

LIR CLASSICS

LIR017 - PROGRAMME NOTES

Twelve Days - A Christmas Celebration

For centuries the feast of Christmas has inspired composers from many different countries and musical traditions to write their own personal responses to unique time of the year.

This is the first CD recorded by Pegasus, and we specifically chose a Christmas theme as there is such a wealth of music associated with this festive season, providing the opportunity to contrast age-old and popular melodies with new and unfamiliar voices. We have decided to highlight in particular the breadth of works written by British composers, many still living, a testament to a tradition that is alive and thriving in this country; the collection includes two world premiere recordings of carols arranged by friends of the choir.

Over several years we have presented Christmas concerts working with a number of charities, and therefore we are delighted to have produced this CD in partnership with the Princess Alice Hospice.

Jingle Bells was the first song broadcast from space, in a Christmas-themed prank by Gemini 6 astronauts in 1965, who contacted Mission Control with this report: "We have an object, looks like a satellite going from north to south, probably in polar orbit... I see a command module and eight smaller modules in front. The pilot of the command module is wearing a red suit...". The astronauts then produced a smuggled harmonica and sleighbells and gave a rendition of the carol.

Jesus Christ the Apple Tree is a metaphorical poem about the nature of religious belief, and is characterised by a simple flowing phrase which is sung throughout, including as a round in the final verse. The words are from Joshua Smith's collection of 'Divine Hymns' published in New Hampshire in 1784, but the music is by the British composer Elizabeth Poston, who died in 1987. She was a respected composer and musicologist, and had a distinguished career in radio broadcasting, but also during World War II acted as a 'secret agent', using gramophone records to send coded messages to allies in Europe.

Carols dedicated to the Virgin Mary and based on pre-Reformation texts have been a rich source of inspiration for British composers in the last hundred years, possibly harking back to a time when Christmas had more spiritual meaning. The three carols which follow all have a female soloist, a Marian reference, and adopt texts from the Middle Ages.

Peter Warlock was born Philip Heseltine at the Savoy Hotel in London in 1894, and died tragically young in 1930. In his short life he won public acclaim for the songs he wrote under his pseudonym. His empathy for the human voice can be heard in his *Balulalow*, which features a soprano soloist. 'Baloo' and 'Balulalow' are old Scottish words for 'lullaby'; this song is Mary's lullaby to the Christ child, and the words come from 16th century Scotland.

John Rutter's name is virtually synonymous with Christmas and his carols are well-loved. There is a Flower uses 15th century text; the flower described is a symbol for Christ, blossoming from the branch which is Mary.

Lennox Berkeley was born in Oxford but had French ancestry and spent five years in Paris, studying with Nadia Boulanger. There is a subtle French tang to the harmonies of his carol, which uses text from a medieval hymn extolling the virtues of Mary in a simple yet haunting work written for the Cambridge Hymnal in 1967.

Infant Holy is understood to be a very old Polish carol. It was first published in 1908 and speaks of the stable scene, with the infant Jesus lying in a manger and the hillside where shepherds heard the angels and rejoiced. The original Polish text is used here in a setting by contemporary London composer Paul Ayres.

Jonathan Rathbone's energetic and modern setting of Gabriel's Message is based on the familiar carol which has Basque origins. The piece was written for the Swingle Singers, with whom Rathbone sang after his musical training in this country, and the words tell of the angel Gabriel bringing God's message to Mary.

The Coventry Carol dates back to the 16th Century, and was performed in Coventry as part of The Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors, a popular mystery play. The play depicts the Christmas story from the Gospel of Matthew, including Herod's slaughter of the innocents. The lyrics of this haunting carol, which is the only remaining fragment of the play, represent a mother's lament for her doomed child. Both Richard Allain and Kenneth Leighton present the medieval text in a striking new guise, the former using the familiar melody with searing original harmonies, the latter creating a plangent soprano solo to represent the grieving mother.

Silent Night was written as a poem by the Austrian priest Joseph Mohr, and famously set to music by Mohr's friend Franz Xavier Gruber, who first performed it on Christmas Eve in 1818 in the small alpine village of Oberndorf. It is reputed that the organ at Mohr's church had broken down and so the melody was composed accordingly for guitar and voice. The expansive and warm arrangement here, unaccompanied and in eight parts, is written by Raman Guttridge specially for the choir.

Andrew Carter takes two traditional Spanish Carols and gives them a contemporary setting. The first combines a tender lullaby, sung by a soprano soloist, with melodic influences from Spain and Latin America. The second, also featuring a soprano soloist, is a vibrant declaration of Christ's birth, full of irrepressible joy and excitement.

John Tavener is perhaps best known for his Song to Athene which was sung at Princess Diana's funeral. He is a member of the Greek Orthodox church, and the text for God is With Us is taken from the Orthodox Compline service for Christmas Eve. The distinctive Byzantine overtones can be heard particularly in the declamatory tenor solo.

Epiphany has also proved a popular subject for composers over the ages, and the next three carols take the Kings as their subject.

Peter Cornelius who was born on Christmas Eve in 1824 originally wrote his carol The Three Kings as a song for soloist. The celebrated choral version here, arranged by Ivor Atkins, keeps the original Cornelius song as a baritone solo, backed by the choir singing the Lutheran Advent chorale "How brightly shines the Morning Star".

Healy Willan was born in London in 1880 but emigrated to Canada as a young man, and spent the rest of his life there. The text of his carol by Laurence Housman, younger brother of the poet A.E.Housman, describes the arrival of the three kings from the unusual perspective of the innkeeper, represented by the men's voices in the choir.

Judith Bingham's carol tells of the Kings setting out on an uncertain journey received simultaneous premieres at Winchester Cathedral and St.John's College, Cambridge on Advent Sunday in 1998. The words are taken from two sources – the first is the seventeenth-century Bishop of Winchester, Lancelot Andrewes, and the second is William Wordsworth's poem about his time as a student at St.John's. The music brilliantly conveys a sense of mystery and trepidation.

Morten Lauridsen is a living American composer, and his motet O Magnum Mysterium launched his international reputation. The words describe the hushed reverence and blessed contemplation at the nativity, telling of the lowly animals and shepherds gathering around the new-born boy, alongside his mother who looks adoringly upon him. Lauridsen's setting is stunning in its luminous serenity, leading to an ecstatic climax, which captures the sense of magnitude and awe of the occasion of Christ's birth, but also its great tenderness and humility. The composer himself speaks of the piece as: "a quiet song of profound inner joy".

We finish our Christmas medley with an uplifting rendition of The Twelve Days of Christmas in a witty arrangement by Andrew Carter.

Samir Savant
Chairman, Pegasus
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