

## **Notes Homage to St. Nicholas November 17, 2007**

**By Tom Bickley**

### **St. Nicolas and Santa Claus**

For present-day Americans, the name Saint Nicolas often evokes images of Santa Claus and questions about the relationship of the obscure version and the popular one. An encyclopedic set of books would be too short to allow full exploration of how St. Nicolas came to be our Santa Claus. Those interested in reading on this topic may enjoy *Christmas in America: A History* by Penne Restad (Oxford 1996) or for younger readers *Wonderworker: The True Story of How Saint Nicholas Became Santa Claus* by Vincent Yzermans (Acta, 2004). Considering the cultural meaning of St. Nicolas prepares us to receive the gift of the music Chora Nova performs tonight.

### **The Culture of a Saint**

Nicolas (often spelled Nicholas) was a Greek-speaking bishop of Myra (capital of Asia Minor) in the 4th century. This places him clearly in the line of Christianity planted by Paul in the first century. He was imprisoned during the persecutions by Roman Emperor Diocletian. These ideas combine with Nicolas' reported appearance at the Council of Nicaea in 325 to ground this figure as connected to the central traditions of Christianity. They give him theological street cred. Popular piety and church hierarchy both sought to exploit such an exemplar with further encouraging stories. The tales of his life portray a marvelously compassionate, pastoral presence, who assists the disenfranchised and tempers the harsh conditions of life in a world of terrifyingly uncertainty. Who among us this evening would not want such a leader in organized religion?

Nicolas was raised as a Christian. In his infancy, he observed the Church's official fasts by refusing to suckle. His virtuous parents died while he was a young man, leaving him in comfortable financial circumstances. He used part of his money to provide dowries for three girls who would have been sold into prostitution otherwise. After similarly disbursing the rest of his wealth, he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. On that journey he foretold a dangerous storm and, urging the frightened crew to prayer, prayed himself successfully for calm weather. Upon returning and landing at Myra, he found himself proclaimed as the chosen orthodox candidate for bishop, defeating the heretical Arian party. In a time of famine, Nicolas recognized that a stew served to him was made from the brine-pickled bodies of three murdered boys. The saint's power restored the victims to life and they sang "Alleluia!" in response.

Six centuries after Nicolas' death, his tomb at Myra was guarded by Christians living under Muslim rule. Italians from Bari removed his relics to that city. Afterwards, the veneration of St. Nicolas increased greatly. He is the patron saint of bakers, brewers, brides, children, Greece, grooms, merchants, pawnbrokers, Russia, sailors, Sicily and travelers. Iconographers east and west depict him with children, a sailing vessel, and sometimes tossing bags of gold through a window. The three gold balls marking a pawnbroker's shop come from the bags of gold with which Nicolas supplied the dowries for the young women.

### **Haydn's Missa Sancti Nicolai**

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) composed his Missa Sancti Nicolai to celebrate his patron Nicolas Esterhazy's name day, 6 December, in 1772. This bright, exuberant mass setting contrasts sharply with the somber affect of Haydn's Symphony no. 45 ("The Farewell Symphony"). That symphony's unusual ending conveyed the desire of the court musicians to leave the summer quarters to return to their families. This mass was composed quickly and may have been a thank-you gesture to Prince Esterhazy for his decision to accede to their wishes and to St. Nicolas for his intercession.

Haydn's mass includes the sections of text that occur in each Catholic mass at that time (the "ordinary"). With driving rhythm and a shining G major tonality, the familiar texts catch the ear anew. The mass opens and closes with dance-like sections in 6/4 time. Notice the contrast at the end, when the opening melodies

return after a more reflective setting. Through the piece soloists and full choir interact. The Gloria drives to a close with a fugue on the text "Amen."

### **Britten's cantata Saint Nicolas**

Compared to the familiar texts and musical language of Haydn's Missa Sancti Nicolai, Britten's St. Nicolas cantata seems a fantastic sonic dreamscape. The text by Edward Crozier retells legends of the saint's life, in a dramatic conversation between tenor soloist and choir. The musical language, always accessible, pushes the boundaries of traditional harmonic practice and moves readily among rhythms that one moment may be an enthusiastic waltz and the next a somber pulsed drone.

Movement 4 ("He journeys to Palestine") includes a musical depiction of the storm at sea that conveys intense emotional response to the danger. The men's voices represent the sailors in peril, the women's voices comment on the scene.

Movement 5 ("He comes to Myra and is chosen Bishop") presents sections that may remind listeners of the fugal portions of the Gloria in the Haydn on tonight's program. This musical portrayal of Nicolas' consecration as bishop ends with a hymn, "All people that on earth do dwell." That well-known tune (named "Old Hundredth") and text are a metrical paraphrase of Psalm 100. Britten heightened the drama of the movement by calling for the congregation to join in singing that hymn. Similarly, the entire cantata closes with a tune (named "London New") very familiar in England, with the congregation likewise asked to sing that tune with the hymn text "God moves in a mysterious way." In the last movement of the cantata ("The Death of Nicolas") Britten masterfully employs musical elements from streams of Anglican tradition not only in the use of that concluding hymn, but also in the unison choral singing of the canticle Nunc Dimittis to chant tone IV as accompaniment for the tenor's solo "Lord, I come to life... ."

This cantata was intended for performance in parish churches. Centennial celebrations for Lancing College (dedicated to St. Nicolas) in 1947-48 occasioned its composition. The first public performance took place on 24 July 1947 at Lancing College. It was performed twice prior to that at the Aldeburgh festival. Imogen Holst wrote, "Hearing Britten's Saint Nicolas sung by village choral societies in the overcrowded parish church in Aldeburgh last summer was an exhilarating experience." (Tempo, Winter 1948-9).

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