

## Phil's Classical Reviews

Audio Video Club of Atlanta

*Happy Holidays!*

Christmas, 2016

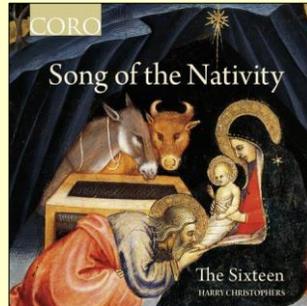


**Simphonies des noëls** (ATMA Classique) is a reissue of a 1993 release by Dorian Recordings that should never be allowed to go out of print. With a blend of reverence and flair, Bernard Labadie leads Les Violons du Roy of Québec in a program of revered works based on French noëls and Italian pastorales that struck a decidedly popular note in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The French come first, in the persons of Michel de Lalande's *Symphonies des noëls* and Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Noël pour les instruments*, the former served up with zestful economy, the latter more expansive, and both utilizing the melodies of the popular *noëls*, or French Christmas carols, that everyone knew and loved.

The Italian selections by Giuseppe Sammartini, Giuseppe Torelli, and Arcangelo Corelli are all examples of the Christmas Concerto, a genre that ended, by tradition, in a lilting pastorale melody in gently rocking or swaying *Siciliano* rhythm that was meant to evoke the Adoration of the Shepherds. The Sammartini, where the pastorale is largely played on open strings, is the most rustic-sounding of the three, while the Torelli, with more frequent stopped passages for the solo violinists, is more modern and dramatic. The Corelli, best-known of the three, strikes a happy medium.

German composer Johann Christoph Pez is represented by his Concerto pastorale in F major, which contrasts simple supported



In **Song of the Nativity** (Coro) Harry Christophers and The Sixteen present us another winner, in stylish accounts of the old becoming new, of carols and traditionals in modern arrangements by fifteen 20<sup>th</sup> century composers (most are living and well at this posting). They are often placed against more traditional settings for reference. One example is the solemn beauty of "Adam lay ybounden" in both Boris Ord's richly detailed setting and Howard Skempton's more austere one that harkens back to the mood and texture of the 15<sup>th</sup> century original.

"This endris night," also based on a late medieval original, is cast in the form of an intimate dialog between the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus: "This endris night I saw a sight, / A star as bright as day, / And ever among, a maiden sung, / Lully, by by, Lullay." Eloquent simplicity contrasts with brilliant tones in John Rutter's setting of yet another 15<sup>th</sup> century lyric poem, "There is a flower."

Martin Lauridsen's "O magnum mysterium," a modern classic, explores the inner world of silence leading to ecstasy and bliss. G.K. Chesterton's "The Christ Child" is heard in the sonorous harmonies of Gabriel Jackson's arrangement and also in the quiet poetic beauty of Alan Bullard's setting, "And all the stars looked down."

There is a consistency in spiritually compelling polyphonic textures and harmonies in the selections heard on this program that makes them



**The Christmas Album** (MSR Classics) is the ultimate treat for French horn fanciers. The performers are the members of the American Horn Quartet and a horn quintet from the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. Nicely conceived and well-executed arrangements of traditional carols and pop songs with a Christmas theme help to keep a slate of music for nine similar instruments from ever lapsing into monotony.

There's a lot of variety in a program that ranges historically from the 16<sup>th</sup> century German carol "Lo How a Rose e'er Blooming" (*Es ist ein Ros' Entsprungen*) all the way to "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch" from the animated cartoon picture based on Dr. Seuss. Highlights include Kerry Turner's *Symphony of Carols*, smoothly incorporating a medley of Christmas songs (*Deck the Halls, Away in a Manger, Angels from the Realms of Glory, Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella, Greensleeves, Coventry Carol, In the Bleak Midwinter, Adeste Fideles*), plus an enthusiastic rendering of "For unto us a child is born" from Handel's *Messiah* and an unlooked-for delight from Australia, "The Three Drovers" (are they the Aussie equivalent of the Wise Men?)

We also have Mel Torme's *The Christmas Song*, plus thrilling accounts of Leroy Anderson's ever-popular *Sleigh Ride* and Walter Perkin's jazzy "Christmas Fiesta," both with added percussion and drums that turn up the excitement. Kerry Turner's *Hymnus* is an

melodies (Arias) featuring a brace of recorders with a finely conceived Passacaglia, a variation form that manages to be erudite without spoiling the prevailing mood of simple happiness and joy.

natural repertoire for Harry Christophers and The Sixteen. Other titles you will want to hear again include Henry Walford Davies' different-sounding original setting of "O little town of Bethlehem," Peter Warlock's sonorous and gently rolling "Bethlehem Down," and James MacMillan's "O radiant dawn," in which the composer's striking harmonies conjure up images of almost painful beauty.

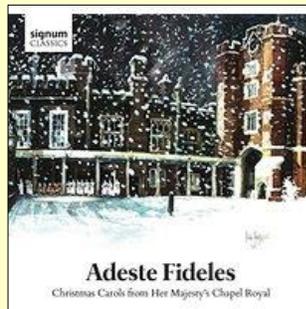
improvisation-like work based on the oldest song of them all, the 4<sup>th</sup> century antiphon *Divinum Mysterium*, a.k.a "Of the Father's Heart Begotten." In Track 2, as a bit of Aussie whimsy that defies logic, we are treated (?) to a brief solo on the didgeridoo, a decidedly bizarre-sounding Aborigine instrument with a low, growling sound that may cause home listeners to fear their speakers have malfunctioned!



Andrew Nethsingha directs the Choir of St. John's College, Cambridge in **Christmas with St. John's**, a wide-faring program of Christmas favorites and rarities that will stress the endurance and stretch the tessituras of any choir, anywhere. Happily, his singers are in good mettle, in a choir that by tradition melds the voices of boys and men. The treble voices of the boys (fifteen in number, with alternates) make a particularly fine impression, from stratospheric highs in the solos to sudden fortes in consort with the adult voices that are absolutely sensational, if sometimes shocking in intensity.

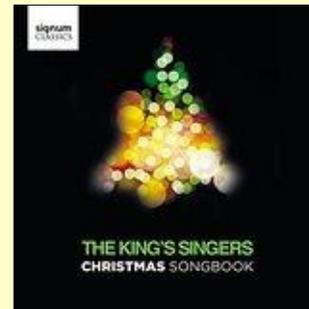
The program ranges from the sublime (John Scott's "Creator of the Stars of night," Andrew Carter's "Mary's Magnificat," Philip Ledger's arrangement of "A Spotless Rose") to the tub-thumping down-to-earth revelry of William Mathias' 1969 arrangement of "Sir Christémas" that invests the old revelers' song with harmonized fifths and fourths that evoke Medieval dissonances that sound surprisingly modern.

Elsewhere, George Radcliffe Woodward's "Ding, Dong! Merrily on High," an arrangement of a 16<sup>th</sup> century French dance tune, has us



"**Adeste Fideles**," Christmas Carols from Her Majesty's Chapel Royal, showcases a unique ensemble of boys and men with antecedents going back as far as the 7<sup>th</sup> century. As part of an establishment that was set up to serve the spiritual needs of the Sovereign, this choir, composed of six "Gentlemen in Ordinary" and ten boy Choristers from the Chapel Royal, has its choice of the best voices available. The result is much opportunity for virtuosity in the interaction of men's and boy's voices that we hear in the present offering.

The choir's resources are optimally utilized in a wide-ranging program of Christmas favorites and rarities in a variety of arrangements. That being the case, I am happy to report there is little evidence of mickey-mousing with the settings of carols we all know and love. I mean the kind of deliberate license that permits arrangers to monkey with the melody and meter of a familiar traditional, distorting it well beyond recognition. Under director of music Huw Williams and with discretely flavorful participation by organist Martyn Noble, the arrangements preserve the purity of line and movement we are accustomed to hearing in such old favorites as



**Christmas Songbook**, the latest release by The King's Singers, has all the earmarks of a blockbuster hit album. There are no other words to describe this collection of good ole pop favorites that swing with the greatest audacity, with enough carols and traditionals thrown in to offset the prevailing levity. Well, Christmas has always been the season when low-down revelry rubs elbows with holy mystery, so what should we expect?

The King's Singers, currently consisting of David Hurley and Timothy Wayne-Wright, counter-tenors; Julian Gregory, tenor; Christopher Bruerton and Christopher Gabbitas, baritones; and Jonathan Howard, bass, go back as far as 1968 when they were founded by choral scholars at King's College Cambridge. Over the years, the Singers have moved from Tudor polyphony and Renaissance motets to more modern, popular repertoire. We heard it happening in their "Great American Songbook" album (Signum, 2014), and it resounds again, with an impish vengeance, in this latest release.

Well served by three of their favorite arrangers (Robert Rice, Alexander

hearing the pealing of bells in its harmonies. And John Gardner's arrangement of the old English traditional "Tomorrow shall be my Dancing Day" bounces betwixt triple and duple time in a jazzy mood.

Do not expect to hear the familiar John Jacob Niles' version of "I Wonder as I Wander" in its eloquent simplicity. Instead, we have a blues and jazz-influenced arrangement by Carl Rütli. Simon Preston's setting of "I saw Three Ships" likewise takes an old chestnut and gives it an erratic bounce far removed from the setting we are used to hearing (No matter: choral arrangers *will* do their thing, like it or not!)

The only item I really dislike in this program is Michael Finnissy's 2014 "John the Baptist" with its corrosive harmonies, sharp dissonances, and the way in which fortes seem to leap out at us for no apparent reason. On the other hand, Peter Warlock's "as Dew in Aprylle," to lyrics from a medieval mystery play, affords much delight in its easy flow (disguising meters that continually change between five and four soft beats to the bar). Mark Bletchley's harmonization of "Silent Night," on the other hand, discretely preserves the flavor of Franz Gruber's well-loved original.

So, persevere, listener. There is more ambrosia than vinegar in this highly diverse program!

"Sans Day Carol," "Sussex Carol," and "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree."

The differences, when they occur, are tastefully conceived in order to enrich the harmony and enliven the meter. A good example is "Once in Royal David's City" (Henry John Gauntlett, harmonized by A. H. Mann, descants by Sir David Willcocks) in which the broadened tempo creates a processional effect that comes across very well here. Another is "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (harmonized by Ralph Vaughn Williams with descants by Thomas Armstrong) in which the meter is given a gentle sway that beautifully underscores the mood.

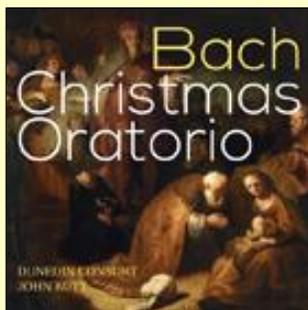
A jaunty arrangement of "The Holly and the Ivy" by John Gardner allows the choristers lots of opportunity to show off their rhythmical prowess. (These have to be the best and most versatile boys' voices I've ever heard on record). Ditto the exultant "Spanish Carol" and the rousing rendition of "We wish you a Merry Christmas" that closes the program.

Other highlights in a very attractive program include a surprisingly chaste setting of the "Ave Maria" by Igor Stravinsky and a coolly austere "New Year Carol" by Benjamin Britten that makes effective use of the "Sing levy-dew" refrain from the original Pembroke carol. The bold polyphony of Thomas Weelkes' 16<sup>th</sup> century "Hosanna to the Son of David" comes across sensationally. And an effective setting of William Blake's "The Lamb" is an unlooked-for delight, capturing the innocence and poignancy of the original poem.

L'Estrange, and Keith Roberts), the Singers dive deliriously into material that suits their distinctive vocal style encompassing flawless harmonizing and the kind of smooth segueing and layering that allows the bell-clear countertenor voices to pierce through the fabric or effortlessly float on a pyramid of sound firmly anchored by the lower voices.

The pop numbers harken back to the days when all of us great unwashed body of music listeners were better-served by Tin Pan Alley than we knew at the time. Tracks include "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" (John Coots), "It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas" (Meredith Wilson), "Sleigh Ride" (Mitchell Parrish), "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" (Hugh Martin), "Winter Wonderland" (Felix Bernard), and "White Christmas" (Irving Berlin). As a gag, we have an outrageous medley of "Frosty the Snowman" and "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer," with impudent interjections and scats a-plenty. On the serious side, we're given a sad little song by Michael Carr, Tommie Connor, and Jimmy Leach, "The Little Boy that Santa Claus Forgot," just brief enough to make its point and depart before it gets maudlin.

The carols and traditionals aren't neglected, either: reverent and stylish settings of "In the Bleak Midwinter," "Still, Still, Still," "The First Nowell," "It Came upon the Midnight Clear," and "Silent Night." The Singers close the program with a wallop rendition of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas."



Bach: Christmas Oratorio

John Butt, the Dunedin Consort (Linn Records)

John Butt leads the Dunedin Consort of Edinburgh in as fine and persuasive a performance as I've heard of J. S. Bach's Christmas Oratorio. This is a problematical work with stretches of turgidness offset by moments of undeniable inspiration and fire. Strong performances by the members of the consort, instrumentalists as well as vocalists, make amends for less inspired, workmanlike patches in Bach's sprawling canvas.

The first thing you need to know about the Christmas Oratorio is that it is not a single work, but *six* of them – six cantatas strung together with texts proclaiming the mercy and goodness of God in sending his son to be our

comfort, guide, and saviour. The main thread connecting these six cantatas is the wondrous miracle of the Incarnation and the Holy Birth as the manifestation of God's mercy and fatherly goodness. (As they say in pastoral circles, "It'll preach, brother, it'll preach!") The cantatas, each dealing with a particular aspect of the Christmas story, were premiered individually in Leipzig in six parts, in keeping with the Lutheran calendar: 1) First Festival Day of Christmas, 2) Second Festival Day, 3) Third Festival Day, 4) Feast of the Circumcision, 5) Sunday after New Year, and 6) Feast of the Epiphany.

The turgid moments I've alluded to do are not associated with the settings of actual passages of Scripture focusing on the Revelation to the Shepherds and the Adoration of the Magi. Nor does it describe the solemn simplicity of the settings of Lutheran chorales, inserted at appropriate moments in each of Parts 1-6 to allow the congregation to participate. An example from an aria in Part 3 will suffice to illustrate the sort of commonplace verse written especially for the occasion that I'm talking about: "Lord, your compassion, your mercy / comforts us and makes us free. / Your pleasing favor and love, / your wondrous desires, / make your fatherly faithfulness / new again." (Trust me, it sounds just as banal in the original German.) This is by no means the worst example of what we might term "18<sup>th</sup> century praise music." As with its modern-day counterpart, a little of it goes a long way.

In a sprawling opus as uneven in places as this is, much of its success rests with the performers. Butt's uncommonly comprehensive vision of the Christmas Oratorio is complimented by two first-rate sets of SATB vocalists: Mary Bevan, Claire Wilkinson, Nicholas Mulroy and Matthew Brook in Parts 1, 3, and 6, and Joanne Lunn, Claire Hendrick, Thomas Hobbs, and Konstantin Wolff in 2, 4, and 5. Mulroy, in particular, is a great Evangelist in Part 1, and Brook and Bevan are marvelous in the bass recitative with soprano chorus "*Immanuel, o Süßes Wort!*" (Emmanuel, O sweet word) in 4, when the child is given his prophesy-fulfilling name. In Part 2, the good news to the shepherds in the Biblical story is augmented by the wonderful old chorale "*Brich an, o schönes Morgenlicht / und lass der Himmel tagen!*" (Break out, o lovely morning light, and let Heaven dawn) in a scene in which the pastoral mood is reflected in swaying rhythms and the imitation of rustic bagpipes by a mellow pair of *oboi da caccia*.

The treachery of Herod is captured by Bach in music of surprising subtlety in 6 when the paranoiac king convenes the three Magi and urges them to search diligently for the newborn child, "so that I too may come and worship him." Mulroy handles this recitative, and Bevan the succeeding recitative and aria in which Herod's real purpose is revealed and we are given the calm assurance that it will be foiled by the All-Highest, with great confidence. In conclusion, there is much to like in the individual details as well as the overall approach to this Christmas Oratorio.



Tchaikovsky: The Nutcracker, Complete Ballet, Symphony No. 4  
Valery Gergiev, Mariinsky Orchestra (Mariinsky) CD, SACD

What is a Christmas without The Nutcracker? Well, believe it or not, it's been about twenty years since I last reviewed Tchaikovsky's enduring favorite, either as the entire ballet or Nutcracker Suite No. 1. Until *just now*, that is! These recent live recordings by a conductor and orchestra famed for their Tchaikovsky – and The Nutcracker in particular – make up for years of benign neglect. Recorded in DSD and with a insightful account of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, it makes for a very attractive package.

Under Valery Gergiev's baton, the Mariinsky Orchestra of St. Petersburg captures all the color, excitement, and persuasive beauty of a ballet that Tchaikovsky composed largely with children in mind, both as performers and as audience. Of course, there are many moments when it transcends that specific purpose. It is a real ballet, after all, with a very moving and romantic pas de deux for the principal dancer and the prima ballerina at the heart of Act II. Its great moments will stand comparison with anything in Swan Lake and The Sleeping Beauty. But in two acts instead of three, it was short measure by comparison with its predecessors.

Peter Illytch was careful to keep the ballet within the endurance limits of the youngest members of his audience. For that reason he left off the lower strings in the *Overture miniature* so that violas are the lowest voices, and elsewhere the orchestration is transparent enough to enhance the luminous color of the music. That pays off in the transition between Act I and the moment at the beginning of Act II in which Clara and the Nutcracker Prince arrive at his magic kingdom. In two tableaux, "Forest of Fir Trees in Winter" and "Waltz of the Snowflakes," Tchaikovsky created the finest music depicting the sheer beauty of winter of *any* composer in any genre.

The story of The Nutcracker is one which we basically do not get from the Nutcracker Suite that everyone knows and loves. That suite is mostly comprised of the Overture and the Divertissement, the suite of characteristic dances the prince's loyal subjects perform to welcome him home: Coffee (Arabian Dance), Tea (Chinese Dance),

Trepak (Russian Dance), Dance of the Reed Pipes, and Mother Ginger and the Polichinelles (Clowns), the last-named of which are traditionally played by the children of the ballet. The actual story is more involved. At a breezy Christmas celebration in a bourgeois home, the festivities are interrupted by the unexpected appearance of one Herr Drosselmayer. This character is known to all as an eccentric, but the gift he brings for the daughter of the house promises to go the limit: it is a nutcracker in the form of a soldier with grotesque features, whereas any little girl would have the perfect right to expect a pretty doll.

In the perverse way of childhood, Clara cherishes the ugly nutcracker above her other presents, and her love enables it to come alive. Just in time, for she is threatened by a nightmarish encounter with an army of mice (nightmares are a part of childhood, too, *remember?*) The music here is particularly effective in conjuring up an atmosphere of evil: string tremolos, shuddering bass clarinet, downward plunging glissandos in the harps, and fluttering woodwinds. The Nutcracker springs to action at this point, routing the vermin horde and slaying their leader, King Rat himself! His heroism breaks the spell in which he has been imprisoned, and he regains his natural form as a handsome prince. (That's what happens to all us guys when we're loved, and don't you gals forget it!) Taking Clara with him on a magic sleighride as her reward, he returns to his own kingdom. There he successfully courts the Sugar Plum Fairy, and all ends on the upbeat (literally).

Tchaikovsky, who seems to have been blithely unaware of the capacity limit of the compact disc, wrote his Nutcracker ballet with a duration of 85 minutes, which of course necessitates CD2. To complete the package, Gergiev and the Mariinsky give us as memorable a performance as I've ever heard of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Op. 36. Along with No. 6, the "Pathétique," it is arguably the composer's most personal symphony, dealing as it does with the daunting power of fate in our lives. We hear the "Fate" theme right from the start in an oft-repeated fanfare launched by the horns, with the trumpets soon joining in. At 19 minutes, this opening movement vies with that of the "Pathétique" as the composer's most front-loaded. There's a lot of doom-laden material for the composer to work through in the course of this work, with romance (in the form of an Andantino *in modo di canzona* that contains echoes of those great Tchaikovsky love stories, Romeo and Juliet and Francesca da Rimini) and sensual delight (in an inside-out Scherzo with alert pizzicati enfolding a trio section of band- and woodwind-inspired music) as the principal attractions. The "Fate" motif from the opening movement returns in the finale, but it is finally eclipsed by a warm Russian folk melody and a lively peroration at the very end. Gergiev handles it all with a masterful hand that inspires confidence in the orchestra.