

Program notes

Welcome to our performance today! Thank you for joining us as we ring in the holiday season together.

In keeping with the long-standing tradition of Chicago Master Singers, as well as King's College, Cambridge, we will begin our program with Sir David Willcocks's beloved arrangement of *Once in Royal David's City*. This piece builds from the first verse's solo to the climax of the sixth verse's soaring descant with a lush organ accompaniment.

Two contemporary works comprise the first programmatic set. The first piece, *O Come, Desire of Nations*, is by Gerald Near. Near is a prominent composer of sacred music with a connection to the Chicago area - he studied music with Leo Sowerby at the American Conservatory of Music. His setting of this "O Antiphon" is a fervent cry for world peace, a timely theme. Near composed this work in loving memory of fellow American composer Stephen Paulus (1949-2014), whose setting of *We Three Kings of Orient Are* we will perform later in the program.

The second piece in this set is the centerpiece of today's program: *Christus Natus Est* by Cecilia McDowall. Based in London, McDowall is one of the most successful composers working today. Her musical prowess has been recognized in numerous ways. Notably, she received the coveted carol commission from King's College, Cambridge in 2021. Subtitled "A Cantata for Christmas," *Christus Natus Est* is a fifteen-minute medley of five traditional carols: "Personent hodie," "Entre le bœuf," "Gaudete," "Infant Holy," and "Angelus ad Virginem." McDowall elevates each tune with colorful harmonies and sincere expression. The tunes are connected by jaunty organ interludes.

The next set of pieces, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, *A Child of the Snows*, and *What Sweeter Music*, is connected textually. The text of each vividly reflects on Christ's lowly birth in a stable and contemplates our inability to offer gifts appropriate for the newborn King. ("What can I give Him, poor as I am?") Harold Darke, composer of *In the Bleak Midwinter*, and John Rutter, composer of *What Sweeter Music*, are pillars of British church music, and we are pleased to share *A Child of the Snows* composed by one of CMS's very own Tenors, Francis L. Lynch.

We conclude the first half with two familiar carols with organ accompaniment. Mack Wilberg adds a sense of flair and playfulness to *Ding! Dong! Merrily On High*. *On Christmas Night* is a setting of the Sussex carol by the great American church musician Paul Manz. Manz originally improvised this arrangement during a Christmas Eve service in the late 1950s or early 1960s at Minneapolis's Mount Olive Lutheran Church, where he was Cantor from 1946 until 1983. Decades later, David Cherwien, Mount Olive's current Cantor, transcribed this improvisation from an archival recording.

Program notes

After intermission, we continue our program with Drew Collins's arrangement of the French carol *People, Look East*, which aptly expresses the anticipation of the season through its exciting rhythms. Two pieces about Epiphany follow. In *We Three Kings of Orient Are*, Stephen Paulus very effectively uses harp and oboe to evoke images of the magi. We continue this theme with a setting of an Epiphany antiphon by Francis Poulenc, one of France's greatest twentieth-century composers. This short, unaccompanied work exemplifies Poulenc's straightforward style, typified by an emphasis on melody, syllabic text setting, and a rich and - at times - quirky harmonic language. Despite some unusual and dissonant chords, *Videntes Stellam* is a favorite piece in the choral repertory.

Two simple and lovely pieces follow. Minnesota-based composer and conductor Dale Warland founded the award-winning Dale Warland Singers and has been a major influence on contemporary choral music in the United States. We are not only including *What Is This Fragrance?* because of its beauty, but also in recognition of Warland's recent ninetieth birthday. I have paired this piece with *Christmas Night* by Norwegian composer Kim André Arnesen. Its singable melody and lush harmonies have quickly made this piece a popular choice for choirs at this time of year.

Nearing the end of our program, we invite you to sing with us on *O Come, All Ye Faithful* and *Silent Night*. We conclude with Philip Stopford's beautiful piece, *A Christmas Blessing*.

Again, I wish to thank each one of you for coming today and for your support of CMS. I hope our music uplifts you and puts you in the holiday spirit. Please make plans to join us for our spring concerts on April 29 and 30. These performances will feature the chorus, professional soloists, and full symphonic orchestra presenting the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams. This is not a concert to miss! Until then, I hope you enjoy this special time of year with your loved ones. I wish you all the best in 2023 and beyond.

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