

# Jack Body: Carol to Saint Stephen

## Notes by the composer

*Carol to Saint Stephen* was originally commissioned in 1975 by the Bach Choir of Wellington, and was first performed by them under the conductorship of Roy Tankersley.

### Introduction

I remember, while still a student at Auckland University, "discovering" mediaeval English carols. There was a large volume of them in the *Musica Britannica* series in the university library. I loved the "archaic" qualities, the open 5ths, the "unprepared" dissonances, the energetic rhythms. For me it was a marvellous foil to the highly refined polyphony of the sixteenth century (Palestrina, Byrd etc), music which was an essential part of my university study. To me these mediaeval carols represented a musical language still in formation, whereas the language of Palestrina seemed like an ultimate development, a rational music in which all the elements were known. As a young, aspiring composer the sometimes angular, unpredictable, vigorous quality of the carols clearly had greater appeal.

Over the years I have used material from this collection of mediaeval carols on four different occasions. As did Stravinsky in such works as *Pulcinella* and *The Fairy's Kiss* ballets, which were based on the music of Pergolesi and Tchaikovsky respectively, my *Carol to Saint Stephen* is a "recomposition" of the original carol. The tradition for this kind of reworking of music of another composer can be seen in the work of many composers, particularly those of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These works were generally called "parody" compositions (not in the modern meaning of the word) and were often done to honour the composer of the original work — nowadays things have changed, and such "borrowings" from the music of one's contemporaries can quickly end up in court for breach of copyright!

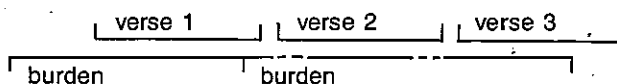
An historical note from the cover notes to *English Medieval Carols*, a recording by the Primavera Singers of the New York Pro Musica Antiqua under the direction of Noah Greenberg:

Most people, when they think of carols, will call to mind "Silent Night, Holy Night", "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing", and other favourites that have become part and parcel of our Christmas tradition. But there is a whole repertory of medieval carols for Christmas and Easter that is just as fresh and appealing now as it was in its heyday. This kind of carol flourished in England, and was derived from an early form of singing, associated with dancing, in which a leader and a chorus answered one another. Originally, indeed, the name "carol" meant "a dance accompanied by song", but by the fifteenth century it had come

to mean a song in a special form, not accompanied by dancing. But the vigorous, lilting rhythms, almost exclusively in triple metre, and the rather angular, energetic melodies of most of the carols make their relationship with the dance amply clear. The leader-chorus relationship is preserved too, in the form of the carol.

### Analytical notes

Like other mediaeval carols, *Eya, Martyr Stephane* comprises a *burden* (chorus) sung by everyone, and *verses* sung by solo singers. *Carol to Saint Stephen* retains something of this distinction — the solo alto and tenor sing only the *verses* (which are "echoed" by the women's chorus) and the men's chorus sing only the *burden*. However, in order to break down the sectioned "squareness" of *burden* alternating with *verse* (B, V1, B, V2, B, V3, B), the men's chorus sing the *burden* through only twice, in a way that overlaps the *verses*. The relationship thus becomes:



The alto and tenor soloists present the *verses* of the original carol in a more or less exact form. Note however the long silences between each of the phrases, and the occasional "stretching" of the original note values, as for example at their first entry ("Of this martyr make we mend").

The soprano soloist clearly represents Stephen himself. The theatricality of this image is emphasised by the semi-circle made by the rest of the choir, by the violence of the sounds they make in the second verse, and by the sense of abandoned aloneness of the ending.

### Compositional techniques

*Carol to Saint Stephen* creates a dense polyphonic texture (up to 35 separate parts) out of a simple two-voice original. This is achieved simply by multiplying the parts and positioning them slightly differently from each other. In a way it could be thought of as a kind of "blurring" such as a pencil drawing that has become smudged, or a blurred photo of something in motion. The last verse particularly has a blurred, slightly out-of-focus quality. Other sections, however, are far more dynamic and rhythmic, such as the opening men's chorus. This page (p.3) is based entirely on the first 3½ bars of the *burden*. The ten short motives are each repeated a specified number of times so that as the four sections of the men's chorus progress they get "out of phase" with each other. However they keep the

Solo Alto

Solo Tenor

Women's Chorus

Musical notation for Solo Alto and Solo Tenor parts, showing a series of quarter notes on a single pitch.

Musical notation for Women's Chorus parts I, II, III, and IV. Part I includes the lyrics "WENO DO - NO CE - LES - TIS GRA - CI - E".

Musical notation for Women's Chorus parts I and II, including the lyrics "DO - NO CE - LES - TIS GRA - CI - E".

Musical notation for Women's Chorus parts III, IV, V, and VI, including the lyrics "LES) STIS GRA - CI - E".

EX. 1

Soloists	(original carol)	bar 2 ("les")	bar 3 ("tis")	bar 4 ("graci")	bar 5 ("e")
Women's Chorus	Section 1	x 6	x 4	x 3	x 2
	Section 2	x 4	x 3	x 2	x 1
	Section 3	x 3	x 2	x 1	(x 2)
	Section 4	x 2	x 1	x 2	(x 3)

same basic pulse so that by the bottom of the page they are back "in phase" again — that is provided no-one has made a mistake in counting their repetitions!

Some of the ways the "blurring" or "phasing" effect is created in the pages following can be seen in these two excerpts. Consider the phrase "Dona celestis graciae" on pp 8 & 9 (Ex. 1), as found in the soloists' and women's chorus parts.

At the beginning of p. 9 the phrase is sung by the soloists in an original form. However the phrase has been started already by the second section of the women's chorus six bars before. Comparing sections 1, 2 and 4 of the women's chorus (no. 3 duplicates no. 1) they all sing the phrase "dona ce.." but at different times and different tempi. Section 1 & 3 sing at a quarter of the speed of the original ( $\delta \times 4 = d = \delta + \frac{1}{4}$ ), section 2 at a sixth of the speed of the original ( $\delta \times 6 = d = \delta + \frac{1}{6}$ ), and section 4 a third ( $\delta \times 3 = d$ ).

This is all designed so that all parts coincide in the first bar of p. 9. Here a kind of "concertina" effect takes place, with each of the four sections of the women's chorus progressively stretching and contracting the original phrase ("lestis graciae") [see above]

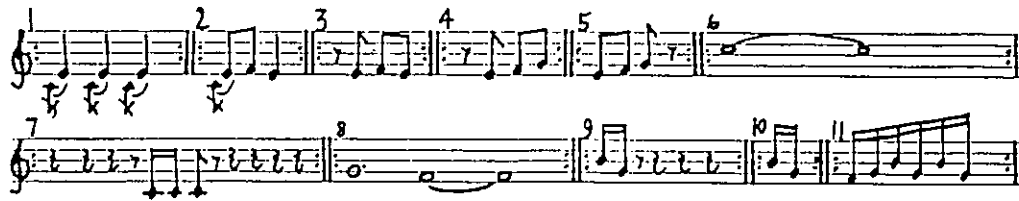
On p. 16 the phrase, "Thou prayest Christ for thine enemies" is sung by the two soloists (Ex. 2). The women's chorus pick up motive from this phrase each repeating the motive several times rather like little eddies in a stream. Each of the repetitions is softer than the previous one, suggesting dying echoes. It can be seen that this is an adaptation of the techniques used in the very opening men's chorus, but with quite a different sounding result.

### Origins of the techniques used

In considering Carol to Saint Stephen in retrospect, there are perhaps three or four experiences which might have suggested to me the techniques which I used in the work.

The musical score for Example 2 is presented in five systems. The top two systems show the soloist's part with the lyrics: "THOU PRAYDEST CHRIST FOR THINE ENEMIES". The bottom three systems show the women's chorus parts, with lyrics: "THOU PRAYDEST THOU PRAYDEST THOU PRAYDEST THOU PRAYDEST", "PRAYDEST CHRIST PRAYDEST CHRIST PRAYDEST CHRIST PRAYDEST CHRIST", and "CHRIST CHRIST CHRIST CHRIST". The score includes various tempo markings such as *mf*, *mp*, *p*, and *pp*, and dynamic markings like *z* (zest). Brackets and arrows indicate phrasing and the relationship between the soloist's phrase and the chorus's repetitions.

EX. 2



Terry Riley's "In C", first eleven figures.

One of these was the sensation of listening to choirs singing in the cavernous cathedrals of Europe, where the sound can echo and reverberate on and on, producing the kind of aural "blurring", so that one is never quite sure which sound is the original direct sound and which is the echo.

Another experience which interested me was my early experimentation with multi-track tape-recorders. I found that recording the same sound separately on to two tracks of a stereo tape recorder created an odd effect, rather like "hearing double". Even when I tried to make the two recordings absolutely synchronous, they were always perceptibly out of phase with one another. By taking this stereo recording and copying it one at a time on to each track of a four tape-recorder the sound was multiplied to a total of eight times, and the phasing effect was even more pronounced. By copying this whole recording back on to each track of the stereo machine, the effect was again doubled. And so on. This kind of technique was used in several of my tape compositions, including *Musik Dari Jalan* (Music from the Streets).

The idea of building up a dense musical texture based on the repetition of short musical motives is also a characteristic of recent American music which is generally labelled under the term "minimalist". Although I find many purely minimalist works rather long-winded and tedious, I believe there are interesting possibilities for the development of minimalist techniques. Indeed, many composers today have been influenced by the music of such composers as Steve Reich and Phil Glass. (The spectacular Auckland-based group, *From Scratch*, obviously has a lot in common with this music). One of my first experiences of minimal music was to hear a performance of Terry Riley's "In C" in Europe in 1969. In this work, the performers proceed through a series of 53 melodic figures, repeating each figure as often as each person wishes. Thus, although

everyone is together on the first figure, they become more out of phase with each other as the piece progresses.

Perhaps another inspiration for Carol to Saint Stephen is philosophical. Whereas in the spatial arts such as painting or sculpture, a viewer can contemplate the art work for as long as he/she wishes, from different perspectives, distances, alone or in company, in different lights etc, music, as a temporal art, passes unstoppably before our ears. True, we can play a recording again and again as often as we like, but we can't really pause during the performance, simply to savour one chord or one phrase of the melody. Perhaps *Carol to Saint Stephen* could be considered my efforts to "hear into" and savour the delights of *Eya, Martyr Stephane* . . .

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#### Some points for discussion

1. Why do you think mediaeval English carols appealed to the Jack Body as a "young aspiring composer", more than the music of Palestrina?
  2. The first page of the score (p. 3) could have been written out in full, showing all the repetitions of the four parts and how they fitted together. What are the advantages and disadvantages of writing it in this short hand way?
  3. Even though the music texture sometimes has 35 separate parts, the music never sounds especially dissonant. Explain why.
  4. Most of the "recomposition" techniques employed involve rhythmic changes to the original carol. Discuss other possible techniques which might have been used.
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