

Soloists Dot Graham, Olwyn Bloor, Sara Caldwell *soprano*. Mary Halloran *alto*.
 Steve Thorpe *tenor & flute*. Mike Bell, Donald Judge *bass*. Ambrose Smith *recorder*.

Pianist Rosalind Hall

Conductor Donald Judge

Two songs for St Martin

Traditional German Rabimmel, rabammel, rabum Dot

David Monks Hymnus Sancto Martino

Our concert on the theme of Winter sacred and secular opens with two works celebrating St Martin of Tours, a popular figure in central Europe. Life as a Roman soldier didn't suit his pacifist inclinations as a secret Christian convert. He tore his military cloak and gave half to a beggar, refused to kill anyone, was sacked, and became a travelling minister to the poor and needy. In Czechia, he rides through towns on or near 11 November, collecting for the principal Catholic charity. But the religious is mingled with the seasonal and agricultural. St Martin's Wine, the Czech equivalent of Beaujolais Nouveau that comes in red, white and rosé, accompanies a feast of roast goose. In Germany, more informal collectors may, like English Wassailers, use donations to fund large quantities of beer. *We go with our lanterns*, they sing in this arrangement by Donald Judge, breathing in the aroma of cakes before disappearing to the pub. A more demure approach comes from a Latin text set by David Monks, an Irish composer living in France.

Three Wintry Songs with words by William Shakespeare

Charles H H Parry Blow, blow thou Winter wind Steve

Gerald Finzi Fear no more the heat of the Sun Mike

John Dankworth When icicles hang by the wall Donald

Shakespeare provided a wealth of words about Winter, which have been eagerly taken up by many composers. *Blow, blow* comes from *As You Like It*, where Amiens opines that the worst wintry weather has to offer is nothing compared to human cruelty. Its composer is best known for setting Blake's *Jerusalem* and Milton's *Blest Pair of Sirens*. *Fear no more* is from *Cymbeline*: Guiderius and Argiragus, Cymbeline's sons sing about the deceased Cloten and Fidele. Finzi's magnificent setting is included on the strength of the reference to *furious winter's rages*. To lighten the mood, *When icicles hang*, from *Love's Labours Lost*, is one of a set of Shakespeare songs by jazz musician John Dankworth, first recorded in the 1970s by his wife Cleo Laine. *Roasted crabs* are crab apples in a bowl of punch, while *Greasy Joan doth keel the pot* may refer to a kitchen servant using bread to mop up and eat excess fat from a stew.

Two Wintry Sequences by Henry Purcell

Purcell only wrote one true opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, which the Choir will perform in May 2024. But he wrote several masques, huge works of speech, song and dance designed for spectacular dramatic productions. *The Faery Queen* was based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: indeed the entire play and Purcell's several hours of music were mingled together in the original performances. Both sequences see Winter dispelled by warmth and radiant sunshine. The celebrated **Frost Scene** from *King Arthur* sees Cupid releasing the frozen Cold Genius and his followers. For all his towering English greatness, Purcell was hugely inspired by French and Italian composers. He stole the technique if not the notes of the shivering song from an earlier work by Lully.

from *The Fairy Queen* Now Winter comes Slowly Mike
 Hail great parent

from *King Arthur* Act three Frost Scene Cupids: Sara & Olwyn Cold Genius: Steve

INTERVAL

Donald Judge Missa Brevis: Carols, Canons and Chorales (2023)

The composer writes: I'd long wanted to set words from the Latin Mass which inspire so much choral music spanning several centuries. Indeed, the Festival Choir has sung settings, including *Requiems*, from every one of the past six, from William Byrd to Cecilia McDowall. Some masses are written for specific occasions and may include other texts, as in Cecilia's *Tongues of Fire* or Britten's *A War Requiem*. This one is possibly unique in that it takes five ancient or traditional carols and uses their melodies for those of the succeeding Mass texts, which employ a variety of contrapuntal devices

including canons. To round off each section, the chorales (also based on the preceding carol's melody) set not hymns, as in Bach's *Cantatas*, but familiar words from the King James Bible pertinent to the Christmas season. The work deliberately creates music that shifts between place and time under all sorts of influences, but trying to avoid direct imitation of particular composers. Another feature is the use of modes – scales that are neither major nor minor, but which give the music a distinctive character. The work lasts a little over twenty minutes and falls into five sections, each comprising a Carol, the Mass text and a Chorale, the latter two deploying variants of the carol's melody.

Angelus ad Virginem is one of the oldest known carol melodies, originating in France, and telling, in Latin and medieval English, of Gabriel's message to Mary. The **Kyrie** turns the first few notes of the carol to the minor key, and inverts that melody to set *Christe eleison*. **Chorale 1** sets the first of four quotes from St Luke, beginning *Fear not, Mary*.

Narodil se Kristus Pán is a carol every Czech knows: it concludes many Christmas services and concerts. The soloist's words proclaim *Christ the Lord is born*, while those of the chorus are in medieval English. The **Gloria** plays with the opening notes that features the sharpened fourth so distinctive in Czech folk music, and is in 5/8 time. **Chorale 2** sets Luke's words beginning *And suddenly there was with the Angel a multitude* – whose music is inspired by Handel.

Já bych rád k Betlému is another Czech carol, a lilting waltz expressing a desire to join a pilgrimage to Bethlehem. As in so many Czech carols, birds, and especially the cuckoo, feature – quite why in winter is uncertain. The cuckoo finds its way into the exuberant **Sanctus** whose three sections, reflecting the three repetitions of the word *Sanctus* contrast chorus, solo quartet, chorus. The last section contrasts major key triads with jarring chord clusters as the music rises up the scale and the singers enter their high registers. **Chorale 3** sets the words beginning *And he shall reign*.

Noël nouvelet has an appropriately French impressionist feel to the harp-like accompaniment, with verses sung by soprano soloist and altos, and an important role throughout the movement for solo flute. **Benedictus** takes the carol's opening 4 notes, developing them into fugal passages of increasing complexity, with bell-like piano. **Chorale 4** sets Luke's words beginning *And the shepherds returned*, one of them playing the flute.

Personent Hodie will probably be the carol most familiar to audiences; Gustav Holst's arrangement being the most familiar setting of a piece that originated in 16th century Finland. A deliberately different approach features a jazzy accompaniment, with each verse rising a semitone, and each voice part taking a verse in turn against wordless harmony from the other three. Repetition of the final bars with silences wind down to the **Agnus Dei**. As in *Benedictus*, the opening notes of the carol are transformed in rhythm. Each repetition starts like a fugue, but leads to slightly slower section, identical each time. **Chorale 5** is the longest, setting not Luke but John: *In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness*. When composing it, I was aware that a lot of my pieces for the Choir have quiet, reflective endings. That seemed to be happening again, with the singers apparently settled in darkness. But the light glitters and crescendos high on the piano before a final flourish and *Light* a triumphant B major chord.

Three Christmas Songs

Michael Head	The little road to Bethlehem	Olwyn
Émile Louis	Petit Noël	Sara
Max Reger	Mariä Wiegenlied	Dot & Mary

To balance the three secular songs from male vocalists in part one, here are three sacred ones, from England, France and Germany, sung by female voices. Michael Head conjures a quintessentially English melody for Margaret Rose's 1946 poem inspired by seeing sheep on an lane in Essex in winter. The words of Pierre-Jules-Théophile Gautier chosen by Émile Louis contrast the winter's cold with the warmth of the stable and the angels hovering overhead. Reger sets a German folk carol depicting Mary rocking the infant Jesus. Brahms also knew this tune: in the second of *Two Songs with Viola obbligato*, the viola plays it while the singer has a different text and melody.

Isabella Leonarda Gloria

The composer was a 17th century Italian nun from Navarra, a woman nobly born who chose life in a convent over marriage. She is just one of far more female composers than anyone imagined, from many centuries, who along with those of colour are only now getting the recognition they deserve. Leonarda was a prolific and imaginative composer, whose performers were clearly not limited to nuns. This ingenious and inspired setting of the Angels' message to the shepherds contrasts female angels appearing to male shepherds, both singing in 2 parts. Finally, their voices combine in resplendent four-part harmony as they set off for Bethlehem. The final word goes to a shepherd's pipe.