

Performance Notes

During the high Middle Ages (the twelfth through fourteenth centuries), poets and musicians of the British Isles produced a vast array of songs, ballads, carols and liturgical works on the topics of the incarnation and the virgin birth. In comparison to continental Europe, the number of these pieces is so large that it sometimes seems as if the British invented the celebration of Christmas. It is from this rich repertoire that *Anonymous 4* has chosen the first works to begin a series of Medieval & Modern Masterworks with *earthsongs*. These pieces and others in this series can be heard on our CD *On Yoolis Night* (harmonia mundi usa, hmu 907099)



Antiphon: Hodie Christus natus est

Source: Worcester Antiphoner (British, 13th century)

This plainchant Magnificat Antiphon for Second Vespers of Christmas Day is taken from a British collection of chants for the Divine Office (the daily round of eight services of psalms and prayers). It is familiar to modern ears as the opening of Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*, and, thanks to this association, still "sounds like Christmas" to us, as it did in the Middle Ages.

Plainchant, which looks easy on paper, can be the most challenging and rewarding of choral styles. Chant originated as heightened speech, and text expression is of the greatest importance on three levels. First, consider the general emotional affect, in this case, happy celebration. Second, observe the shape and direction of each text phrase, and of the piece as a whole. "Lead the line" to the high point—often the last accented syllable in a line—with occasional subsidiary accents in longer phrases. Third, distinguish between the strong and weak syllables of each word, striving for a natural speech rhythm. Work out these elements and sing lines, not notes. The result will be unity of intent, which makes chant, and all ensemble music, come alive. In its original context, the cantor (or cantors—two or three) would have intoned the opening notes—probably just the first word, "Hodie"—after which the entire choir would have joined in and sung through to the end. Note: the slur mark with the slash is a *plica*—a smooth, liquid connection between two notes, the second of which is softer, and closing to the "n" sound somewhat early.

Carol: Alleluia: A nywe werk

Source: MS. Selden B. 26, f. 22 (British, 15th century)

This joyful carol has a double *burden* or refrain (the first in two-voice texture, the second in three-voice texture), which is to be sung consecutively as a unit at the beginning of the carol. The second, three-voice *burden* is sung between the verses and at the end of the carol. The verses themselves are written in "call-and-response" style. In larger ensembles, the monophonic sections should probably be sung by a semichorus. In smaller ensembles, these sections can be sung by all singers, some singers, or even one singer. We've provided all the verses as they exist in the manuscript, but some verses may be omitted in performance.

Although carols all follow a basic structure of *burden* (refrain) alternating with a number of verses, fifteenth-century English carols show a wide variety of style and expression. They probably functioned as "para-liturgical" music, amplifying the set liturgical forms of the Mass and Divine Office on important feast days, and perhaps accompanying festive processions. The term *carol* descended from the French *carole*—a type of medieval dancing song. Carols were not just for Christmas: they were written and sung for many feasts of the church year (including the passion and death of Jesus), in honor of Mary and the saints, or even to teach a moral lesson. But the Christmas carols—rollickingly jolly or lullaby tender—speak most clearly to modern sensibilities.

Significantly missing from medieval musical manuscripts (with a few exceptions) are indications of tempo, dynamics and expression. These are elements that we work out ourselves, based on the text, the texture, and the intent of the original, as best we can determine it. In choral performance, the size and skill of the ensemble will have a bearing on tempo as well. We strive to connect dynamic variation to changes in texture and (mainly) the text. Expression takes its cue from these elements as well.

In the Middle Ages, music was written down in a way that best suited the mode or tone (of which there were many more than just our major and minor). Thus a piece in "mode I" would usually be written with D as the tonic, or home note. The actual acoustical starting pitch was set by the lead singer, and might be any pitch that suited the ensemble. In this edition, for ease of use in choral situations, we have transposed some of the music to appropriate keys.

Voice distribution in medieval music is a tricky business. There is a lot of voice crossing, and ranges can be fairly wide within a single voice part. Judicious mixing of first and second sopranos, or even of sopranos and altos, will often yield good results. Transposing the pieces up a major second and singing them an octave lower should allow them to be sung by a male chorus. A suitable key can also be found for use by a group of male and female voices, with low-to-medium female voices singing the top line, and male voices on the lower parts. In terms of rehearsal methods, it should be borne in mind that medieval music is essentially linear, not harmonic, and the less keyboard accompaniment used during rehearsal, the better chance singers have of developing their "melodic" ears.

In all of these works, the text underlay is fairly clear in the manuscript sources. When the exact placement of a syllable is doubtful, we have chosen a placement that enhances the musical line, and that, where possible, obeys the early-Renaissance dictum that syllables should fall on longer rather than shorter note values. Texts have been edited by the members of Anonymous 4. Translations have been prepared by the members of Anonymous 4 and by Lawrence Rosenwald.

Discovering and learning the pronunciation of an old language is one of the fascinating aspects of performing music from earlier times, and in our experience can greatly enhance the character and flavor of the music. In their detective work, modern linguistic scholars use a variety of resources including poetic rhymes, spelling variants, and puns, as well as the writings of early orthoepists (Renaissance scholars of pronunciation). For the pronunciation of these Middle English and Latin texts, we have consulted several sources, in particular the volume *Singing Early Music*, ed. Timothy J. McGee, with A.G. Rigg and David N. Klausner (Indiana University Press, 1996). As there are no definitive rules, however, the choices we have made are our own interpretations of these scholars' guidelines. We provide here our version of the texts in the International Phonetic Alphabet.

Anonymous 4



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Renowned for their astonishing vocal blend and virtuosic ensemble singing, the four women who comprise Anonymous 4 came together in 1986 to experiment with the sound of medieval chant and polyphony as sung by higher voices. The group's members combine musical, literary, and historical scholarship with contemporary performance intuition as they create innovative programs interweaving music with poetry and narrative. Based in New York City, Anonymous 4 perform to critical acclaim on music series throughout North America and abroad, and are celebrated regulars at major international festivals such as the BBC Proms, Tanglewood, and Belgium's Flanders Festival. Anonymous 4 have been featured on radio and television programs worldwide, including A&E's "Breakfast with the Arts," "CBS Sunday Morning," and "A Prairie Home Companion." Anonymous 4's award-winning recordings of medieval music have attained unprecedented popularity, rising to the top of Billboard's classical chart and reaching over a million listeners. For more information, visit Anonymous 4's website: <www.anonymous4.com>

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