

# Noël sur les instruments

Marc-Antoine Charpentier

## Inspiration for the Messe de minuit

Opening the second half of the concert, **The Elm City String Quartet** gifts us four of Charpentier's popular instrumental arrangements of traditional French *noëls*. Composed and performed throughout his career, and commonly played at the celebration of Midnight Mass, these brief instrumental numbers historically appeared in tandem with Charpentier's Christmas dialogues (such as the *In navitatem Domini canticum*) but in the creation of the *Messe de minuit*, their melodies were incorporated directly into the mass itself.

From the rather solemn "Or nous dites Marie" (*But tell us Mary*) to the jolly "Laissez paître vos bêtes" (*Leave your beasts to pasture*) these melodies would have been instantly recognizable during the Christmas season in 17th Century France. They were also, interestingly, subject to extensive **contrafacta**. Fresh texts, set to old tunes, were a common form of communication among the largely illiterate masses, often carrying news of war and political change. The "Noël" particularly, was a favorite base for gossip about the royal court. Is it a stretch to think that the Italian-influenced Charpentier, famously ignored by Louis XIV and his imposed cultural monopoly, is having a bit of a go here?

Listen again for three of these Noëls as they appear in the *Messe de minuit*:

Kyrie I "Joseph est bien marié"  
Christe eleison "Or nous dites, Marie"  
Kyrie II "Une jeune pucelle"

*Joseph est bien marié* (*Joseph is Well-married*)  
*Or nous dites, Marie* (*But tell us, Mary*)  
*Une jeune pucelle* (*A Young Maid*)  
*Laissez-paître vos bêtes* (*Let your beasts graze*)



## Charpentier's Instrumental Compositions

Charpentier was a singer, not an instrumentalist. And never being associated with the court of Louis XIV, did not have the opportunity to write suites and *simphonies* - as many of his contemporaries did - for *Les Vingt-quatre Violons du Roi*, or compose *Pièces de viol or de clavecin*. Rather, Charpentier was a composer for the church, and so his instrumental works largely took the form of preludes to motets, psalms and other choral works, as well as an instrumental mass (his *Messe pour les Instruments au lieu des orgues*) and of course various overtures and dances for secular purposes. Are rare trio sonata - Charpentier's *Sonate à 8, H.548* - written around 1685, combines Italian style with the principle of French dances, and is widely considered a highlight of French Baroque instrumental music. The collection of *Noëls pour les Instruments* which Charpentier intended for orchestra, supported by pipe organ, are certainly his best known and most recorded.

## Further Reading

**The Instrumental Music of Marc-Antoine Charpentier**  
*H. Wiley Hitchcock for The Musical Quarterly*

**Discovered at the Lilly Library: an autograph theoretical work by Marc-Antoine Charpentier (late 1698)**  
*Part II: Marc-Antoine Charpentier the Theorist*

## Watch & Listen

**Noëls sur les instruments - Ensemble Marguerite Louise**

**Messe pour les instruments au lieu des orgues**

**Sonate à 8, H.548**