

The Holly and the Ivy

Description: A musical arrangement written for two singers, a soprano and an alto, without accompaniment.

Methods/Techniques:

The piece is written in the medieval carol format starting with a chorus, with the chorus repeated after each verse.¹ It is based on a carol collected by Cecil J. Sharp in Gloucestershire, and first published in 1911 in his collection “English Folk Carols”. Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott wrote “We suspect that the words of the 'refrain' may well have been newly tacked on to the older carol by a Birmingham broadside publisher around 1710.”² The original text of the chorus, which is often misidentified as the first verse, has been restored in this arrangement. The 1710 refrain about “the rising of the sun and the running of the deer”³ was removed.

In Elizabethan England, popular songs and carols were commonly sung in unison, but two or more parts were common for vocal consorts. For example, seven of the 49 songs in the popular collection “An English Medieval and Renaissance Song Book” edited by Noah Greenberg are two part arrangements. This 2 part setting has a harmony part in the alto line.

Materials:

Since the leading experts on carols describe it as “older” than 1710, and nothing in the style of the melody or verses indicates that it was written after 1600, I believe that it was probably sung in our period of study. Unfortunately this cannot be proven.

The carol is typeset in modern notation using Finale. The performers were not experienced in reading renaissance notation, so modern notation was used for their convenience.

Complexity:

In addition to setting the melody in the key of G major to fit the singer's voices, I wrote the harmony part in the alto line. I based the harmony on parts of several arrangements I have heard, but the overall line is original.

1 A carol is “a late medieval English song on any subject, in which uniform stanzas, or verses (V), alternate with a refrain, or burden (B), in the pattern B, V1, B, V2 . . . B.” Encyclopaedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/96438/carol> , accessed August 25, 2014.

2 “The Shorter New Oxford Book of Carols”, Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott, Oxford University Press, 1993, page 206.

3 Ibid.