

Part one includes short choral pieces, solos and duets, all by French composers. Rather than provide all the French and Latin texts and translations, a short synopsis of each song is included along with occasional biographical or historical insights, as might be the case in a radio broadcast. To keep the sequence running seamlessly, please reserve your applause until the end of each half.

Gabriel Fauré **Cantique de Jean Racine** **Choir**

The text asks the Saviour to receive the prayers of the faithful and to bestow His grace and gifts. Fauré is best known for his Requiem, but he wrote very distinctive and beautiful songs as well as powerful chamber music.

Gabriel Fauré **Les berceaux** **Mary Halloran alto**

*The text of **The Cradles** by Sully Prudhomme imagines ships about to leave harbour while the women the sailors will leave behind rock the cradles.*

César Franck **Ave Maria** **Dot Graham soprano**

The ancient and familiar Latin prayer addressing Mary the Mother of God, beginning Hail Mary, has been set by many composers over the centuries. Franck was renowned as an organist whose works include the Three Chorales. He also composed a violin sonata with the famous canonic finale, and a single symphony that develops short melodic and harmonic ideas throughout the three movements.

Charles Gounod **Ave Verum Corpus** **Choir**

Another prayer dating from a 13th century Franciscan manuscript appeals to the true body of Christ in the Sacrament. Set by countless composers, the versions by Byrd and Mozart are great favourites of the Choir and audiences. Gounod brings a simple Gallic charm and sincerity to his setting.

Eugène Bozza **Aria** **Paul Yandell alto saxophone**

We move from sacred to secular music. Bozza was a 20th century composer who wrote prolifically for wind instruments.

Fest Noz **La Non Marion** **Steve Thorpe voice and penny whistle**

This is folk music inspired by the Breton Fest Noz tradition, a night time festival of song and dance.

Camille Saint-Saëns **Une flute invisible** **Olwyn Bloor soprano** **Steve Thorpe flute**

*Words by Victor Hugo. An invitation to a tryst in an idyllic orchard, where the invisible flute blends with birdsong. Saint-Saëns liked his best-known music least, and banned performances of *The Carnival of the Animals*. That and the *Third Symphony*, which features the organ, are his best known works, though his output includes five virtuosic and melodic piano concerti which he premiered.*

Francis Poulenc **Les chemins de l'amour** **Mike Bell bass**

Setting a text by Jean Anouilh, that longs for the happy paths of youthful love now that they have vanished. Without being specified in the text, it's very likely that this reminded Poulenc of a homosexual amour, illicit at the time. The composer, who died in 1963, was conflicted throughout his life and music between his Catholic faith, his deepest feelings, and his very secular and sensual sense of fun.

Nadia Boulanger **Cantique de Maurice Maeterlinck** **Gordon Rowlands tenor**

An enigmatic reflection on the sadness of love and the consolation of even distant, tear-jerking memories. Nadia Boulanger decided that, unlike her sister Lili, who died tragically young, she had no talent as a composer. In the spirit of "those who can, do: those who can't, teach" she became possibly the most influential composition teacher of the 20th century. Her pupils included Aaron Copland, Philip Glass and Astor Piazzolla.

Jules Massenet

Marine

Sara Caldwell soprano Mike Bell bass

An enigmatic Seascape with words by Camille Distel, Massenet's principal operatic librettist. Come away to sea, it suggests. It will cradle you, and there is nothing to fear.

Léo Delibes

Flower Duet

Sara Caldwell soprano Mary Halloran alto

Made famous by advertisements for British Airways, this beguiling duet is from Act 1 of the opera Lakmé. The eponymous heroine, daughter of a Brahmin priest, goes with her maidservant to gather flowers by the river. The tragic love story that ensues and brings about Lakmé's death is all in the future. For now, all is the innocence and vibrancy of nature.

Camille Saint-Saëns

Tollite Hostias

Choir

The final item in the first half has become a favourite of the Choir's since we first sang it as the finale of the composer's rarely performed Christmas Oratorio. It calls on the faithful to bring their gifts and offer praise at the Manger.

Interval 20 minutes

Charles Gounod

St Cecilia Mass

Soloists: Dot, Sara, Steve and Mike

Kyrie – Gloria – Credo – Offertory – Sanctus – Benedictus – Agnus Dei – Domine salvum fac

The words of the Latin Mass have inspired literally hundreds of settings by composers from across the centuries. Few Festival Choir seasons go by without performing at least one, whether entire or movements of, sometimes including a Requiem Mass. Everything from Byrd to Bach, from Zelenka to Verdi over the years. Gounod's setting is a work that wears its heart on its sleeve. Its direct melodies and harmonies perfectly capture the mood and meaning of the words. Written for large forces with orchestra and organ, it also lends itself to a more intimate setting and piano accompaniment. As well as occasional solos, Gounod sometimes assigns parts to a trio or semichorus of soprano, tenor and bass. A striking feature of the Credo (I believe) is how much of the faith is affirmed in a stirring melody sung in unison.

There are two departures from the normal progress of a Mass. Between the Gloria and the Credo comes an Offertory originally for solo organ but here played by piano duet. After the Agnus Dei, the score includes three short and different settings of Domine salvum fac. This might be thought odd because it was the French Royal Anthem during the Ancien Régime that ended almost 60 years earlier with the French Revolution and a lot of bloodshed. It also inspired the words of the British National Anthem. Alternate words underlay the music in praise of the Emperor Napoléon (the Third, not Bonaparte). Naturally we'll sing the Royal words. The words and plainchant melodies are the same, but the settings of the Prayer are for the Church, the Army, and the Nation. It seemed too rousing a finale to resist.

After hearing the premiere of the work officially titled 'Messe solennelle en l'honneur de Sainte-Cécile' on St Cecilia's day, 22 November 1855, the 20 year-old composer Camille Saint-Saëns, Gounod's junior by 17 years, wrote: "The appearance of the Messe Saint-Cécile caused a kind of shock. This simplicity, this grandeur, this serene light which rose before the musical world like a breaking dawn, troubled people enormously. At first one was dazzled, then charmed, then conquered."

Tonight you will receive a copy of the Choir's glossy new leaflet for the coming 2023-24 season. The first concert, like this one, is a mixture of the sacred and the secular, but for Advent. It contains a brand-new short mass setting by Donald Judge where the Latin texts are enclosed by traditional ancient carols and chorales of sorts, linked by the carol melody. In February the Choir celebrates its 60th anniversary, and in May (when there was to have been a Festival, now postponed until 2026) we'll present Purcell's glorious operatic masterpiece Dido and Aeneas, a project that, like Dido herself, came to an untimely end in March 2020. We look forward to seeing you either as a singer or in our audience.

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for devising the stage lighting.**

**And to Shackleford Pianos
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