

Magnificat

The *Magnificat*, the canticle of the Virgin Mary, is found in the opening chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, the point where Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth after learning that she is to be the mother of Christ. Traditionally, the words have been ascribed to Mary, though their strong resemblance to the Old Testament *Song of Hannah* and to various psalms makes it more likely that Luke himself interpolated them to express an appropriate sense of rejoicing and trust in God. Liturgically, the Magnificat belongs to the Office of Vespers (and its Anglican counterpart, Evensong) and to feasts of the Virgin Mary, and there are innumerable concise musical settings intended for use in church. Extended concert settings, however, are quite rare, Bach's being the most notable (and even this was designed for use in the Lutheran liturgy). In the general layout of its movements and in its scale and dimensions, Bach's *Magnificat* provided the obvious precedent for John Rutter's setting. There is even a parallel to Bach's Christmas interpolations in the use of a vernacular text on the Virgin Mary – *Of a Rose*, which (like so much medieval religious art) likens Mary and her child to a flower springing from the stem of Jesse. Like Bach, Rutter uses Gregorian themes associated with the text at various points in the work. But there, all comparisons end, since the style and content of Rutter's *Magnificat* are not even remotely neo-Bachian, resting rather within an eclectic amalgam of more recent traditions that characterize much of the English composer's choral writing. This work was given its world premiere in May 1990 by the composer in Carnegie Hall, New York.