

BENJAMIN BRITTEN
*A Ceremony
OF Carols*



CAPELLA REGALIS
BOYS CHOIR

Nick Halley, *Director*
Lori Gemmell, *Harp*



**IN JANUARY OF 1942, IT STRUCK
BENJAMIN BRITTEN THAT HE HAD TO
GO HOME.**

Three years earlier Britten had come to America. Well — he came to Canada first: to Quebec City, then Montreal, then north to a cabin in the Laurentians for six weeks in May in June, during the height of blackfly season. His letters called them mosquitoes, but if you've ever been there in June, you know — they're blackflies, and they're ferocious. You don't realize they're biting until it's too late. 31 bites on one foot alone, he claimed.

But that was a small matter compared to what he was leaving back in England. Fascism was raging across Europe and England was twisting in the wind. Britten was a committed pacifist, a gay man and a progressive composer. In England of the time that was three strikes against him, so he left.

After the Laurentians he went to Toronto, to Michigan, then to upstate New York where he stayed with the composer Aaron Copland and thrashed

him daily on the tennis court. He carried on to Long Island, where he first met the Canadian composer Colin McPhee, who introduced him to the haunting music of Bali... then a winter spent in an artists' commune in Brooklyn with the poet W. H. Auden, the writer Carson McCullers and the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee...

But Britten was not settled. He had, in his own words, lost faith in human nature, and he was floating on the shards of his own shipwrecked hopes, with the currents of the world tugging him this way and that.

Those currents finally took him very far from England — both geographically and culturally — to Escondido, California — a holiday beach town devoted to the easy life Britten thought he wanted, until January of 1942, when two things happened.

One was that he received a letter from his former collaborator W. H. Auden, who had no problem telling people exactly what he thought they needed to hear.

Auden said that because Britten had

always been surrounded by people who told him how brilliant he was, his music was in danger of becoming bloated and self-satisfied, and that if he allowed this to continue his compositions would become just a series of “large, unfeeling corpses.”

“If you are really to develop to your full stature,” Auden said. “You will have, I think, to suffer, and to make others suffer.”

Britten rejected this completely, and before long he severed every connection with W. H. Auden for good, but he kept the letter.

And shortly after that, he came upon an article about the 18th century English poet George Crabbe, whose writing was shot through with the harsh cold of the North Atlantic — full of beauty and suffering.

“In a flash I realized...” he said, “[t]hat I must write where I belong.” He immediately began making plans to get home. But getting to where you belong can be both a literal challenge and a psychological one, and for Benjamin Britten it was both.

England was in trouble in 1942. London bombings killed hundreds every week, and with German warships above, and U-boats below, crossing the Atlantic was like walking a minefield. The only way ships could make it at all was to travel in convoys, and the passage Britten finally found was on a ship so old and so badly maintained that the convoy around it was gone within a few hours.

That ship was the aging Swedish freighter the *Axel Johnson*. Britten’s cabin was small and overheated and the ship’s crew a brutish, angry lot after months at sea... Britten and his life partner Peter Pears were the only passengers, and certainly the only gay, intellectual, upper middle-class artists on board. There was even trouble before they left. Customs agents were convinced that Britten’s music contained some kind of secret code that could compromise American sovereignty and seized all of his manuscripts. Even that did not weaken Britten’s resolve to get home and on March 12, 1942 the *Axel Johnson* set sail from Brooklyn, and manuscripts or not, Britten was on it.

The trip was only supposed to take 12 days, but it was immediately obvious that wasn't going to be the case. They lurched and bobbed up the coast and soon stopped in Boston for repairs, then bumbled on further, until the engines seized all together, and they had to be towed into the nearest port: Halifax.

They were in Halifax several days, but even though life on the ship was stifling and sad, and the delays increased the coming danger on the Atlantic, Britten was as happy as he could be. After three years away, he was going back where he belonged. On one idle afternoon he walked through Halifax and in a bookshop he came upon *The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems*, edited by Gerald Bullett — a collection of 16th century verse in Middle English, ancient and simple and clear.

In all, it took the *Axel Johnson* a month to get to England, but that was fine. It gave Britten time to set those poems to music.

A Ceremony of Carols is everything he was going through at the time. It is beautiful. It is harsh. It is vulnerable and

naïve and clinging to the innocence of childhood, at the same time as it acknowledges the cruelty of children, and the suffering they, far more than adults, are fully capable of both enduring and inflicting. It is both modern and ancient. It is self-aware and sensitive, and at the same time, its truth will surround you, like blackflies at your feet, whether you realise it's happening, or not.

The *Axel Johnson* finally docked in Liverpool on April 17, 1942. *A Ceremony of Carols* was published later that year. Benjamin Britten, just like the Little Babe in the thrilling 7th movement, had to wrestle with his devils for the rest of his life, but he did so knowing he was where he belonged, and that a little piece of Halifax had helped him get there.

— Tom Allen, November 2023

Tom Allen hosted the Capella Regalis live performances of A Ceremony of Carols in Lunenburg and Halifax, Nova Scotia, in December 2019.

A CEREMONY OF CAROLS (OP. 28)

by Benjamin Britten (1913–1976).

Texts excerpted from *The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems*,

edited by Gerald William Bullett (1894–1958); first published in 1933.

1. PROCESSION

Hodie Christus natus est:
hodie Salvator apparuit:
hodie in terra canunt Angeli,
laetantur Archangeli:
hodie exsultant iusti, dicentes:
Gloria in excelsis Deo, Alleluia.

*Today Christ is born;
today the Saviour has appeared;
today on earth the Angels sing,
the Archangels rejoice;
today the righteous rejoice, saying:
Glory to God in the highest, Alleluia.*

Source: Antiphon to the Magnificat at 2nd Vespers of Christmas

2. WOLCUM YO!E!

1 Wolcum, Wolcum,
Wolcum be thou hevenè king.
Wolcum Yole!
Wolcum, born in one morning.
Wolcum for whom we sall sing!

2 Wolcum be ye Stevene and Jon.
Wolcum Innocentes every one.
Wolcum, Thomas marter one.
Wolcum, be ye, Good Newe Yere.
Wolcum Twelfth Day both in fere,
Wolcum, seintes lefe and dere,
Wolcum Yole!

3 Candelmesse, Quene of bliss.
Wolcum bothe to more and lesse.
Wolcum be ye that are here.
Wolcum Yole!
Wolcum alle and make good cheer.
Wolcum alle another yere.
Wolcum Yole! Wolcum!

Source: Anonymous, 14th century

3. THERE IS NO ROSE

1 There is no rose of such vertu
As is the rose that bare Jesu:
Alleluia.

3 By that rose we may well see
There be one God in persons three:
Pares forma. (of the same form)

5 Leave we all this worldly mirth,
And follow we this joyful birth:
Transeamus. (let us journey)

Source: Trinity College (Cambridge) manuscript, early 15th century

2 For in this rose containèd was
Heaven and earth in littel space:
Res miranda. (wonderful happening)

4 The aungels sungen the shepherds to:
“Gloria in excelsis Deo”,
Gaudeamus. (let us rejoice)

4. THAT YONGĒ CHILD

Soloist: Peter Dietz

1 That yongē child when it gan weep
With song she lulled him asleep;
That was so sweet a melody
It passèd alle minstrelsy.

Source: Anonymous, 14th century

2 The nightingālē sang also:
Her song is hoarse and nought thereto:
Whoso attendeth to her song
And leaveth the first then doth he wrong.



5. BALULALOW

Soloist: Sergio Astan

1 O my deare hert, young Jesu sweat,
Prepare thy creddil in my spreit,
And I sall rock thee to my hert
And never mair from thee depart.

2 But I sall praise thee evermoir
With sanges sweet unto thy gloir;
The knees of my hart sall I bow,
And sing that richt Balulalow!

Source: James, John and Robert Wedderburn, 16th century

6. AS DEW IN APRILLE

1 I sing of a maiden
that is makèles:
King of all kings
to her son she ches.

3 He came al so stille
to his moder's bour,
As dew in Aprile
that falleth on the flour.

5 Moder and mayden
was never none but she;
Well may such a lady
Goddess moder be.

2 He came al so stille
there his moder was,
As dew in Aprile
that falleth on the grass.

4 He came al so stille
there his moder lay,
As dew in Aprile
that falleth on the spray.

Source: Sloane manuscript (British Library), early 15th century

7. THIS LITTLE BABE

1 This little Babe so few days old
is come to rifle Satan's fold;
all hell doth at his presence quake
though he himself for cold do shake;
for in this weak unarmede ise
the gates of hell he will surprize.

3 His camp is pitchèd in a stall,
his bulwark but a broken wall;
the crib his trench, haystalks his stakes;
of shepherds he his muster makes;
and thus, as sure his foe to wound,
the angels' trump alarum sound.

Source: Robert Southwell (c. 1561–1595)

2 With tears he fights and wins the field,
his naked breast stands for a shield;
his battering shot are babish cries,
his arrows looks of weeping eyes,
his martial ensigns Cold and Need
and feeble Flesh his warrior's steed.

4 My soul, with Christ join thou in fight,
stick to the tents that he hath pight.
Within his crib is surest ward,
this little Babe will be thy guard.
If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,
then flit not from this heavenly Boy.



8. INTERLUDE (HARP SOLO)

9. IN FREEZING WINTER NIGHT

Soloists: Owen Landry & Chase MacIntyre

1 Behold, a silly tender babe
In freezing winter night,
In homely manger trembling lies;
Alas, a piteous sight!

3 This stable is a Prince's court,
This crib his chair of State;
The beasts are parcel of his pomp,
This wooden dish his plate.

5 With joy approach O Christian wight,
Do homage to thy King;
And highly praise his humble pomp,
Which he from Heav'n doth bring.

Source: Robert Southwell

2 The inns are full, no man will yield
This little pilgrim bed.
But forced he is with silly beasts,
In crib to shroud his head.

4 The persons in that poor attire
His royal liveries wear;
The Prince himself is come from Heav'n;
This pomp is prizèd there.

10. SPRING CAROL

Soloists: Wyn Burkhart & Samuel Swain

Pleasure it is
to hear iwis
the Birdès sing,

The deer in the dale,
the sheep in the vale,
the corn springing.

Source: William Cornysh (1465–1523)

God's purvayance
for sustenance.
It is for man.

Then we always
to him give praise,
And thank him than.

11. DEO GRACIAS!

1 Deo gracias! Deo gracias!
Adam lay i-bounden, bounden in a bond;
Four thousand winter thought he not too
long.

3 Deo gracias! Deo gracias!
Ne had the appil takè ben, the appil takè ben
Ne haddè never our lady a ben hevenè quene.

Source: Anonymous, 15th century

2 Deo gracias! Deo gracias!
And all was for an appil, an appil that he tok,
As clerkès finden written in their book.

4 Blessèd be the time that appil takè was.
Therefore we moun singen.
Deo gracias!

12. RECEPTION

Hodie Christus natus est:
hodie Salvator apparuit:
hodie in terra canunt Angeli,
laetantur Archangeli:
hodie exsultant justì, dicentes:
Gloria in excelsis Deo, Alleluia.

*Today Christ is born;
today the Saviour has appeared;
today on earth the Angels sing,
the Archangels rejoice;
today the righteous rejoice, saying:
Glory to God in the highest, Alleluia.*





PRODUCTION

Produced by Nick Halley and Vanessa Halley.

Recorded, edited, mixed and mastered by
John D. S. Adams / Stonehouse Sound.

Recorded live in performance in December 2019, at the
Cathedral Church of All Saints, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Liner notes © 2023 Tom Allen. Used by permission.

All photographs by Béatrice Schuler. Cover photograph
© 2020 Béatrice Schuler. Used by permission.

Art design and production by Kate Sinclair-Sowerby,
Co. & Co. (www.coandco.ca)

CAPELLA REGALIS ADMINISTRATION

Nick Halley, *Founder & Artistic Director*

Vanessa Halley, *Executive Director & Girls Choir Director*

Hannah Griffin, *Assistant Executive Director*

Hilary Allister, *Probationers Programs Director &
Recruitment Officer*

Scott Beard, *Music Librarian*

Paul Halley, *Accompanist & Musical Mentor*

Helen Ryding & Gary Thorne, *Chaplains*

Barbara Butler (*Chair*), Scott Beard, Curtis Dietz,

Andrew Griffin, Nick Halley, Paul Halley, Janelle Lucyk
(*Operating Board*)



CAPELLA REGALIS CHOIRS

capellaregalis.com

©© Capella Regalis Choirs 2023 All rights reserved