

ORIENTIS PARTIBUS

12th Century Conductus

Arranged by Lee R. Kesselman

TRANSLATION AND PRONUNCIATION

/ɔ-ri- en-tis par-ti-bus ad-ven-ta-vit a-si-nus/

1. Orientis partibus adventavit asinus
eastern lands came from ass

/pul-kær et for-ti-si-mus sar-tsi-nis ap-ti-si-mus/

Pulcher et fortissimus, sarcinis aptissimus
beautiful and strong burdens fit (fit for carrying burdens)

/hɛ hɛ sir as-nɛ hɛ/

Hez Sir Asne, hez!
Hey Sir Ass, hey!

/au-rum dɛ a-ra-bia tus et mi-ram dɛ sa-ba/

2. Aurum de Arabia, Thus et myrrham de Saba
Gold from Arabia frankincense and myrrh from Sheba

/tu-lit in ɛ-kle-si-a vir-tus a-si-na-ri-a/

Tulit in ecclesia Virtus asinaria,
Brought into the church brave donkey

Hez (etc)

/dum tra-hit vɛ-i-ku-la mul-ta kum sar-tsi-nu-la/

3. Dum trahit vehicula, multa cum sarcinula,
While (he) pulls the carts many with heavy loads

/i-lus man-di-bu-la du-ra tɛ-rit pa-bu-la/

Illius mandibula dura terit pabula.
his jaws grind tough fodder

Hez (etc)

/a-men di-kas a-si-nɛ jam sa-tur dɛ gra-mi-ne/

4. Amen dicas, asine, lam satur de gramine,

Truly I say, ass, now sated with grass

/a-men a-men i-te-ra as-per na-re ve-te-ra/
Amen, amen itera, Asper nare vetera,
Amen, Amen I say again, spurn the past

Hez (etc)

1. Orientis partibus adventavit asinus Pulcher et fortissimus, sarcinis aptissimus Hez, Hez Sir Asne, hez!	From the East the donkey came, pretty and strong, fit for burden. Hey, Sir Donkey, Hey!
2. Aurum de Arabia, Thus et myrrham de Saba Tulit in ecclesia Virtus asinaria, Hez, Hez (etc)	Gold from Arabia, incense and myrrh from Saba this gallant donkey brought to the church. Hey, Sir Donkey, Hey!
3. Dum trahit vehicula, multa cum sarcinula, Illius mandibula dura terit pabula. Hez, Hez (etc)	While he pulls carts, many with heavy loads, his jaws grind hard fodder. Hey, Sir Donkey, Hey!
4. Amen dicas, asine, lam satur de gramine, Amen, amen itera, Asper nare vetera, Hez, Hez (etc)	You say "Amen," donkey, all filled with grass. "Amen," you repeat, spurning the past. Hey, Sir Donkey, Hey! ¹

¹ Translation of verses 1,2 and 4 from "Orientis Partibus". *Choral Public Domain Library*.

[http://www2.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/Orientis_partibus_\(Anonymous\)](http://www2.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/Orientis_partibus_(Anonymous)).

Accessed 26 May 2017. Verse 3 – Elizabeth Pauly.

BACKGROUND AND PROGRAM NOTES

A *conductus* is a Medieval liturgical choral composition (pre-dating the *motet*) which employed several voice parts in harmony and was not based on any pre-existent tunes or chants. Its name comes from the Latin *conducere* (to escort) and it was most likely sung while the lectionary was carried from its safe home to where it was to be read. Conductus was a principal type of vocal composition from the Ars Antiqua period (roughly 1160-1320 A.D.). The style of the conductus was usually rhythmic, as befitting music accompanying a procession, and almost always note-against-note.

Orientis Partibus, or “*The Song of the Ass*,” was sung as a processional at Sens [sās], (a city in north-central France), when a donkey was ridden into the Cathedral. The popular humor of the Feast of Fools and similar mediaeval festivals is found in the carol’s “braying” refrain, which was sung by the clergy.

Orientis Partibus is written in Mixolydian mode (with the flatted 7th). There are many versions of the tune, including both compound and simple meters. This version could be used as the opening piece of a holiday concert, as a processional, or with instrumental repetitions to increase its length.²

Many will recognize this version of the melody of *Orientis Partibus* as the carol *The Friendly Beasts*. The song is associated with a festival celebrated in many European towns in the Middle Ages. The festival, known as *Festum Asinorum*, or *Feast of the Ass*, (January 14th) represented the New Testament story of the Virgin Mary’s flight into Egypt.³ A letter from a Canon in Beauvais, France dated 1697 describes the rituals associated with the festival:

² Kesselman, Lee R. “*Orientis Partibus*.” Boosey & Hawkes, 2006, p. 3.

³ Greene, Henry Copley. “*The Song of the Ass*.” *Speculum*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1931, pp. 536. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2849511.

'On the first day after the Octave of the [three] Kings, they chose a beautiful young girl, put a child in her hands, and mounted her on an ass which they led in procession from the Cathedral Church to the Church of St Stephen. Placing the ass and his lovely burden in the Sanctuary there on the Gospel side, they sang a solemn mass, whose prose [of the Ass] is in Louvet, and whose Introit, Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, etc., end in hin ham [he haw], to the point where in fine missae sacerdos versus ad populum vice "Ite Missa est" ter hinhanabit [he-hawed], populus vero vice "Deo gratias" ter respondavit, "Hinham, Hinham, Hinham".'⁴

The article quoted above goes on to describe the scholarly discourse on whether or not the donkey was actually ridden into the churches (Greene believes in the likelihood of this happening at least in Beauvais – one of the towns where this feast was celebrated).⁵

RECORDINGS

Commercial recording provided by publisher:

<https://www.jwpepper.com/sheet-music/media-player.jsp?&type=audio&productID=10013035>

ANALYSIS

Key: Mixolydian mode, G final

Meter: 6/4

Harmony: Present only in “braying” chorus – organum style (parallel 5ths)

Form: Verse/Chorus

⁴ Ibid, p. 534.

⁵ Ibid, p. 540.

This particular arrangement features mixed voices, handbells, flute and percussion. All verses are in unison, followed by harmony in parallel 5ths during the choruses.