

LOUISE TALMA'S CHRISTMAS CAROL

BY KENDRA PRESTON LEONARD



In December 1959, while she was working on the orchestration of her opera, *The Alcestiad*, American composer Louise Talma (1906–1996) took a break from her work—something she usually loathed to do—to write a short musical Christmas card.¹ Its recipient was her close friend and the librettist of her opera, author and playwright Thornton Wilder. While Talma's correspondence often includes musical settings of short greetings or lines from previous letters sketched out in the margins, usually composed in a single line and lasting two or three measures, this work is more significant. Playfully titled *Chorus Angelorum, Piccolissima Fughetta, Molto Tonale, Sopra un Téma, Torentoni Niventis Wilderi*, it is—as the title suggests—a fugal motet written for three voices without accompaniment, taking as its text the words “Merry Christmas” and “Happy New Year” in several translations.² Talma dates the score as 12–13 December 1959, and it apparently reached Wilder on or around the 23d of that month. Tucked away in a letter from Wilder in the Louise Talma Papers held by the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, the *Chorus Angelorum* does not appear in Luann Dragone's online catalog of Talma's works, nor is it listed among her compositions in standard reference works such as *Grove Music Online*.³ The date of composition places it as being the only work Talma completed while working on the opera, which she formally began on 13 September 1955 and completed in piano-vocal score on 30 October 1958.⁴

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1. Thornton Wilder, letter to Louise Talma, 23 December 1959, Louise Talma Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Uncat. ZA 525 (hereinafter, “Talma Papers”), box 19.

2. Louise Talma, *Chorus Angelorum*, 12 December 1959, Talma Papers, box 19.

3. “Compositions,” *Louise Talma Society Website*, <http://www.omnidisc.com/Talma/Compositions.html>; Arthur Cohn, Dorothy Regina Holcomb, Sara Jobin/Virginia Davidson, Gregg Smith, “Talma, Louise,” *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/public> (both accessed 17 February 2010). Dragone's catalog also omits at least one other work, the vocal piece *Revocation*, the manuscript for which is held by the Juilliard School Library.

4. Louise Talma, “The roundabout way a work sometimes comes into existence,” Talma Papers, box 10, folder 6.

The *Chorus Angelorum* is notable among Talma's oeuvre for several reasons. It represents a completely tonal work by Talma during a period when she was working in her own distinct nonstrict serial idiom; and is the only fully tonal work she composed after being inspired to work in a serial style by Irving Fine's String Quartet of 1952. Further, the swiftness of its composition opens a window into Talma's psyche at this point. She had just come off the end of a grueling three-year period composing *The Alcestiad* and, while still working up to twenty hours a day on the orchestration, was relieved that the job of creating the piano-vocal score was complete. The *Chorus Angelorum* also comes at a time during which the opera was under consideration by the Metropolitan Opera Company for an American premiere at the new Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, something that caused Talma both happiness and anxiety at the outcome. Finally, the work is a very solid—albeit short—representation of the joy Talma took in her friendship with Wilder, who was also the dedicatee of the first of her Six Etudes for piano (1954), the Three Bagatelles (1955), and her Second Piano Sonata (1955).⁵

Talma began composing in a nonstrict serial style in the early 1950s, and *The Alcestiad*, which she was orchestrating at the time of the *Chorus Angelorum*'s composition, is constructed of serially-derived motifs used to create tonal centers. Although Talma had mostly abandoned the harmonic languages and styles of her training with Nadia Boulanger at the Conservatoire Américain in Fontainebleau, France, which encompassed mastering the compositional approaches of composers from Monteverdi to Stravinsky and focused on French neoclassicism, she nevertheless focused much of her serial work on tonal centers. Long parts of *The Alcestiad*, her largest serial work, consist of tonally-centered writing, and some of her sketches for the opera indicate her methods of altering serial elements to fit dramatic moments in which Talma felt that more audience-accessible harmonic language was required.⁶ The brief lines of music Talma included in other letters and notes were generally atonal, such as the line of birdsong she heard on a trip to Delphi in Greece, which she sent to Wilder on a postcard and later incorporated into the opera.⁷ For her to write an entirely tonal work, even a short one, in what she calls a "Molto Tonale" style at this time is unexpected.

The key Talma chose for her work is not, however, so unexpected. The *Chorus Angelorum* is firmly set in A♭ major, which Talma associated with

5. Louise Talma, letter to Nadia Boulanger, 4 July 1941, Library of Congress, Louise Talma Collection, Boulanger box 1.

6. Louise Talma, notes and sketches, Talma Papers.

7. Louise Talma, letter to Thornton Wilder, 19 April 1956, Thornton Wilder Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, YCAL MSS 108 (hereinafter, "Wilder Papers"), box 58, folder 1602.

happiness and pleasure. In a letter to Wilder dated 2 January 1956, Talma implored Wilder to visit her in Rome, where she was in residence at the American Academy, writing, "So now you must write and tell me if you are going to see me in A flat major—or if not not and if not I shall have to invent a new key—e triple flat minor or something like that—to express my despair."⁸ The exuberance of the *Chorus Angelorum's* text of Christmas cheer reflects Talma's characterization of the key as one representing delight. The tempo is marked "Allegrissimo," which, like the title, is Talma's own brand of rare playfulness with language and standard musical markings, often seen in her happier letters to Wilder and others (fig. 1).

The *Chorus Angelorum* was certainly written not just for Wilder alone but as an entertainment for him, his sister Isobel, with whom he lived, and their guests at Christmas. Wilder was an accomplished musician, but his friends were not always so capable, and it is probable that Talma had this to some extent in mind when she wrote the work. The work begins with an outlining of the tonic, and the motion of the three lines is primarily stepwise for the ease of amateur performers. There is very little chromaticism: just two modulations in which the harmony moves away to F minor and then returns to A \flat major. The fugal writing is simple and easy to follow, and new entrances of the subject and countersubject are constructed in ways that make the needed entrance pitch easy to find among the other voices. The subject and countersubject are both four-and-a-half measures long and, like other fugal constructions by Talma, can be employed in several relatively uncomplicated forms to create harmonic and rhythmic interest: as an antecedent-consequent phrase; concurrently in harmony with one another; in inversion and retrograde; and in fragments, which Talma uses to draw elements together at cadential moments.

The speed with which Talma wrote the *Chorus Angelorum* is remarkable, even for a brief work. Composition was difficult for Talma, who repeatedly wrote to Wilder of the agony of writing; she often took several days to set a single phrase of text, fretting over the placement of each syllable. "I spent the whole of yesterday and today getting the right setting for the one line 'Admetus . . . ask me again to marry you,'" she wrote while working on *The Alcestiad* in 1957. "It's such a crucial line it has to be just right or it'll be awful."⁹ She made and revised sketches again and again before committing a phrase to the full score, a process she compares to

8. Louise Talma, letter to Thornton Wilder, 2 January 1956, Wilder Papers, box 58, folder 1604.

9. Louise Talma, letter to Thornton Wilder, 2 July 1954, Thornton Wilder Collection (distinct from the "Wilder Papers"), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, YCAL MSS 162 (hereinafter, "Wilder Collection"), box 58, folder 1607.

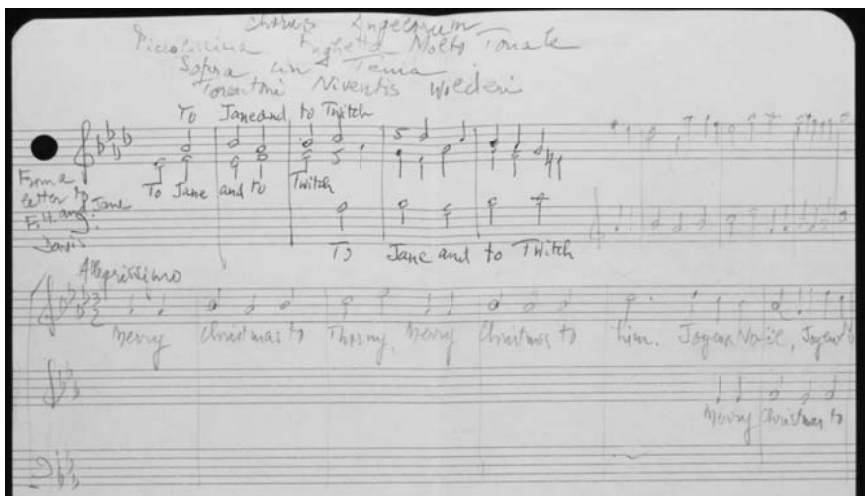


Fig. 1. Louise Talma, *Chorus Angelorum*: title, dedication, fugue subject, and beginning of countersubject. By permission of the MacDowell Colony.

Stravinsky's work habits as described by Robert Craft. "Craft says that Stravinsky makes melodic and motivic jottings and sketches of patterns on small scraps of paper. . . . 'Their pages are erasure-smudged and littered with scaffoldings of serial orders and transpositions of serial groups.' Doesn't that last sentence sound like little me?"¹⁰ Indeed it does. The documents held in the Louise Talma Papers by the Beinecke Library include hundreds of pages of sketches, notes, and rough drafts. Once she was satisfied with a line, she copied it meticulously into her master score, carefully drawing every note to match and writing in the text in a clear print.

In contrast to her usual pace, Talma composed the *Chorus Angelorum* over the course of only two days, and with little or no revision. There appear to be no sketches for the work in Talma's files, and the score sent to Wilder exhibits uncharacteristic roughness in its presentation, including poorly spaced measures and text in Talma's somewhat scrawling cursive writing. At the end of the third manuscript page, Talma dates the work as "Dec. 12–13 1959" (fig. 2).

These aspects of the *Chorus Angelorum* indicate that it was written quickly. Considering that Talma often spent several days working on an individual line or text or even just a few words, the composition of a sixty-five-measure work in just two days is exceptionally rare. Although

10. Louise Talma, letter to Thornton Wilder, 2 July 1954, Wilder Collection, box 58, folder 1609.

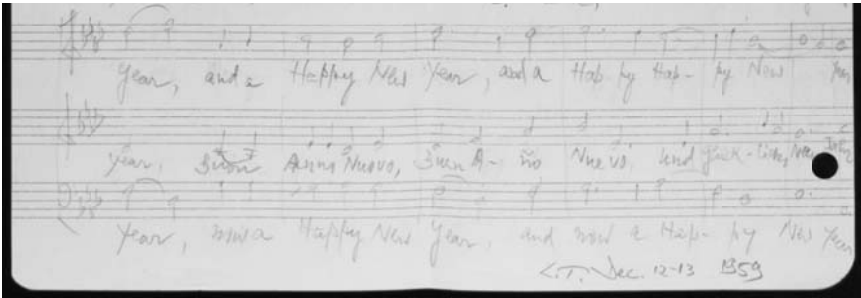


Fig. 2. Louise Talma, *Chorus Angelorum*: final six measures, with Talma's initials and dates of composition. By permission of the MacDowell Colony.

the simplicity of the text and the structured form of the fugue no doubt helped contribute to the speediness of composition, it is likely that Talma's good spirits during this period also helped the work along.

Talma had reasons to celebrate at the end of 1959. She was relieved to be finished with the composition of *The Alcestiad* and was well into the orchestration phase, and she and Wilder had presented a copy of the piano score to Rudolf Bing at the Metropolitan Opera in May.¹¹ Bing had openly declared his interest in premiering an American opera at the opening of the newly constructed Lincoln Center, and Talma hoped that it would be hers. In September, *New York Post* columnist Leonard Lyons wrote that, "On Rudolf Bing's desk is now the opera whose libretto was written by Thornton Wilder and music by Louise Talma. This may be the opera with which the Met would open its new Lincoln Square showhouse . . ." heightening Talma's excitement for the opera's prospects. Although Bing did not, in the end, select *The Alcestiad* for the Met, he did not make his decision until 1960, and so for the Christmas season of 1959, the idea of a Met premiere seemed very much probable to Talma and Wilder.¹²

Along with the piano music dedicated to him, the *Chorus Angelorum* is a testament to Talma's friendship with Wilder, which began after he heard her Piano Sonata no. 1 and sought her out to learn more about her music. Wilder was a raconteur and adored hosting guests, attending parties, and socializing in general, while Talma tended to be solitary, retreating for long periods to artists' colonies for uninterrupted work and to avoid the discomfort she felt in social situations. She blamed herself

11. Thornton Wilder, letter to Louise Talma, 13 May 1959, Talma Papers, box 21.

12. Bing finally indicated in 1960 that he would not program *The Alcestiad*, after which time the Frankfurt-am-Main opera house expressed interest in producing its premiere, which took place in early 1962.

for her sometimes paralyzing social anxiety and inability to relate to others, describing herself as “pretty aloof”¹³ and as someone “who has made for herself an ever-widening desert of solitude—in short, whose every relationship, of child to parents, of woman to man, of friend to friend, has become spoiled.”¹⁴ Talma overcame her natural resistance to others in her relationship with Wilder, which developed partly through correspondence in which she felt free to be open and highly communicative about herself and her work. Wilder enjoyed Talma’s constant stream of letters, and for her, his were “always a joy.”¹⁵ When Wilder proposed donating their correspondence regarding *The Alcestiad* to Yale University, Talma replied that she was happy to do so, but that, “first I must have them photostated, as I can’t bear not to have them in immediate reach so that at any moment I can live over again the joy I had on receiving them.”¹⁶

To date, no other works like the *Chorus Angelorum*—an unusually casual and quickly-written work dedicated to a close friend with every intention of his performing it—have been located in Talma’s oeuvre. Tonal and accessible, it would be ideal for inclusion on a concert of carols or other holiday music, and as an artifact of the composer’s life, provides an indication of Talma’s historically thorough musical training, her outlook following the completion of *The Alcestiad*, and the love she bore for her collaborator on that work.

ABSTRACT

Discovered in 2009 at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University, Louise Talma’s 1959 Christmas carol, playfully titled *Chorus Angelorum, Piccolissima Fughetta, Molto Tonale, Sopra un Tema, Torentoni Niventis Wilderi*, is a fugal motet for three voices. Written for Thornton Wilder, Talma’s collaborator on her opera *The Alcestiad*, the work is unusual in that it represents a completely tonal work by Talma during a period when she was working in her own distinct nonstrict serial idiom, and is the only fully tonal work she composed after being inspired to work in a serial style by Irving Fine’s String Quartet of 1952. It is also a glimpse into Talma’s psyche at the time when she was orchestrating *The Alcestiad*, and into her close friendship with Wilder.

13. Louise Talma to Thornton Wilder, “1957/6/27,” 27 June 1957, Wilder Collection, box 58, folder 1609.

14. Ibid.

15. Louise Talma to Thornton Wilder, “1956/2/27,” 27 February 1956, Wilder Papers, box 58, folder 1604.

16. Louise Talma to Thornton Wilder, “1958/10/18,” 18 October 1958, Wilder Collection, box 59, folder 1615.