

## Program notes

Many of my favorite Christmas memories revolve around music. Indeed, choral music seems to be the soundtrack of the season. Today's program includes many CMS favorites, as well as new selections, and we hope our performance warms your heart and puts you in the Christmas spirit.

Equally gifted as a conductor and composer, Sir David Willcocks, former director of the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, set the standard for Christmas music in the twentieth century. His arrangement of *Once in Royal David's City* is iconic, and for many singers and audiences, Christmas is not complete without hearing it performed as part of the King's College "A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols." It begins with a solo treble voice singing the first verse. The choir and organ join, and the piece climaxes in the sixth verse, aided by a soaring descant.

Healey Willan was born in England and immigrated to Canada, where he held various church and academic positions. To this day, he is widely respected for his contributions to sacred music, and his *Hodie, Christus Natus Est* is one of his best-known works. The piece sets the traditional antiphon text with rhythmic polyphony, ending with an exuberant "Alleluia." Willan seamlessly blends Renaissance and modern techniques into this jubilant motet.

Stephen Paulus was a uniquely talented composer who died too soon. Choirs around the world love his unaccompanied pieces, particularly *The Road Home* and *Pilgrims' Hymn*. *Jesu Carols* shows a different side of Paulus's compositional voice. This eclectic four-movement piece for choir and harp juxtaposes centuries-old texts with contemporary harmonic language. The first, second, and fourth movements are rather jaunty, but the third movement, *Waye Not His Cribb* is austere in its portrayal of Christ's unfittingly crude birth. *Jesu Carols* has an interesting connection to Chicago: it was commissioned by the William Ferris Chorale in 1985.

Abbie Betinis is an exciting composer based in the Twin Cities. At age 31, she was named one of the United States' top *100 Composers Under 40* by New York's WQXR-FM and NPR. Her compositions, which include choral music as well as other genres, demonstrate her eclectic style and varied interests. This arrangement of *In the Bleak Midwinter* skillfully combines the original Holst-Rossetti material with newly composed music and texts. It simultaneously portrays winter's harshness and the warmth of Christ's redeeming birth.

We conclude our first half with *Glory, Glory, Glory to the Newborn King* by one of the all-time great Spiritual composers/arrangers, Moses Hogan. This energetic piece is based on the spiritual "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and uses layered ostinatos, a quintessential element of the Spiritual genre, to great effect.

The next four pieces tell the story of Christ's birth. The first piece, *Huron Carol*, is Susan LaBarr's arrangement of Canada's oldest Christmas song. Originally titled *Iesus Ahattonnia*, the text was written by a missionary to the Huron people. The poetic imagery sets the nativity in the north woods—hunters hear the angels sing instead of shepherds; a rabbit-skin robe replaces the babe's swaddling

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cloths; and fox and beaver pelts are given in place of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Few composers can compete with John Rutter's contribution to Christmas music, and his *Angels' Carol* is perhaps his best-known work for the season. This tuneful piece portrays the celestial song that the shepherds heard on the night of Christ's birth. Its lightly flowing harp part and memorable melody ensure that this work will continue to be a yuletide favorite for many years to come.

The text of *Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day* is an extended metaphor. It is sung from Christ's perspective and shares that he became incarnate to save humanity (his "true love") and to call us to join his "dance." The theme of dance continues with a short work by Kirke Mechem, who is primarily known for his operas, particularly *Tartuffe*. *Fum, Fum, Fum!* comes from Mechem's larger work, *Seven Joys of Christmas*, in which each movement portrays a different aspect of joy. This movement is subtitled "The Joy of Dance." Energetically set with patter-like rhythms, *Fum, Fum, Fum!* is exciting from start to finish.

In contrast to the excitement of Mechem's work, Philip WJ Stopford's arrangement of the Coventry Carol is sublime. At first, the lush harmonies and lilting meter make *Lully, Lulla, Lullay* sound serene; however, upon reading the text carefully, it becomes clear that the subject of this piece—the massacre of the Holy Innocents by King Harold—is quite tragic. Viewers of the CMS University program may remember Stopford joining one of the YouTube sessions and discussing his compositions, including this carol.

The next two pieces address the Christ Child asleep on Christmas Eve. *Niño lindo* is an arrangement of a Venezuelan carol by one of that country's most famous composers, Alberto Grau. The music rocks back and forth and repeats itself in a way that recalls a parent putting an infant to sleep.

Ola Gjeilo was born in Norway, but has lived in the United States for many years. He brings his well-known style, typified by elegant simplicity and tasteful dissonances, to the beloved carol, *Away in a Manger*. The quietness of this arrangement portrays the hushed experience of gazing at a newborn and the multi-layered contemplativeness of Christ's birth.

As he did with countless other Christmas carols, Willcocks arranged *O Come, All Ye Faithful* in a straightforward manner, yet judiciously added points of interest to make it sparkle. In particular, the diminished chord on "Word" in the final verse has become famous in its own right. Even though *Silent Night* was composed in the nineteenth century, it holds such a special place in Christmas traditions that it seems like it was sung at the actual manger! We conclude with CMS's traditional benediction for the season, Stopford's *A Christmas Blessing*.

I hope that our performance warms your heart, and that you and yours have a wonderful holiday. Best wishes for 2022 as well!

John C. Hughes, D.M.A.  
Music Director