

PROGRAM NOTES

This afternoon's program of early baroque German Christmas music features works by Michael Praetorius, a central figure in the transmission of the new Italian styles to German lands in the early years of the 17th century. Born on February 15, 1571, Praetorius entered the service of the Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel in 1595 as an organist, becoming court chapel master in 1604. In the mid-1610s he spent several years at the court of the Elector of Saxony, mostly in Dresden, where he encountered and absorbed the latest music from Italy, including works by Claudio Monteverdi, Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli, Giulio Caccini, Luca Marenzio, and many others, as well as treatises on the practice of basso continuo by Agostino Agazzari and others. He died on his fiftieth birthday in 1621.

Praetorius was a largely self-taught musician whose enormous surviving output includes over 1000 works based on Protestant chorales and hymns, as well as on the Latin liturgy of the Lutheran church (such as, on our program, the setting of the Advent hymn *Conditor alme siderum*, the canticle *Magnificat* with interpolated German and Latin Christmas songs, and the motet on verses from Psalm 24, *Attollite portae*), and three volumes of an encyclopedia entitled *Syntagma musicum*. Many more works are lost or were never finished, including a fourth book of *Syntagma* and all but one book, *Terpsichore*, of a projected nine-volume set of secular music.

A tireless pedagogue as well as composer, Praetorius provided detailed instructions as to how his music could be scored and how one might arrange the performers, especially in large-scale concerted works for multiple vocal and instrumental choirs such as those from *Polyhymnia caduceatrix et panegyrica* ("Festive and peace-bringing Polyhymnia") and *Puericinium* ("compositions for boys," featuring a choir of three or four soprano soloists), both late collections that incorporate elements of Italian styles. We have followed his principles and prescriptions insofar as possible.

No sonatas or canzonas by Praetorius survive, although one of the projected volumes of secular music was to contain some. In fact, the sonata was almost exclusively an Italian phenomenon until the second half of the 17th century. Germans enjoyed dance music by French composers, such as the music by Pierre-Francois Caroubel published in Praetorius's *Terpsichore*, and also wrote their own, such as the suites in Johann Hermann Schein's *Banchetto musicale* (Musical Banquet), but for the sonatas and canzonas on this program we turn (as Praetorius did) to Venice and music by the celebrated Giovanni Gabrieli and by Giovanni Battista Grillo, who became the first organist of San Marco in 1619.

The remaining set is drawn from the *Cantiones sacrae* by the great organist Samuel Scheidt. Although all three works are in eight parts, each employs its forces differently. The cheerful *Gelobet seystu* is scored the most conventionally, pitting two identical SATB four-part choirs against each other in antiphonal exchanges, whereas *Puer natus in Bethlehem* divides the eight parts as unequally as possible, setting one soprano against seven voices in an exhilarating, if brief, call-and-response. In *Duo seraphim*, Scheidt distributes his voices into higher (SSAT) and lower (ATBB) choirs, but for much of the work, he plays with combinations of two voices (for "Duo seraphim") and three (at "Tres sunt") both between and within the choirs, reserving the antiphonal, two-choir writing for climaxes.

—Scott Metcalfe