

Monteverdi Choir

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The adoration of the shepherds

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Charpentier: Baroque Christmas
Monteverdi Choir | English Baroque Soloists
Christophe Rousset

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21	1.55	Domine Deus, Rex coelestis
22	1.20	Quoniam tu solus sanctus
23	1.37	Credo in unum Deum
24	0.19	Et in unum Dominum
25	1.24	Deum de Deo
26	1.25	Et incarnatus est
27	1.30	Crucifixus
28	1.13	Et ascendit
29	0.50	Et in Spiritum Sanctum
30	1.56	Et unam sanctam
31	1.32	Sanctus
32	0.49	Benedictus
33	2.29	Agnus Dei
		Noëls sur les instruments, H. 531 & H. 534
34	1.10	Où s’en vont ces gais bergers, H. 534/2
35	1.32	Laissez paître vos bêtes, H. 531/2
36	2.20	Vous qui désirez sans fin, H. 531/3
37	1.00	Joseph est bien marié, H. 534/3
	69.21	

Charpentier: Baroque Christmas

Dr Andrew Frampton

Although Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1643–1704) composed in all the major genres of his day, it is his sacred music—numbering almost 500 works in total—that assumes the most significant place in his output. Written for churches, convents and private chapels, his religious output exhibits an extraordinary richness and diversity of genre, form and compositional technique, and includes masses, psalms, motets (including so-called oratorios), Magnificats, Te Deum settings, Litanies, hymns, Tenebrae compositions, antiphons and instrumental church music. Many of these works reveal Charpentier's love of the dramatic Italian liturgical style, which he acquired during his studies in Rome with the great oratorio composer Giacomo Carissimi (1605–1674) from 1666. By this time, however, France's own musical style was developing in a very different direction: courtly and grand, it was dominated by the figure of Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687). As *Surintendant de la Musique* at the Versailles court of Louis XIV, and later director of the Royal Opera, Lully sought to reject both Italian music and French composers who had studied in Italy (despite having been born there himself). He also held a monopoly over the development of staged musical theatre in France, which he jealously guarded. It is little wonder, then, that Charpentier once commented, 'since those who scorned me were much more numerous than those who lauded me, music became to me a small honour and a heavy burden'.



Posthumous watercolour portrait of Marc-Antoine Charpentier, c.1750



Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, 14 December 2024 (© Daniel Dittus)

As a result, after returning to France around 1670, Charpentier was inhibited from gaining a permanent position at Louis XIV's court, instead serving a succession of church and aristocratic appointments. In doing so, however, it became possible for him to develop his own unique style, and experiment with forms and genres in ways that would not have been possible at court. In the household of 'Mademoiselle de Guise', Marie de Lorraine (1615–1688), he found not only sympathetic patronage but, through the Guises' influential connections in Paris, the opportunity to write sacred music in the Italian style, including the 'dramatic motet'. From 1687, he became *maître de chapelle* at the Jesuit Collège de Louis-le-Grand, and then, additionally, *maître de musique* at Saint-Louis, the most prestigious Jesuit church in Paris, for which he wrote many important sacred works. His last appointment was as *maître de musique* at the French

Dauphin's chapel, the Sainte-Chapelle, a position he held until his death.

Charpentier composed no less than 35 dramatic motets, often called oratorios, for use in church services. Modelled on the works of his teacher Carissimi, this was an essentially Italian genre—sacred music as drama—but one that now became infused with French influences. Of the four settings Charpentier composed for Christmas titled *In nativitatem Domini canticum*, it is the one dating from 1690, later given the catalogue number of H.416, that is undoubtedly the grandest, and the one most frequently performed today. The text, by an anonymous author, presents the Christmas story in two distinct sections, based on various passages from the Old and New Testaments, respectively. The first section depicts God's people waiting for the coming of the Messiah, whilst the second focuses on the events of the Nativity, chiefly from the perspective of the shepherds. The music reflects this division of the text, undergoing a noticeable modal shift between Parts 1 and 2, from C minor as a central key to C major. This kind of allegorical key change is also found in other dramatic works by Charpentier.

The motet opens with a reflective instrumental *Praeludium* that leads into a declamatory recitative, its text taken from Psalm 12. This, in turn, is answered by the 'Chorus Justorum' (Chorus of the Righteous), who plead for God to send a Saviour to deliver them. Further Biblical quotations in the following movements come from Joel 3, Isaiah 64 and Isaiah 45. Solo voices and groups of singers are employed to represent the Israelites, the angels and the shepherds.

Charpentier also uses the orchestra to create magical effects that heighten the storytelling. Between Parts 1 and 2, for instance, he inserts a mesmerising interlude entitled *Nuit*. In both its orchestration (including one of the earliest uses of muted strings) and its slurred two-note rocking motion, it conjures the stillness and quiet sense of expectation that Christmas Eve brings. Suddenly, the mood changes, and *flûtes* (recorders) rejoin the orchestra as the heavens open in radiance and the angels appear. Based on Luke 2:9–15, the gospel reading for Midnight Mass, this section is cast as an Italian *dialogue lauda* between the angel

and the shepherds (the 'Chorus Pastorum'), musically reinforced through the use of joyful Italianate dance rhythms.

At the 'Et in terra pax', Charpentier employs yet another magical transformation, shifting to a slower duple metre to express the calm of earthly peace, which in turn makes the following contrast with the 'Marche des bergers' ('March of the Shepherds') all the more delightful. When the shepherds arrive at the manger, their sense of awe and wonder is movingly conveyed through unusually powerful dissonances. In this work, therefore, Charpentier already reveals his skill in combining different kinds of music that evoke elements of both the sacred and the secular, in the service of dramatic expression: rich harmonic language and 'high' musical styles lie easily alongside folk-like melodies and dances.

The Catholic Council of Trent, in the sixteenth century, had technically forbidden the use of secular tunes in church, but there was nonetheless a long-standing tradition in France of the liturgical performance of popular, folk-like Christmas carols. These *noëls*, which had mainly spread in oral traditions, were printed for the first time in the *Grande Bible de Noëls* (Lyon, 1554), and subsequently in various organ books and with continuo accompaniments. As a result, many French composers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including Charpentier, composed instrumental carol settings to be played in church.

Charpentier's *Noëls sur les instruments*, H.531, for two *flûtes* (recorders), strings and basso continuo, dates from the early 1690s, and was specifically designed to be performed alongside *In nativitatem*. It consists of three carol settings: the stately 'O Créateur', the genial 'Laissez paître vos bêtes', and the triple-time 'Vous qui désirez sans fin'. Subsequently, Charpentier composed another set of seven *Noëls*, H.534, which were intended as companion pieces for his eight so-called 'O' antiphons (H. 36–43) that were sung in the week before Christmas. Many of these carols had their origins in secular French songs: 'Une jeune pucelle', for example, is based loosely on the older 'Une jeune Fillette', whilst 'Joseph est bien marié' was originally a children's song, 'Quand Biron voulut danser'.



St Martin-in-the-Fields, 17 December 2024 (© Paul Marc Mitchell)

All the *Noëls* feature prominent tutti-solo dialogue: contrasts between passages for the whole orchestra and others for smaller groups of instruments. This, together with the discovery the organ part was intended for a full-size instrument, has led some scholars to suggest that Charpentier was composing not for a small chamber ensemble but a large orchestra. In any event, his chosen scoring, especially the inclusion of recorders, strongly evokes the pastoral, reinforcing the link with the shepherds. In H. 534, the carol ‘Les Bourgeois de Chastre’ appears in two versions, although only one is recorded here.

Most of the tunes heard in the *Noëls* reappear in Charpentier’s most popular mass setting, the *Messe de Minuit pour Noël*, H.9. Written around 1694 for the Jesuit church of Saint-Louis in Paris, this work was designed to evoke the special atmosphere of the Midnight Mass, the first of three celebrated on Christmas Day. Here, however, Charpentier took a daring step: rather than simply arranging ten carols as instrumental movements to supplement a vocal work, he decided to incorporate them into the mass itself, by setting sections of the Latin text to these secular tunes. In doing so, he also utilised a contrapuntal, *concertante* style

of instrumental writing, already seen in his earlier masses, that is distinctively Italian. The *Messe de Minuit* is therefore a work of remarkable synthesis, uniting elements of the French and Italian national styles, modality with tonality, and the sacred with the profane. The carols used, and the corresponding sections of the mass in which they appear, are as follows:

Movement	<i>Noël</i> melody
Kyrie eleison	<i>Joseph est bien marié</i> (‘Joseph is well betrothed’)
Christe eleison	<i>Or, nous dites Marie</i> (‘Now tell us, Mary’)
Kyrie eleison II	<i>Une jeune pucelle</i> (‘A young virgin’)
Gloria (‘Laudamus te’)	<i>Tous les bourgeois de Chastre</i> (‘All the people of Chastre’)
Gloria (‘Quoniam tu solus sanctus’)	<i>Où s’en vont ces gais bergers</i> (‘Where are these happy shepherds going’)
Credo (‘Deum de Deo’)	<i>Vous qui désirez sans fin</i> (‘You who desire endlessly’)
Credo (‘Crucifixus’)	<i>Voici le jour solennel de Noël</i> (‘Here is the solemn day of Christmas’)
Credo (‘Et in spiritum sanctum’)	<i>A la venue de Noël</i> (‘At the coming of Christmas’)
Sanctus	<i>O Dieu, que n’étais-je en vie</i> (‘O God, if I had been alive’)
Agnus Dei	<i>A minuit fut fait un réveil</i> (‘At midnight there was an awakening’)

The extraordinary effect created by Charpentier's use of the carols can be heard from the very first 'Kyrie eleison', which is based on 'Joseph est bien marié'. After the carol melody is heard and then repeated in full, Charpentier proceeds to alter it using different kinds of instrumentation and imitation, and by quoting it only in part. This kind of varied motivic development continues in the second 'Kyrie', and beyond. Indeed, musical diversity, whether in treatment of the carol melody, texture, or scoring, is central to this piece.

In some sections, such as in the *Kyrie*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*, the carols are used throughout. Here, Charpentier alternates between movements for instruments only, and movements for voices; within these, he also alternates between solo and choral textures. This switching between instruments and voices was already a well-established practice in French organ masses of the time, as seen in François Couperin's two organ masses of 1690, and particularly suited the tripartite structures of these texts. In the *Messe de Minuit*, the orchestra simply takes over the role of the organ.

The other sections of the mass, the *Gloria* and the *Credo*, are more motet-like in structure. They only partially feature carol tunes, and sometimes the carols are not used at all. The *Gloria*, for instance, opens with a nocturnal scene, featuring muted strings and vocal echoes, that appears to deliberately recycle music from *In nativitate*'s equivalent setting of the same text, 'Et in terra pax' (see above). This is then sharply contrasted with the 'Laudamus te' that follows, in which the carol 'Tous les bourgeois de Chastre' represents the awakening of the shepherds. Elsewhere, Charpentier uses other techniques to heighten musical expression. For example, in the *Credo*, he wordpaints the text 'descendit' and 'ascendit' with appropriately descending and ascending passages, whilst 'et unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam' ('and in one holy catholic and apostolic Church') is sung homophonically by all the voices, emphasising the church's unity. At the end of the 'Et incarnatus'—a text central to Christmas—the words 'et homo factus est' ('and became man') are repeated three times,



punctuated by dramatic pauses, and followed by the instruction to hold a long silence ('faites ici un grand silence').

Although they do not feature in every movement, the carols nonetheless have a striking influence on the character of the whole work, giving it an unusual modal flavour and an enchanting, dance-like quality that both seem perfectly suited to Christmas. In addition, Charpentier's remarkable fusion of sacred and secular musical traditions in the same piece perhaps serves a larger symbolic function, evoking the meeting of Heaven and Earth on Christmas night, and the wonder and mystery of God taking human form.



1 **Praeludium**
[Unus ex choro]
Usquequo avertis faciem tuam,
Domine,
et oblivisceris tribulationis nostrae?

Prelude
[One of the Chorus]
How long wilt thou turn away thy face,
O Lord,
And forget our tribulation?

2 **Chorus Justorum**
Memorare testamenti tui quod locutus es.
Veni de excelso et libera nos.

Chorus of the Righteous
Be mindful of thy covenant which thou didst declare.
Come down from on high and deliver us.

[Unus ex choro]
Consolare filia Sion,
quare maerore consumeris?
Veniet ecce Rex tibi mansuetus:
plorans nequaquam plorabis,
et tacebit pupilla oculi tui.
In illa die stillabunt montes dulcedinem,
et colles fluent lac et mel.
Consolare, confortare filia Sion,
et sustine Deum Salvatorem tuum.

[One of the Chorus]
Be comforted, daughter of Zion,
why art thou consumed with grief?
Behold, thy gentle King will come to thee:
weeping, thou shalt not weep,
and the pupil of thine eye shall be at rest.
In that day the mountains shall drop sweetness
and the hills shall flow with milk and honey.
Be comforted, daughter of Sion,
and uphold the Lord thy Saviour.

[Chorus Justorum]
Utinam dirumperes caelos
Redemptor noster, et descenderes!

[Chorus of the Righteous]
Oh, that thou wouldst rend the heavens,
our Redeemer, and wouldst come down!

[Unus ex choro]
Prope est ut veniet Dominus.
Veniet et non mentietur,
juxta est salus Domini.
Qui venturus est modo veniet;
qui mittendus est veniet modo,
veniet et non tardabit.

[One of the Chorus]
The time is near when the Lord shall come.
He will come and will not lie;
the salvation of the Lord is at hand.
He who is to come will come presently;
he who is to be sent will come presently;
he will come and will not tarry.

[Chorus Justorum]
Rorate caeli desuper,
et nubes pluant justum.
Aperiatur terra et germinet Salvatorem.

[Chorus of the Righteous]
Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above,
and let the clouds rain the just:
let the earth be opened, and bud forth a Saviour.

3 **Nuit**

Night

4 **Réveil des bergers**

Awakening of the Shepherds

5 **Chorus Pastorum**
Caeli aperti sunt;
lux magna orta est,
lux magna, lux terribilis.

Chorus of Shepherds
The heavens have opened;
a great light is arisen,
a great light, a terrifying light.

6 **L'Ange**
Nolite timere pastores;
Ecce enim annuntio vobis gaudium magnum,
quod erit omni populo:
quia natus est vobis hodie
Salvator Christus Dominus,
in civitate David.
Et hoc erit vobis signum:
invenietis infantem pannis involutum,
et positum in praesepe.
Surgite ergo; ite, properate,
et adorete Dominum.
Vos autem Angeli, cantate mecum
Domino canticum novum,
quia mirabilia fecit super terram.

The Angel
Fear not, shepherds,
for behold, I bring you tidings of great joy,
that shall be to all people.
For, this day, is born to you
your Saviour, Christ the Lord,
in the city of David.
And this shall be a sign unto you:
you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes,
and laid in a manger
Rise, therefore; go, make haste,
and worship the Lord.
And you, Angels, sing with me
a new song unto the Lord,
because he hath done wonderful things upon the earth.

7 **[Chorus Angelorum]**
Gloria in altissimis Deo,
et in terra pax
hominibus bonae voluntatis.

[Chorus of Angels]
Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace,
good will towards men.

8 **Pastor**
Transeamus usque Bethleem,
et videamus hoc verbum
quod factum est,
quod Dominus ostendit nobis.

9 **Marche des bergers**

10 **[Chorus Pastorum]**
O infans, O Deus,
O Salvator noster!
Sic eges, sic clamas,
Sic friges, sic amas!
O infans, O Deus,
O Salvator noster!

[Chorus]

Pastores undique
Certent concentibus,
Pastorum hodie
Natus est Dominus.
Certent muneribus,
Certent amoribus,
Palmas victori legite!

Agni cum matribus,
Caulis prorumpite,
Aquae de fontibus,
Agros perfundite.
Aves in vallibus,
Concordant cantibus,
Silvae, lac, et mel facite!

11 **[Chorus]**
Exultemus, jubilemus Deo Salutari nostro;
justitia regnabit in terra nostra,
et pacis non erit finis.

Shepherd
Let us go over to Bethlehem
and see this word
that is come to pass,
which the Lord has shewed to us.

March of the Shepherds

[Chorus of Shepherds]
O infant, O God,
O our Saviour!
How destitute thou art, how thou dost cry,
How cold thou art, how loving!
O infant, O God,
O our Saviour!

[Chorus]

From all sides, let the shepherds
Vie with one another in their concerts:
This day is born
The shepherds' Lord.
Let them vie in their gifts,
Let them vie in their love:
Gather palms for the victor!

Lambs with your mothers,
Burst forth from your folds;
Waters, from your springs,
Pour out over the fields.
Let the birds in the valleys
Harmonise their songs.
Woods, bring forth milk and honey!

[Chorus]
Let us rejoice and be glad in God our Saviour;
justice will reign in our land,
and of peace there will be no end.

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Messe de Minuit pour Noël, H. 9

16 Kyrie eleison.

17 Christe eleison.

18 Kyrie eleison.

19 Gloria in excelsis Deo
Et in terra pax
hominibus bonae voluntatis.

20 Laudamus te,
Benedicimus te,
Adoramus te,
Glorificamus te,
Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam
gloriam tuam,

21 Domine Deus, Rex coelestis,
Deus Pater omnipotens.
Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe,
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris,
Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis;
Qui tollis peccata mundi,
suscipe deprecationem nostrum.
Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris,
miserere nobis.

22 Quoniam tu solus Sanctus,
Tu solus Dominus,
Tu solus Altissimus,
Jesu Christe,
Cum Sancto Spiritu,
in gloria Dei Patris.
Amen.

Midnight Mass for Christmas

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Glory be to God on high,
and on earth peace,
good will towards men.

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 on 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 on us.

For thou only art Holy,
Thou only art the Lord,
Thou only art Most High,
Jesus Christ,
With the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

- 23 Credo in unum Deum,
Patrem omnipotentem, factorem caeli
et terrae,
visibilium omnium et invisibilium,
- I believe in one God,
the Father Almighty, maker of heaven
and earth,
and of all things visible and invisible,
- 24 Et in unum Dominum, Jesum Christum,
Filiium Dei unigenitum,
et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula;
- And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only-begotten Son of God,
born of his Father before all worlds;
- 25 Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine,
Deum verum de Deo vero;
Genitum, non factum,
consubstantialem Patri:
per quem omnia facta sunt.
Qui propter nos homines et propter
nostrum salutem
descendit de coelis;
- God of God, light of light,
very God of very God;
Begotten not made,
being of one substance with the Father,
by whom all things were made.
Who for us men,
and for our salvation,
came down from heaven;
- 26 Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto
ex Maria Virgine,
et homo factus est.
- And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit
of the virgin Mary,
and was made man.
- 27 Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub
Pontio Pilato;
passus et sepultus est.
Et resurrexit tertia die,
secundum Scripturas;
- And was crucified also for us under
Pontius Pilate,
he suffered and was buried.
And the third day he rose again,
according to the Scriptures;
- 28 Et ascendit in caelum,
sedet ad dexteram Patris.
Et iterum venturus est cum gloria
judicare vivos et mortuos:
cujus regni non erit finis.
- And ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of the Father.
And he shall come again with glory
to judge both the quick and the dead:
whose kingdom shall have no end.

- 29 Et in Spiritum Sanctum,
Dominum et vivificantem:
qui ex Patre Filioque procedit.
Qui cum Patre et Filio simul adoratur
et conglorificatur:
qui locutus est per Prophetas.
- And in the Holy Spirit,
Lord and giver of life:
who proceedeth from the Father and Son.
Who with the Father and Son is worshipped
and glorified:
who spoke by the prophets.
- 30 Et unam, sanctam, catholicam
et apostolicam Ecclesiam.
Confiteor unum baptisma
in remissionem peccatorum.
Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum,
Et vitam venturi saeculi.
Amen.
- And in one holy catholic
and apostolic church.
I acknowledge one baptism
for the remission of sins.
And I look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.
Amen.
- 31 Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus,
[Dominus Deus Sabaoth,]
Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.
Hosanna in excelsis.
- Holy, Holy, Holy,
[Lord God of Hosts,]
Heaven and earth are full of thy glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
- 32 Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.
Hosanna in excelsis
- Blessed is he who cometh in the name
of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.
- 33 Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi:
miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi:
miserere nobis.
Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi:
dona nobis pacem.
- Lamb of God, that takest away the sins
of the world, have mercy upon us.
Lamb of God, that takest away the sins
of the world, have mercy upon us.
Lamb of God, that takest away the sins
of the world, grant us peace.