

“There is No Rose,” Fourteenth century carol (1420) Chaucerian English

There is no rose of such vertu,
as is the rose that bare Jesu.

Alleluia

For in this rose contained
was heaven and earth in little space.

Res miranda (miraculous thing)

For by that rose we may well see
that he is God in persons three.

Pares forma (of the same form)

The angels sungen the shepherds to:
Gloria in excelsis Deo.

(Glory to God in the highest)

Gaudeamus [hodie] (let us rejoice – this day)

Leave we all this worldly mirth
and follow we this joyful birth.

Transeamus (leave the world of sin and follow the child)

“Rose” is the Medieval symbol of the Virgin Mary, representing purity and healing. The piano introduction creates a world of wonder and mysticism depicting the Virgin birth by using the antique Lydian mode (raised fourth degree of the major scale and by using a 3:2 polyrhythm that (hopefully) creates the illusion of floating. Verses one, two and five portray Mary with a lyric and upward striving melody. The word “rose” is lifted to an exalted place with notes not typical to the major key. Verses three and four refer to the excited shepherds in a dramatic setting of the text as the shepherds might have announced it. Women’s voices singing verse four represent the angels singing to the shepherds. The piano improvises on the introductory melody that is intended to represent the swirling of angel wings and a whirlwind of divine energy. This leads to a joyous celebration of the word, “Gaudeamus (let us rejoice)” and the choir expands to eight parts.

Christian symbolism abounds here. The end of each lyric section (on the words “bare Jesu,” “little space, and “joyful birth” shifts down a half step to portray the otherworldliness of the Virgin birth in “little space.” The men respond to the women’s English verse in Latin, and the right hand of the piano forecasts the “shepherd’s theme” of verses three and four. The polyrhythm of the shepherd’s theme portrays the fusion of two worlds. The canon (round) of verses three and four is in three parts (the number ‘3’ is central to Christian symbolism). The cadences of each verse use keys in the relationship of a “third” to the home key. The final cadence moves from the distant chord of “F# minor nine” to the home key of “F” Lydian (which is another shift of a half step). Thus, almighty God is made gentle through the “mystical Rose” who gives birth to a kind and vulnerable child for the faithful to follow.