

Four Christmas motets

Francis Poulenc (1899 - 1963)

O magnum mysterium
Quem vidistis pastores
Videntes stellam
Hodie Christus natus est

Francis Poulenc was one of a somewhat notorious group of young French composers who became known as 'Les Six'. The aims of the French group were to break away from the twin influences of Germanic formality and French impressionism, and to employ a direct and simple style in their own music. Of the six, Poulenc was by far the most successful.

Although Poulenc saw himself as primarily a composer of religious music, it was not in fact until 1936, following his return to Catholicism, that he produced his first sacred work. A steady stream of religious pieces then flowed from his pen, including a Mass and a series of motets. Poulenc's very distinctive style contrasts austere, dissonant textures with rich, sensuous harmonies, usually paralleled by abrupt changes in mood from the playful to the solemn.

In the Christmas motets, composed in 1952, we find Poulenc at his most relaxed as he joyfully celebrates the events of the Christmas story. The texts are those traditionally associated with the Gregorian chants set for Christmas and the Epiphany.

programme notes by John Bawden

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O magnum mysterium

O great mystery and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the new-born Saviour lying in a crib. O blessed virgin, whose womb was worthy to bear the Christ.

Quem vedistis pastores

Tell us, shepherds, what have you seen? Tell us the news - who has appeared on earth? We have seen a new-born King and choirs of angels praising the Saviour together. Announce what you have seen, and proclaim the birth of Christ.

Videntes stellam

When they saw the star, the Magi rejoiced with great joy; entering into the house they offered the Saviour gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Hodie Christus natus est

Today Christ is born; today the Saviour has appeared; today the angels sing on earth and the archangels rejoice; today just men rejoice saying, 'Glory to God in the highest. Alleluia.'