

Do you hear what I hear?

Music to brighten your holidays

In these perilous economic times, we can take some comfort and perhaps a little joy from the music of the season. It's easy to get sentimental and wistful at Christmas, especially this Christmas, when far too many in our country will be hurting or hungry. But real sentiment is worth celebrating, and good music can help us do that, bringing us back to times, places, and faces we shouldn't forget.

In that spirit I lead here with three new releases — the first from Ireland, the second from Chicago, and the third from Yo-Yo Ma and friends — and follow with some recent releases as well as hardy chestnuts still roasting on that open fire of the heart.

HOME ON TIME FOR CHRISTMAS by Don Stiffe with Sharon Shannon: Just released in Ireland, this is a three-track CD single intended to raise support funds for CROI, the West of Ireland Cardiology Foundation, a registered Irish

Heart Charity at University Hospital Galway. Galway singer-songwriter Don Stiffe wrote and sings the title ballad, an upbeat call to come home to Ireland for the holidays and to think of those who can't make it back. Clare-born Sharon Shannon plays button accordion, and she and Stiffe are joined by Lunasa's Kevin Crawford on whistle as well as Jimmy Higgins on percussion, Declan Corey on mandolin, and Frankie Colohan on guitar. The CD also features "Gaffo's Ball," played by Shannon with the band Renegade, and "Missing Galway," a song composed and sung by Stiffe about his stay in Boston during the 1990s. For more information about the CD, visit www.croi.ie.

BO-HO-HO-HOLA by Bohola: The first track on "A Childhood Christmas," Bohola's 2000 Christmas CD, is "The Frost Is All Over," and the first track on this new CD leads with "Is the Frost All Over?" followed by "Six Christmases," "On a Christmas Day," "The Holly Jig," "The Wren," and "The Christmas Polkas," all in the same medley. Bohola is the duo of piano accordionist Jimmy Keane and singer,

bouzouki, and dordan player Pat Broaders. Terry Winch's Bronx-based Christmas story "Celebration," Frank Kelly's "Dear Nuala" (a humorous Irish take on the "Twelve Days of Christmas"), and a passage from Dylan Thomas's "A Child's Christmas in Wales" are among the stories and anecdotes woven into the music of this appealing, 18-track CD. For more information, visit www.bohola.com.

SONGS OF JOY & PEACE by Yo-Yo Ma & Friends: This new album by cellist Yo-Yo Ma begins and ends with "Donna Nobis Pacem" ("Give Us Peace"), a fitting sentiment for any season. Ex-Nickel Creek mandolin wizard Chris Thile and bassist Edgar Meyer improvise on the same hymn in a different track. Cape Breton fiddler Natalie MacMaster joins Ma on cello, Marta Cook on Celtic harp, and Mac Morin on piano for "A Christmas Jig/Mouth of the Tobique Reel," and MacMaster and Ma join vocalist Alison Krauss and piper Cristina Pato for "The Wexford Carol." Not every track on this CD is a keeper (singer-pianist Diana Krall and trumpeter Chris Botti make unimpressive contributions), but there's enough here to sustain the album's largely reflective mood.

A CHRISTMAS CELTIC SOJOURN LIVE: Issued last year as a DVD and a CD on Rounder/Decca, this is taken from the Dec. 18, 2006, concert organized and emceed at Boston's Cutler Majestic Theater by Cork-born Brian O'Donovan, host of the weekly "A Celtic Sojourn" show on WGBH-FM. Waterford-born singer Karan Casey gives stirring interpretations of "This Time Will Pass," "Angels We Have Heard on High," and especially "O Holy Night"; Robbie O'Connell is also compelling in his singing of "Three Kings" and the waist-expanding "Miss Fogarty's Christmas Cake"; and harper Michelle Mulcahy offers an enchanting "An Bhuatais/The Bucks of Oranmore." There are also three prior CD's bearing Brian O'Donovan's tasteful holiday stamp: "A Christmas Celtic Sojourn" (Rounder) in 2001, "Comfort and Joy" (Rounder) in 2003, and "A Christmas Celtic Sojourn: Live Recordings 2003-2005" (WGBH) in 2006. Visit www.rounder.com or www.wgbh.org/celtic.

ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT by Cherish the Ladies: Among other holiday recordings of recent or longer vintage, this one by Cherish the Ladies retains its sparkle. Originally self-released by the group on their own Big Mammy Records imprint, it was later reissued by Rounder after the band joined the label. CTL then comprised Joanie Madden, Mary Coogan, Donna Long, Marie Reilly, and singer Heidi Talbot, who does an especially fine rendition of "The Castle of Dromore" as well as "Silent Night," sung in Irish and English. Information on this CD is available at www.cherishtheladies.com and www.rounder.com.

THE BELLS OF DUBLIN by The Chieftains: Still the most popular Irish traditional band in the world, the Chieftains have released two holiday recordings ("Silent Night: A Christmas in Rome" from 1999 is the other), but I prefer this one from 1991. Clustered with guest musicians, the eclectic "Bells of Dublin" offers a memorable collaboration between Kevin Connell and the Voice Squad on "The Holly She Bears a Berry/God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen/The Boar's Head"

medley, Nolwen Monjarret's "A Breton Carol," Kate and Anna McGarrigle's "Il Est Ne/Ca Berger," Jackson Browne's bold "The Rebel Jesus," and a lengthy "The Wren! The Wren!" medley of tunes and songs performed by Kerry button accordionist Brendan Begley and Northumbrian piper Kathryn Tickell, among others.

HANDEL: MESSIAH by the London Symphony Orchestra and Choir conducted by Sir Colin Davis: "That generous and polite nation" was George Frederic Handel's grateful reaction to the people of Ireland for the successful premiere of his oratorio "Messiah" in Dublin's Fishamble Street Musick Hall on April 13, 1742. There are many fine versions of "Messiah," but this one from 1966 has never been topped. Soprano Heather Harper, contralto Helen Watts, tenor John Wakefield, and bass John Shirley-Quirk are the soloists, and each is magnificent. This is as close to perfect as any classical performance recorded during the analog era can get.

DYLAN THOMAS READS 'A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS IN WALES': In Manhattan's Steinway Hall on Feb. 22, 1952, less than 21 months before his death, Welsh poet Dylan Thomas recorded this extraordinary recitation of his ageless, lyrical story about Christmas as a youth in the seaside town of Swansea. No spoken-word album has ever delivered more pleasure, and I recommend that you and your family listen to the Harper Audio CD and read the New Directions text simultaneously.

Don't forget to watch "A Christmas Carol," the 1951 film starring Alastair Sim in his definitive screen role of Ebenezer Scrooge, but be sure to see the black-and-white original on DVD, not the computer colorization.

A more recent movie I recommend on DVD is "Joyeux Noel" ("Merry Christmas"), a best foreign film Oscar nominee from 2005. It's about a famous WWI incident during Dec. 1914 when battlefield soldiers ceased combat for a brief truce on their own initiative.

Finally, read Monaghan poet Patrick Kavanagh's "A Christmas Childhood."



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