In 1955, the same year that A Ceremony of Carols was arranged for mixed choir, Lorraine Bowman's East High School A Cappella sang This Little Babe and Deo Gracias. This was exciting to sing then and exciting to hear the Jay Welch Chorale sing excerpts a few years back and be gratified at how clearly the words came through. The words are worth hearing.

The source for half of the texts is The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems. As the story goes, in 1942 Britten picked up a copy of this poetry anthology when the cargo ship on which he was travelling from the U.S. to his native England stopped in Nova Scotia. Deep in the innards of the boat as war raged in Europe and the Atlantic was prowled by German U-boats, his quarters were said to be, "miserable and very near a huge ice box. The smell and heat were intolerable." Britten says he tried to compose with difficulty "as people seemed to whistle up and down the corridor all day." During the trip he was able to compose music for five poems from the anthology (numbers 3, 5, 6, 8, and 10) and one other (number 2.)

The English of the first texts is Middle English, the language of Chaucer. The pronunciation is very different from Modern English, which is complicated by the fact that spelling was not standardized until well into the 18th Century. (Incidentally people who say they know the exact pronunciation of a given word in Middle English are suffering from a bad case of the "little learning being a dangerous thing syndrome.") It is perfectly acceptable to pronounce the words that are easily recognizable as we do in modern English. This has been a long accepted practice with Shakespeare's English, which we know was not pronounced as we hear it performed today. This obviously makes what is already very dense and poetic text more accessible to us. Numbers 6 and 8 are by Robert Southwell, a contemporary of Shakespeare. Indeed, it is said by some that the Bard (along with Ben Jonson and Milton) was influenced by reading Southwell. Jonson, in particular praised him. The opening and closing recessional are traditional Latin texts for Christmas Day vespers. Some may not know that Britten did not originally write the work for mixed voices -- it was for treble voices or boys' choir, hence it is very appropriate for a women's choir.

1. Procession
Hodie Christus natus est; Today Christ is born;
Hodie Salvator apparuit; Today the Savior has appeared;
Hodie in terra canuant angeli, Today the angels sing
Laetantur archangeli: The archangels rejoice;
Hodie exultant justi, dicentes: Today the righteous rejoice, saying:
Gloria in excelsis deo. Glory to God in the highest.
Alleluia!

2. Wolcum Yole!
Wolcum be thou hevene king. Wolcum Yole! Wolcum, born in one morning. Wolcum for whom we sall sing. Wolcum be ye Stevene and Jon (Saints whose days are near Christmas). Wolcum Innocentes (reference to the Feast of the Innocents, for the children killed by Herod's command.)
Wolcum, Thomas marter one. (Thomas, considered the first Christian Martyr.) Wolcum be ye Good New Yere. Wolcum seintes lefe and dere. (saints precious and dear). Wolcum Yole! Wolcum! Candelmesse, (Candlemass celebrates the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple). Quene of bliss. Wolcum bothe to more and lesse. (great and humble) Wolcum be ye that are here. Wolcum Yole! Wolcum all and make good cheer. Wolcum alle another yere. Wolcum Yole! Wolcum!

Note: This text strikes an appropriate note for a Christmas concert such as ours, presented early in the season. Yule suggests a season as much or more than a single day.

3. There is no Rose
There is no rose of such vertu (virtue, efficacy, strength) As is the rose that conteined was Heaven and earth in litel space. Res Miranda (wonderful happening). By that rose we may well see There be one God in persons three. Pares forma (alike in nature). The aungels sungen the shepherds to: Gloria in excelsis Deo. Gaudeamus (let us rejoice). Leave we all this worldly mirth, And follow we this joyful birth. Transeamus (let us pass over "to a better life"). Allelulia, res miranda, Pares forma, gaudeamus, Transeamus.

Note: This text introduces a theme to which we will return: The traditional comparison of Mary to a flower, in particular a rose.

4a That yonge child
That yonge child when it gan weep (weeps) with song she lulled him asleep; That was so sweet a melody that passed alle minstrelsy.
The nightingale sang also; Her song (of the nightingale) is hoarse and nought thereto (compared to Mary's voice) Whoso attendeth to her song (of the nightingale) And leaveth the first then doth he wrong.

Note: A lullaby sung either by Mary or an invitation to others to join in the song will supply the text for numerous carols in our concert. I find the assertion particularly charming that the nightingale's song, reputed to be exquisitely melodic, is hoarse and of no consequence compared to Mary's.

4b. Balulalow (Lullaby)
O my dere hert, young Jesu sweit (sweet), Prepare they creddil in my spreit (spirit), And I sall rock thee to (in) my hert, And never mair from thee depart. But I sall praise thee evermoir With sanges (songs) sweit unto they gloir; The knees of my hert sall I bow, And sing that richt (fitting) Balulalow (lullaby).

Note: This lullaby features some striking poetry centering on the singer's spirit and heart as the place where the Christ child in invited to prepare his cradle, where he will be rocked, and where the "knees of his heart" will bow to him.

5. As dew in Aprille
I sing of a maiden that is makeles (matchless); King of kings to her son she ches (chose). He came al so stille (peacefully, silently) there (at the place where) his moder was, As dew in Aprille that falleth on the grass. He came al so stille to his moder bour (mother's bower, chamber) As dew in Aprille that falleth on the flour (flower). He came al so stille there his moder lay, As dew in
april that falleth on the spray (as in a spray of flowers). Moder and mayden was never none but she; Well may such a lady Goddes (God's) moder be. **Note:** Returning to the traditional comparison of Mary to a delicate flower, this poem compares the Christ child's coming to Mary to the stillness of the dew in April descending.

6. **This little babe**
   the tents that he has pight (pitched)
   **Note:** The central metaphor in this poem is war in general and specific war waged by Christ and his followers upon the powers of evil, the gates of hell. As the metaphor is extended the details of battle are described in terms of the apparent powerlessness of the little babe. But we come to see the inference that it from his meekness and humility he takes his power, and in which his followers will find their ultimate safety and hope for ultimate victory over evil.

7. **In Freezing Winter Night**
   silly, (weak, helpless) wight (men, mankind)
   **Note:** This poem follows the same approach as the preceding one. The humble trappings of the court of the Prince of Peace and King of Kings display a "humble pomp" -- a powerful oxymoron. Pomp by definition is an ostentatious and superficial show of power and royalty. The heavenly king's court is prized in heaven.

9. **Spring Carol**
   iwis (truly) purvayance (provisions)
   **Note:** The preceding poem alludes to the bleak circumstances of winter traditionally presented as those attending Christ's birth. The imagery maintains its power in spite of what might have been literally true, after all, is it not in the depths of winter, at least for us in the cold parts of the world, that we most need Christmas? This poem, however, is a spring carol expressing gratitude for "God's purvayance for sustenance," that is, his providing for our sustenance.

10. **Gracias (Thanks be to God)**
    ibounden, (bound) clerkes (clerics) ne had (had not) moun (may, must)
    **Note:** In striking contrast to the calumny which for centuries has been heaped upon Adam and more especially upon Êver for partaking of the forbidden "apple," this poem praises god that they did.

11. **Recession** (same as 1.)