

Text Interpretations in the Motet “Viderunt omnes”

Christoph Dalitz, January 2022

The five part Christmas motet “Viderunt omnes”, which I had written in 2021 for a choir from Pittsburgh, USA, is made freely available on music.dalitzio.de. It includes many musical interpretations of the meaning of the text, which might not all be obvious to a casual singer or listener. The following text explains these interpretations in the hope that this helps enhancing both the singing and listening experience of the piece.

1 The words

The text stems from the Roman Catholic Christmas liturgy. It is an excerpt from Psalm 98 that actually is much older, as the Old Testament was written long before the birth of Christ. The psalm invites to sing a new song to the Lord because he has shown his salvation and will create justice. From this psalm, the following excerpt is chosen:

“Viderunt omnes fines terrae
salutare Dei nostri. Jubilate Deo
omnis terra.”

“All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God. Sing joy-
fully to God, all the earth.”

By placing these verses into the context of Christmas, the Roman liturgy gives it a different meaning: “the salvation of our God” now refers to Christ, because the Christmas

feast celebrates that God became apparent in Christ’s life.

2 The medieval chant

My musical setting of this text is not only based on the liturgical text but also on the liturgical chant melody, which is more than thousand years old. Fig. 1 shows the beginning of the chant. The melody to the first phrase “viderunt omnes” is literally cited at the beginning of the motet.

Within the citation of this chant melody, I have included some musical word painting. The music starts with two long notes on “viderunt” (“have seen”) in both opening parts, which gaze out of the score like two eyes. Moreover, the word “omnes” (“all”) is presented in 12 entries, a number that symbolically stands



Figure 1: Incipit of the medieval chant as given by the “Graduale Romanum” (1910).

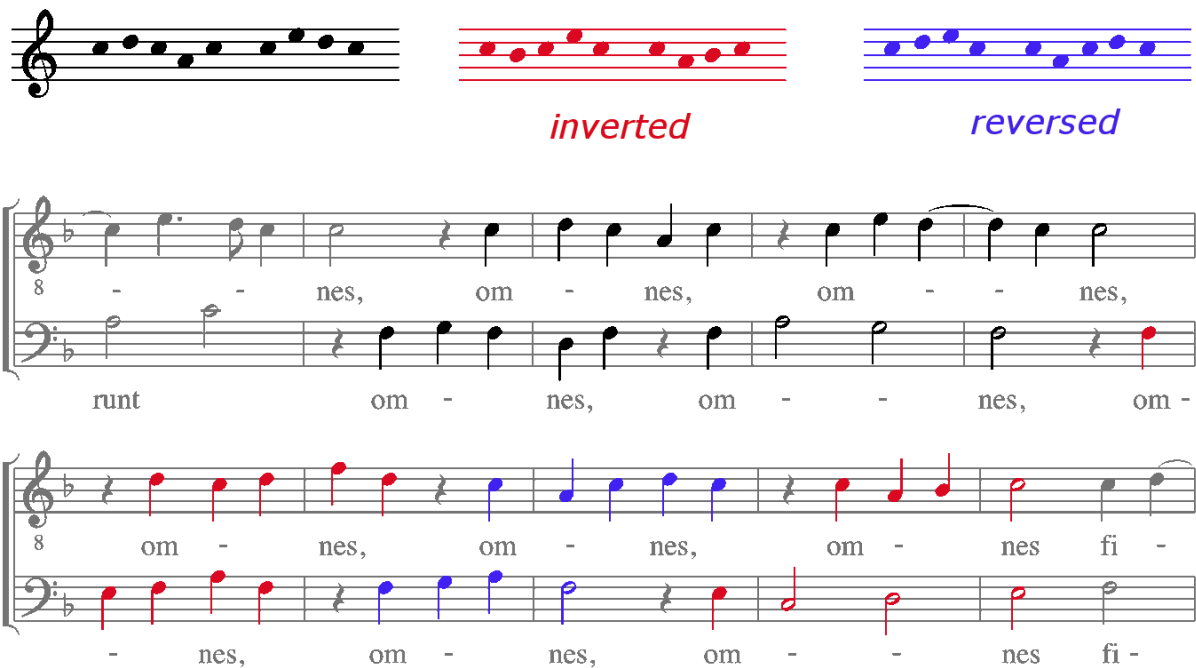


Figure 2: Occurrence of both mirrored variants of the chant melody in the opening section of the motet on “omnes” (“all”). Vertical reflections are highlighted in red, horizontal reflections in blue.

for “all” in the Judaic tradition. The meaning of “all” is further illustrated by mirroring the melody phrase in both possible variants: horizontally (reversion) and vertically (inversion), as shown in Fig. 2.

3 Further word painting

For the sake of variety, not all parts sing all the time, but voices are combined in varying groups, which, too, are chosen according to the meaning of the text. The piece starts with the two bottom voices, thereby representing “fines terrae” (“the ends of the earth”). At “terrae” (“earth”), the bass reaches the lowest note of the entire piece. In contrast, “salutare Dei” (“God’s salvation”) is given to the three top voices, which not only represent heaven, but

also Holy Trinity. Note also that there are *three* voice group entries on the text “salutare Dei”.

In Renaissance illustrations of Christ’s birth, it was not uncommon to display a cross in the background as a hint that the incarnation of God aroused the suspicion of the powerful and that Christ was later crucified. Fig. 3 shows an example by Albrecht Dürer: the cross is prominently visible in the upper corner as part of the stable. I have adopted this idea and let the section “salutare Dei” (“the salvation of God”) end with a cross in bar 30, most prominently placed in the top voice.

The final part “jubilate Deo” (“sing joyfully to God”) is set in triple time. Depending on the context, triple time can have different meanings: it can stand for Holy Trinity (“tempus perfectum” in contrast to “tempus imperfectum”), or it can represent darkness because



Figure 3: Woodcut of Jesus' birth in "Kleine Passion" (1511) by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528)¹.

some rhythms in triple time required blackened notes in mensural notation. In this motet, however, the triple time is used to represent joy. First the invitation "jubilate" is repeated twice in groups of few voices, and eventually the jubilation bursts out in full five part polyphony, representing all the earth rejoicing.

¹Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:D%C3%BCrer_-_Jesu_Geburt_001.jpg

4 The falsobordone verse

The verse is set as a *falsobordone* setting. This musical technique was derived from the monastic tradition of reciting psalms on *psalm tones*. This is typically done in unison, but during the Renaissance, polyphonic settings emerged. They left the bulk of the psalm verses to be recited in free rhythm, which was then followed by a written out cadence. My setting follows this model, with the soprano roughly following the sixth psalm tone.

The verse is provided with two different text underlays. One is the verse given in the *Graduale Romanum*:

“Notum fecit Dominus salutare suum: ante conspectum gentium revlavit justitiam suam.”

“The Lord hath made known his salvation: he hath revealed his justice in the sight of the Gentiles.”

This is the original liturgical text, but it is even more text in Latin, which might be problematic in some circumstances because many listeners cannot understand it.

To make the entire motet accessible even in such situations, I have provided an alternative verse with the same music, but an English translation of the text “Viderunt omnes ...”. This can serve as a self-explanatory “sub-title” (like in foreign-language movies), which hopefully makes the motet usable for a wider variety of choirs.