

A Meditative and Musical Guide

to

*Magnificat*

by

John Rutter

The *Magnificat*, the outpouring of spirit that Mary proclaimed when she visited her cousin Elizabeth and shared her news of the miraculous birth of the Messiah, is the quintessential liturgical text for the Advent Season. Mary's words, patterned closely from those of Hannah as she gave thanks for the birth of her son Samuel (Samuel 2:1-10) and a close parallel to Psalm 113, are at once a joyous outburst of praise and thanksgiving, an expression of humility, a recognition of the glory of God and his mercy for humankind, a strong statement of God's love for the humble and poor, and news of the fulfillment of God's promise of a savior. John Rutter characterizes the text as "a canticle of praise, trust, and joy."

### **Movement 1 – Mary Sings Praises to God (Luke 1:46-48)**

*Magnificat anima mea Dominum:* My soul doth magnify the Lord:  
*et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo.* and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

*Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae:* For he hath regarded the lowliness of his hand-maiden:  
*ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes* for behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me  
*generationis.* blessed.

The first movement is divided into 2 large sections that express contrasting perspectives of Mary's joy. Rutter looked to the strong musical heritages of Spain and Mexico to derive the rhythmic motors for this joy. The first section begins with an orchestral fanfare that sets the stage for the clearly joyful, festive text of the first part of Mary's Song. "My soul doth magnify the Lord" springs first from the women's voices, as it should, in an arch-shaped melody that is quickly joined by the men. Underlying this melody is the Latin, rhythmic accompaniment in the orchestra. Tango rhythms are introduced at *in Deo salutari meo* in the women's voices

The second section presents a more introspective sense of praise and thanksgiving. As the women's voices sing "*Quia respexit . . .*" it is as if Mary is thinking to herself. One of the most beautiful sections of the movement occurs as the tenors sing a chant-like melody beneath the women in the only *a cappella* section of the work. When we arrive at *omnes generationis* the tango rhythms of the first section are reprised, this time by the men, followed by women.

The movement concludes in a highly joyful reprise of the music drawn from the dance rhythms of the first section. Colorful percussion instrumentation heightens the joy.

### **Movement 2 – 15<sup>th</sup> Century English Carol**

Of a Rose, a love Rose,/Of a Rose is all my song.

Hearken to me, both old and young,/How this Rose began to spring;  
A fairer rose to mine liking/In all this world ne know I none.

Five branches of that rose there been,/The which be both fair and sheen;  
The rose is called Mary, heaven's queen./Out of her bosom a blossom sprang.

The first branch was of great honour:/That blest Marie should bear the flow'r;  
There came an angel from heaven's tower/To break the devil's bond.

The second branch was great of might,/That sprang upon Christmas night;  
The star shone over Bethlem bright,/That man should see it both day and night.

The third branch did spring and spread;/Three kings then the branch gan led  
Unto Our Lady in her child-bed;/Into Bethlem that branch sprang right.

The fourth branch it sprang to hell,/The devil's power for to fell:  
That no soul therein should dwell,/The branch so blessedfully sprang.

The fifth branch it was so sweet,/It sprang to heav'n, both crop and root,  
Therein to dwell and be our \*bote:/So blessedly it sprang.

\*bote=salvation

Pray we to her with great honour,/She that bare the blessed flow'r,  
To be our help and our succor,/And shield us from the fiendes bond.

The second movement is comprised of eight stanzas, several of which are separated by a brief refrain. The refrain is quite "transparent, gentle and reflective." The stanzas provide a narrative and vary by the forces that present the text. In contrast to the Latin rhythms of movement 1, Rutter utilizes more chantlike melodic lines in this English carol.

### **Movement 3 – Mary Recalls God's Holiness (Luke 1:-49)**

*Qui fecit mihi magna qui potens est :  
et sanctum nomen eius.*

For he that is mighty hath magnified me:  
and holy is his Name.

*Sanctus, Sanctus, Sancus Dominus Deus Sabaoth.  
Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua.  
Hosanna in excelsis.*

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts.  
Heaven and earth are filled with thy glory.  
Hosanna in the highest.

This movement begins with a majestic gesture, suggesting the power of God who has raised Mary up to bear the Christ Child. This gesture is developed in a thoughtful manner through successive presentations of each section of the choir.

The second section turns to the holiness of God (*et sanctum . . .*). Rutter sees God's holiness as very different from power in that it is an attribute of God that calls upon our reflective wits in order to comprehend. Instead of being overwhelmed by God's holiness, we are allowed to "consider" God's holiness as understanding gently unfolds in our minds.

To drive home two millennia of devotional thought about God's holiness, Rutter draws text from the Catholic mass – the *Sanctus*. A chant from the *Missa cum júbilo* provides the final contemplative musical thought for this movement as the soprano and tenor sing separately and then together the words from the *Sanctus*.

### **Movement 4 – Mary Recalls God's Mercy (Luke 1:50)**

*Et misericordia eius a progenie in progenies  
timentibus eum.*

And his mercy is on them  
that fear him throughout all generations.

Rutter describes this movement as "radiantly happy." While the above translation is traditionally given for this text, Rutter tells us that *misericordia* carries with it more of a sense of compassion/loving-kindness that God puts forward for humankind. The soloist "radiantly" presents the ideas and the choir responds as the "we," the thankful, respectful recipients of God's goodwill. *Timentibus* (fear) means more our sense of respect instead of trembling before the Almighty.

### **Movement 5 – Mary Recalls God's Love for the Humble (Luke 2:51-52)**

*Fecit potentiam in brachio suo:  
dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.*

He has showed strength with his arm:  
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

*Deposuit potentes de sede,  
et exaltavit humiles.*

He hath put down the mighty from their seat.  
And hath exalted the humble and meek.

Rutter returns to the Latin dance rhythms and jazz influences for this movement. Instead finding the happy energy of the first movement, we discover music that sounds like a rumble between God and humankind – the part of humanity that makes personal wealth and stature what separates them from others. The music is a real cacophonous struggle until we arrive at *et exaltavit humiles* (and exalts the humble and meek). Rutter writes utterly beautiful music in a gentle contrapuntal style that arches upward and back down dynamically. It ends a bit unsettled and gives over immediately to Movement 6.

### **Movement 6 – Mary Recalls God’s Love for the Poor and Promise of a Saviour (Luke 2:53-55)**

*Esurientes implevit bonis: et divites dimisit inanes.*

He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.

*Suscepit Israel puerum suum, recordatus misericordiae suae.*

He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel.

*Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros, Abraham et semini eius in saecula.*

As he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever.

While garbed in the juxtaposition of haves and have-nots, this text points to God’s providential love for all humankind. This love is everlasting and fills God’s people with good things. And, we can trust this. The choir has more independent singing against the soloist in this movement than in Movement 4, suggesting the affirming, active trust of the people in God’s providential care.

### **Movement 7 – The Lesser Doxology and Final Prayer**

*Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto.*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.

O holy Father, help, we pray, all in need:  
Strengthen those whose spirit fails,  
Comfort those whom grief assails;  
We pray for thy people here, for thy Holy Church so dear;  
You are Lord for all thy servants, God of all people:  
Grant us all the favour of thy gracious love;  
Succour us, comfort us, we humble implore thee.  
Alleluia!

*Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.*

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Rutter recalls God’s majesty and power in the first part of the Gloria Patri. A final prayer is interpolated, and at *sicut erat* . . . (As it was in the beginning. . .) it becomes natural to recall the music of Movement I. The tango/dance rhythms are recalled as the *Amens* begin, and the work ends with shouts of joy.