesians, invoked the spirit of Ireland and took possession of the land. This is the ancient Gaelic poem that begins:

<i>Am gáeth tar na bhfarraige</i>	<i>I am a wind across the sea</i>
<i>Am tuile os chinn maighe</i>	<i>I am a flood across the plain</i>
<i>Am dord na dáithbhe</i>	<i>I am the roar of the tides</i>
<i>Am an fráich torc</i>	<i>I am the fierceness of boars</i>
<i>Am ard filidheachta</i>	<i>I am a height of poetry (magical skill)</i>
<i>Cia an crann agus an theime ag tuitim faire?</i>	<i>Who (but I) is both the tree and the lightning that strikes it?</i>

The Christian invocation of our program comes from a 13th-century Scottish Vespers service – the *Vespers of St. Kentigern, patron Saint of Glasgow*. This is the Vespers service that was sung at Glasgow cathedral for centuries. St. Kentigern, who lived in the 6th century, is said to be buried under Glasgow Cathedral. He was a man of Nature – a kind of St. Francis of Assisi, who charmed birds and animals.

The Vespers of St. Kentigern provides the medieval centerpiece of our program. From this service we include the invocation, responsory, Gloria Patri, hymn, Magnificat, antiphon, and benediction. The *Hymnus* concluding the St. Kentigern Vespers plainchant in Part I of our disc is followed by an Alleluia in traditional Irish style. My intention in composing this was to provide a transition from the plainchant inside the cathedral to the jigs and reels taking place outside the stone walls.

We know that it was traditional in at least some parts of Europe to insert carols at a Christmas Vespers service. This is certainly clear in churches where Christmas music from the late renaissance has survived, such as the music of Praetorius. We have imagined how such carols might have been inserted in Glasgow, and have included several British Isles carols as well as a few jigs.

Our arrangement of the 15th-century English carol “Nowell, Nowell, Tidings Trew” is based on the melody and text as found in a late 15th-century manuscript (see note on sources below).

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The second half of the program is titled “Song of Mary.” This section opens with Mary’s lullaby, the Scottish Gaelic folk song “Talladh Chriosda” (Lullaby of the Christ Child). This is followed by the Gregorian plainchant “Hodie Christus natus est” (Today Christ is born), the well-known antiphon to the Magnificat for Vespers on Christmas Day. The antiphon introduces the Magnificat (Mary’s song of thanks upon receiving the news from the Angel Gabriel that she will be the mother of the Saviour).

This portion of the disc includes Scottish music from the early Reformed Church (16th and 17th centuries). The popular hymn or carol “All Sons of Adam” is a re-working of Mary’s Annunciation song of thanks, thus echoing the Magnificat but in a more dance-like setting.

The rest of the program consists of carols, dance tunes and Christmas lullabies, including the lovely setting of “What Child is This?” using the traditional Irish melody “My Lagan Love” – an inspired idea of Meredith Hall. The great 18th-century Irish harpist and composer Turlough O’Carolan provides us with a charming pair of fiddle tunes.

We end joyously with “The Seven Rejoyces of Mary” — a traditional Irish carol that seems to be rooted in the dance hall. Its final “Alleluia” bursts into a joyous Irish reel called “Christmas Eve.”

We hope that this journey opens a window between the beautiful worlds of early sacred music and Celtic traditions — two worlds that have come to be separated only in modern times.

Nollaig Shona Duit, Beannachd Dia dhuit! (Merry Christmas, and blessings of God be with you.)

Jeannette Sorrell | Cleveland, Ohio, © 2012

A Note on Sources:

- St. Kentigern Vespers: The source is the 13th-century *Sprouston Breviary* MS, housed at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. The complete chant melodies and texts were published for the first time contextually in 2011, edited from the *Sprouston* MS by Greta-Mary Hair and Betty Knott. Thanks to Music Scotica publishers for rushing one of their new volumes to me, fresh off the presses, so that we could prepare this program in summer 2011.
- “Nowell, Nowell, Tidings Trew:” This carol is from a 15th-century manuscript is “re-printed verbatim” in Thomas Wright’s *Songs and Carols Now First Printed, from a Manuscript of the Fifteenth Century*, (London, 1847).
- “All Sons of Adam” appears in the 17th-century songbook *Songs & Fancies*, published in Aberdeen by John Forbes. We have set the text to the well-known ballad tune “Daphne,” in galliard rhythm.

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Mary comes to us from Irish folk tradition, in the form of a children’s counting song.

William Chatterton Dix created an instant classic when he set an excerpt from his 1865 poem “The Manger Throne” to the tune of “Greensleeves.” One day I inadvertently found myself singing the familiar words of What Child Is This? to the traditional Irish tune My Lagan Love. Equally irresistible to me were the words and tune of Usheg Veg Ruy (Little Red Bird). This lovely Manx lullaby describes a little red bird searching for a sleeping place on a cold winter night. One cannot help but be reminded of the holy family, searching for a shelter on Christmas Eve, especially in the final verse of the song, when the bird snuggles between two leaves and sleeps “as warm as a babe at his mother’s breast.”