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VOX HUMANA: Silent Night, Dominant Ninth

Like the first flakes of overnight snow, no one can be exactly sure when it happened. Sometime, though, in the past couple of decades, Christmas music, that is the Christmas music that we in this business perform, took a new turn.

First it was carols, straightforwardly harmonized in four-part settings. True, some domestic publishers had issued unpretentious choral arrangements, mainly to make old music seem more up to date and to attach vernacular texts to old German, French, or Latin poetry. Then, in surprising lock step with rock 'n roll, we endured the British Invasion. While the Beatles were touching down for the first time at JFK on February 7, 1964, so that conspiracy of Oxford University Press, the BBC, and EMI (Argo) Records, had us convinced that the only permissible descants to Christmas hymns were those of David Willcocks, and singing a carol demanded an inventive arrangement with fresh rhythms vying for the ear as background divisi choruses angelically oohed and ahhed. And the junior partners in that invasion, like John Rutter, are still with us and prospering.

So, how did we pull up even? We did the same thing we did to the French in the 1920's, we retaliated with Yankee pop and jazz. No, not Mel Tormé crooning the *Christmas Song*, but settings of our kind of tunes, *Stille nacht*, *Veni Emmanuel*, *Corde natus ex parentis* as lushly bolstered by dominant ninths, major sevenths, diminished thirteenths. Make no mistake, in the right hands, and in the right place, these make gorgeous listening. But just when did it become the norm, the expectation, that Midnight Mass should be the Christmas Pops?

Before reaching for the mighty pen, please, let me make clear that this column is no panegyric on the evils of holiday commercialism, on consumerism, on the secularization of a solemn feast or great music, on old versus new in art. If the world at large wants to commercialize Christmas, let them go ahead. Sermons on the true meaning of Christmas should come from clergy. No sanctimonious self-righteousness here! Were there time and cash enough, the Christmas shopping stroll on Fifth Avenue or Rodeo Drive would beckon. The pop Christmas treacle played by the pianist at Nordstrom's hardly causes notice.

And, while clarifying terms, this comment is not about the many art forms that genuinely appropriate the techniques and materials we're talking about. What would be Gospel without modern harmony? And, it's not about closing the door to cultural expansion and redefinition. Why not test the definitive durability of the accounts of the Nativity? Hip Hop versions of Messiah, for instance, are no more scandalous in concept than *Romeo and Juliet* shifted to the slums of the West Side or *Don Giovanni* in Harlem. Let's try and see first hand if such shifts of surroundings and chronology can add greater significance to the original or make the underlying narrative more universally appealing.

A couple of years ago, early on a November 4, the view from the hotel room in Montreal confirmed that the first snow of the season – about 2 inches – had hit the ground. The Canadians, of all folks, were going giddy over it. The TV news announced

school closings in northern Vermont, the downtown streets already had their holiday lights festooned, and the radio talk show host asked callers what they thought of the weather. So much for northern stoicism, for caller after caller insisted that today was the day to stay at home and pull out the Christmas ornaments!

So, if the world as a whole wants to spend itself into oblivion starting the day after Halloween (still All Saints' in some quarters), why not defend its right to do so? But, allow me the privilege of vowing anew that nobody will hear *me* play a note of Christmas music until the closing words of Vespers on the Fourth Sunday of Advent have reverberated their last. "Christmas is forced upon a reluctant and disgusted nation by the shopkeepers and the press; on its own merits it would wither and shrivel in the fiery breath of universal hatred," said a curmudgeonly George Bernard Shaw.

But, back on topic, what are the expectations upon us who program and play Christmas literature? Must everything be arranged in the name of contemporary significance much in the same way that no voice can any more be heard without amplification, compression, and equalization? Are there alternatives to *Es ist ein' Ros entsprungen* harmonized with chromatic seventh chords? Does the music rack on Christmas Eve need to read F<sup>07</sup>, G<sup>mi</sup>, A<sup>mi7</sup>, Ab<sup>7b9</sup>? Does each score need to come with its resident studio producer?

At the risk of stating the obvious, the humble origins of *Stille Nacht* bear remembering. Recall also that the French noels are down-to-earth country music. String them together and you get the Charpentier, *Messe de Minuit pour Noël*. And, all those haunting Celtic ballads that raise so much cash for PBS also evince the simplicity of music from the groundwork of human experience. Just as, from time to time, the real purposes and narrative of lyric theatre become acutely defined when listening to someone like Mandy Patinkin standing on a bare stage singing with nothing more than a piano, it does us well to pull the plug, scrub away the lush harmonies, ditch the arrangers, and rediscover the effortless glory of Christmas.

- Haig Mardirosian