

IN HOC ANNI CIRCULO

By DOM ANSELM HUGHES, O.S.B.

OF the many hundreds of medieval songs, sacred or secular, which have survived to the present day just a few — such as *Angelus ad Virginem* or *Ad cantus laetitiae* — can be cited in several versions from several countries. A Christmas carol which has an even more varied history than either of these two is *In hoc anni circulo*. As this piece contains both verses and a refrain, and can, at least in its final form, quite easily be used as dance music by those who may be so inclined, it conforms exactly to the academic requirements of writers who quite correctly deny the use of the term *carol* for something which is a mere Christmas song or hymn, without any refrain and perhaps undanceable. Our carol originated with the chorus *De Virgine Maria*, and the verses beginning *In hoc anni circulo* did not arrive until later. Its bibliography runs over five centuries and from Scotland to Czechoslovakia, Italy, and Sweden.

On July 25, 1961, certain changes were made in the rubrics of the Divine Office as used in Benedictine houses. Among these was the alteration by which the antiphons for lauds for the last seven days before Christmas were now to be sung at vespers as well as at lauds, in place of the ferial antiphons previously used for vespers. Now at Nashdom Abbey in Buckinghamshire, as at probably the great majority of Benedictine monasteries, vespers were sung daily but lauds were recited in monotone. As a result of this change I heard for the first time in December, 1961, the music of those antiphons, and in the second half of the first antiphon for Wednesday before Christmas I heard, and recognized at once, the original strain of the chorus of this carol, from which all its later developments sprang.

Ex. 1



Here is the original chorus, *De virgine Maria*; and the complete form *Verbum caro factum est de virgine Maria* is not found in the examples of the carol from earlier centuries so far. The verses, or at least the first verse, *In hoc anni circulo*, are fairly constant from the start in the eleventh century. There is a prodigious number of these verses in some of the sources, as many as twenty-nine in two of the manuscripts; most of them have from fourteen to sixteen verses. All the details are given in *Julian's Dictionary of Hymnology* (1892, and subsequent editions) under the heading of *Verbum caro*.

This carol is a very appropriate piece for illustrating the general development of medieval music over about five centuries, for two reasons: first, because it is one of a small number of tunes which keep on cropping up here and there in the manuscripts sources. The best known of these is probably *Angelus ad Virginem*, referred to by Chaucer in "The Miller's Tale," which occurs in at least eleven manuscripts with or without music for one, two, or three voices. And this argues convincingly that it was accepted by popular choice; and it is still so accepted today where it is known (as, for instance, in the edition I published with Schott in the series *English Gothic Music* in collaboration with the late Percy Grainger, with whom I had the privilege of working for nearly thirty years, supplying him as a sort of back-room boy with material from medieval sources).

What is true of *Angelus ad Virginem* is also true of *Verbum caro*, which is found in one form or another in at least eleven and possibly nineteen musical sources. With one exception all the manuscripts are in France, Italy, and so on. As far as we can tell the tune was unknown in England, though not in Scotland, as we shall see later on; and the one manuscript in England, the Bodleian Canonici misc. 213 at Oxford, was written in northern Italy.¹ And there are three vernacular versions in German.²

A second and more important reason for calling attention to this tune and its settings is because the melody is a very fine one. There are those who seem to think that anything ancient, provided it is

¹ For some further references, see Manfred Bukofzer, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Music* (1950), p. 149, note 50.

² G. R. Woodward, *Piae Cantiones* (1910), p. 205.

old enough, must be suitable for reproduction in sound today. They forget that in the Middle Ages, just as now, people created or developed music which was sometimes fine music and sometimes just ordinary or even bad music. Personally, the writer has never cared about hearing things that are nothing more than interesting archaeological noises.

Good tunes last. *Verbum caro* is documented from about 1100 until 1582. How old it was when the earliest known version was written we have no means of knowing; but the ground source, the antiphon *Prophetae praedicaverunt*, is at least from three to five centuries older. Apart from this plainsong original, the oldest manuscript is one of the Martial-Tropers, that fascinating collection from the monastery of Saint-Martial outside Limoges in France. The manuscripts are now in Paris, except for one in the British Museum.³ *Verbum caro*, with alternate verses in Provençal, occurs on folio 48 of Bibliothèque Nationale, fonds latin 1139. It is dated somewhere about 1100.⁴

The notation of this Paris manuscript is difficult, because there is only one line to guide us instead of four. The four-line staff had not come into general use by 1100; and the scribe, who used only one line and that in dry-point, certainly indulged in some degree of guesswork or accommodation in placing his notes if they happened to be some distance above Fa, which was his guiding line. This is quite evident from comparison of the different verses, of which there are fifteen in this manuscript.

Moreover, not only has the actual contour of the melody given rise to a certain amount of difficulty in transcribing from the photostat of this manuscript, but it also has no method of indicating any time values for the notes. The invention of strict time values for notes is usually placed about 1260 and associated with the names of Franco of Cologne and Petrus de Cruce. There had previously been what is rather infelicitously known as "square notation" for a hundred years previously; but this, even if it was known when Paris 1139 was written, did not apply to syllabic texts such as ours, nor to music written on one line instead of four or five in the staff. So that for our interpretation now we are thrown back on two methods, one

³ MS Add. 36881.

⁴ J. M. Marshall, in *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, XV (1962), 131, says "towards the end of the 11th century." For the Provençal verses, see Edélestand du Mériel, *Poésies inédites du moyen âge* (1854), p. 337.

and it was written probably about 1250, possibly a little earlier. It contains only organa and conductus; there are no motets, which is a sign of its antiquity.

Many of the conductus have interludes which can be either vocalized or played on instruments. An interesting series which has not yet been fully investigated is that of a number of conductus, occurring as a group in most of the manuscripts, in which several common liturgical forms, such as the Pater noster, Credo, and some canticles, are taken as the basis for poetical expansion or troping: and in one of the interludes to the Magnificat, *Jejune mentis*,⁶ I was fortunate enough some twenty-five years ago to stumble across the refrain of *Verbum caro*, but without any trace of the verse, *In hoc anni circulo*.⁷

Ex. 3



The refrain, which in Ex. 2 was the last of four lines, has already been expanded to pick up the third line and add a repetition. The final cadence has moved back from F to the low D as in the Gregorian source, retaining the strict Dorian contour. Now of course it is always possible that Paris 1139 did actually end on D, because, as said above, the scribe was somewhat airy in his habits when placing his dots if they were some distance from his guideline: and as the refrain is written there only once, after the first verse, we have no series by which to compare results, as we have with the verses. However, it seems best to take Paris 1139 at what we can discern of its face value, and to avoid reading back into it what we find in the later versions, by a process of wishful thinking. It does occasionally happen that a later discovery will justify such an experiment; but this is hardly a case for reading back the Dorian ending into Paris 1139, because of what we shall see further on in Ex. 6. Moreover, there is another early authority of the middle of the twelfth century at Madrid, which I have not been able to examine; and a final version can certainly not be established until this has been transcribed.

⁶ Fol. 121^v, at the foot of the page.

⁷ For another reading of the last two bars, see *The New Oxford History of Music*, II (1954), 335.

Dr. Frank Harrison obliged me some years ago by sending me another version, almost contemporary with that of Saint Andrews, which he transcribed in Italy from the Aosta manuscript Seminario 4 (not foliated) of the late thirteenth century:

Ex. 4

Ver-bum ca-ro fa-ctum est de Vir-gi-ne Ma-ri - a. V. Di - es est læ - ti - ti - æ Nam
na - tus est ho - di - e Fil - i - us de Vir - gi - ne, De Vir - gi - ne Ma - ri - a. R. Ver - bum.

The first piece in that section of the Aosta manuscript happens to be *Ad cantus laetitiae*, another carol which has already been mentioned as boasting a number of versions which could be assembled in the same way as *Verbum caro* and *Angelus ad Virginem*.

The next example occurs about 1420, taking us from Scotland to Czechoslovakia, with a jump of 150 years or so. In this both melody and harmony (if you can call it that) of one voice lying above the melody, except where the refrain falls to the low notes, are both quite plain and syllabic. Possibly this trifling detail may reflect the austerity of the Bohemian Brethren, because the setting is taken from their Songbook of Jistebnicz (Jisteburg). At any rate the harmony is austere, being nothing but fifths and octaves: backward, in 1420, or even barbaric, would be a better description, though this backwardness is itself a testimony to the traditional character of the *canto fermo* as there presented:

Ex. 5

This form of the melody is that reproduced by G. R. Woodward as no. 13 of *The Cowley Carols* in 1902, for which he wrote a more sensible four-part harmony.

The next two instances come from Oxford, Bodleian manuscript Canonici misc. 213.⁸ This was written in northern Italy, and can be dated about 1436, as one of the pieces in the manuscript carries this date. There are three settings of *Verbum caro*, but one of them is no more than a detached contratenor part. They occur on folios 15^v and 16^v. The first is headed “Presbyter P. del Zocholo de portu-naonis” (Pordenone, some thirty miles north-northwest of Venice), the other being anonymous. In this, and in the following examples, the treatment is now beginning to sound more like a motet than a carol, for we have now reached the sophistication of the Renaissance and are losing the robust vigor of the old song.

Ex. 6

Ver - bum ca - ro fa - ctum est de Vir - gi - ne Ma - ri - a.

Ver - bum ca - ro fa - ctum est de Vir - gi - ne Ma - ri - a.

The second setting, on folio 16^v, runs as follows:

Ex. 7

In hoc an - ni cir - cu - lo vi - ta da - tur sae - cu - lo

In hoc an - ni cir - cu - lo vi - ta da - tur sae - cu - lo

na - to no - bis par - vu - lo de Vir - gi - ne Ma - ri - a.

na - to no - bis par - vu - lo de Vir - gi - ne Ma - ri - a.

Ver - bum ca - ro fa - ctum est de Vir - gi - ne Ma - ri - a.

Ver - bum ca - ro fa - ctum est de Vir - gi - ne Ma - ri - a.

⁸ The two following examples are taken from the volume *Polyphonia Sacra*, ed. Charles van den Borren (Plainsong and Mediaeval Music Society, rev. ed., 1962), pp. 290, 291.

Not only have we now entered the atmosphere of the Renaissance, but we are also in the period of the *laudi spirituali*. The lauda was an Italian form of simple popular singing, usually harmonized, and not excluding some independent instrumental accompaniment. The texts were in Italian as a rule, but not invariably, being quite often in Latin. Together with the frottola, the lauda was a forerunner of the madrigal. It had a long history: according to *Grove's Dictionary*, it was flourishing from at least 1310 until as late as 1770. In 1508 Petrucci published a volume of laudi composed by Innocentius Dammonis. In this collection we find two four-part settings of *Verbum caro*, the second of which was published in 1935 by Knud Jeppesen.⁹ The opening of this quite attractive composition provides our eighth example. The melody is in the tenor. Alto and bass have no text underlaid; the alto is possibly instrumental, but the text can be applied so easily to the bass that this part was presumably either vocal or more probably both vocal and instrumental.

Ex. 8

The musical score for Example 8 consists of two systems of four-part vocal settings. The first system has lyrics "In hoc an - ni cir - cu - lo" and the second system has lyrics "vi - ta da - tur sac - cu - lo". The score is in G major and 4/4 time, with a tenor melody line and three accompaniment lines (soprano, alto, and bass). The tenor part is the primary melodic line, while the other parts provide harmonic support. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across multiple notes.

The last appearance of *Verbum caro* before its eclipse for nearly four centuries was in 1582, when it was printed in *Piae Cantiones*, a collection of Swedish church and school songs in Latin, edited by Theodoric Petri of Nyland. The book is exceedingly rare. Only one copy, that which was brought from Stockholm and given to John Mason Neale not later than 1853, was known to exist for the next seventy years: but more recently a second copy is said to have been found in a library at Riga. Neale's copy passed to Thomas Helmore, his

⁹ *Die mehrstimmige italienische Laude um 1500* (1935), no. 62, p. 106.

