

# Choral Music for Christmas

BY MARK J. SUDERMAN

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Choral music plays a key role in how we experience the Christmas season. When planning for the Christmas season, we look for music that will enhance public worship and stir us personally to reflect on and celebrate the Nativity. The compact disk recordings reviewed here would be excellent staples for a personal music library. Each one contains outstanding choral literature to use in a variety of sacred Christmas settings.

Choosing a few gems from among the hundreds of Christmas CDs available is a daunting task, so I have decided to focus on the work of ten choirs, many of whom are considered to be among the world's best choral ensembles. Each choir has a number of Christmas recordings available, though I will review only one of them. Six of these choirs are purely professional, two are affiliated with a specific chapel and a type of service, one is a college choir, and the final choir offers an example of one of many major works for the Christmas season. Mostly they sing short Christmas choral anthems or carols, but their literature ranges widely from medieval chant to contemporary pieces, and represents several countries, languages, and church denominations.



The first of the professional choirs is The Cambridge Singers conducted by John Rutter. Among their numerous (and all excellent) Christmas CDs, one of my favorites is *Christmas Night: Carols of the Nativity* (Collegium

Records COLCD 106, released 1993, \$16.36 CD). While many of the pieces are sung a cappella (without instrumental accompaniment), some are accompanied by The City of London Sinfonia. The rich, clean tone of the choir, with their impeccable intonation, helps deliver the text and its meaning in an unobstructed way, allowing the listener to truly appreciate the music. In addition to traditional pieces (such as "O Tannenbaum," "The Cherry Tree Carol," and "Away in a Manger"), it contains Harold Darke's gem "In the Bleak Mid-Winter" as well as other more obscure but delightful carols, including "The Three Kings" by Peter Cornelius and "Myn Lyking" by R. R. Terry. John Rutter, the conductor, is also known as a first-rate composer; the CD includes three of his original carols—"Candlelight Carol," "There Is a Flower," and "Nativity Carol"—and several of his arrangements.

The premier American professional choir, Chanticleer, is known for its seamless blend of sound. This male ensemble, composed typically of twelve voices ranging from low bass to countertenor, imparts a unique all-male sound in its rendering of traditional SATB literature (which is usually sung by both females and males). *Our Heart's Joy: A Chanticleer Christmas* (Chanticleer Records CR-8803, remastered 2004, \$15.98 CD, \$9.99 MP3 download) is a beautiful collection of a cappella pieces from two earlier recordings. The album opens with a number of early music Christmas pieces from the Medieval (1150-1400) and Renaissance (1400-1600) periods, including traditional carols like "Riu, Riu, Chiu" and "E la Don Don." However, some fine twentieth-century pieces are also included, such as the double choir anthem "A Hymn to the Virgin" by Benjamin Britten. Two highlights of the CD are the sumptuous "Ave Maria" by Franz Biebl and the energetic "Medley of Christmas Spirituals" arranged by Chanticleer member, Joseph Jennings.

The Tallis Scholars are known for their excellent singing of early music, typically medieval and renaissance music. This choir of male and female singers has a brighter, clear tone with minimal use of vibrato, typical of the sound that music historians believe was used during this early period in European music. The two-CD set *Christmas with the Tallis Scholars* (Gimell CDGIM 202, released 2003, \$14.93 CD, \$14.93 MP3 download) uses literature that highlights the ensemble's expertise. The first disc begins with a number of medieval carols, as well as four early music settings of "Ave Maria" by various composers. It also displays some beautiful settings of German Chorales and a Christmas motet and mass by Jacob Clemens non Papa (c. 1510-c. 1555). The second disc is comprised almost entirely of chant writing. The choir does an exquisite job of singing the flowing unison lines of a Christmas mass and various Christmas hymns in this plainsong tradition.

Another chamber choir known for their early music singing is The Sixteen conducted by Harry Christophers. However, the choir makes use of their early music tone in singing pieces from the twentieth century in *Hodie: An English Christmas Collection* (Coro 16004, released 2009, \$12.00 CD, \$8.99 MP3 download). The clear, bright sound with minimal vibrato that is good for

early music also works well here with twentieth-century music that contains dissonances and close harmonies. The Sixteen has a bit warmer, fuller sound than The Tallis Scholars. *Hodie: An English Christmas Collection* has a wonderful selection of pieces by various British composers, including Herbert Howells, John Tavener, Kenneth Leighton, and John Linton Gardner. This recording is well worth the purchase not just for its fine selections of British Christmas choral music, but also because it contains Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*. This brilliant twelve-movement work features the choir accompanied by harp.

For those looking for a CD of very traditional Christmas music, an excellent choice is *Songs of Angels: Christmas Hymns & Carols* (Telarc CD-80377, released 1994, \$8.97 CD, \$8.97 MP3 download) directed by Robert Shaw, the eminent choral director of the twentieth century. His relatively large choir of almost fifty singers offers a rich, full-bodied sound and wonderful musicality with careful attention to the text. All of the selections, arranged by either Robert Shaw or Alice Parker or both, are sung a cappella. A sampling of titles includes "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "What Child Is This?," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," and "The Holly and the Ivy."

A setting of traditional carols in a very different vein can be heard on *Carols from the Old & New Worlds* (Harmonia Mundi 907079, released 1994, \$9.90 CD, \$8.99 MP3 download) featuring the Theatre

of Voices choral ensemble directed by Paul Hillier. (There is a second volume available—Harmonia Mundi 907233.) Mr. Hillier is the arranger of the traditional carols on this recording from America, Bavaria, Austria, and England, some of which are familiar, but many are not heard very often. Beyond the traditional carols, there are also a number of composed Christmas pieces by early

American composers, such as Supply Belcher and Daniel Read. Mr. Hillier has skillfully molded the small ensemble of fourteen voices so that the choral tone and style changes to fit the piece, its historic location, and the era in which it was written. This adds to the delight of listening, as the choral tone changes from rich, warm romantic singing to the more strident, bright sounds that were typical of early American music.

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For many choral music listeners, Christmas music is synonymous with Christmas Eve at King's College in Cambridge, England. Each year since 1919, a Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols has been presented in the chapel at King's College. An exquisite choir of men and boys perform music interspersed with Scripture passages foretelling the birth of Christ. The program is broadcast live around the world. A long line of organists and choir directors have led these services through the years and composed or arranged many fine Christmas carols. The two-CD set *Classic Christmas Carols: 50 Favourite Carols* (EMI Classics 5 15086 2, released 2008, \$9.97 CD, \$9.49 MP3 download) is an excellent compilation of the music from these services, featuring numerous organists, the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, and directors David Willcocks, Philip Ledger, and Stephen Cleobury. Other CDs are available that offer both the Scripture readings and the music. The music is rich and poignant, offering a wide range of literature from a boy's opening solo on "Once in Royal David's City," to an organ voluntary, to the full choir and congregation singing "O Come, All Ye Faithful" with brass and organ accompaniment. Listeners are sure to recognize many of the carols and anthems, but also enjoy learning new pieces, all expertly performed.

In a similar vein is *Advent Carols from St. John's* (Nimbus Records NI5414), released 1994, \$14.84 CD, \$8.99 MP3 download) featuring The Choir of St. John's College, Cambridge, England with Christopher Robinson conducting. The Advent Service presented here is representative of the four Sundays in the season of Advent, offering a time of preparation for Christmas. The excellent choir, though not quite up to the standards of King's College, offers a nice variety of musical styles and time periods on this recording, including plainsong, traditional carols, and composed anthems by a variety of European composers. The music is interspersed with the collects and readings of Advent. Notable pieces include "Adam Lay Ybounden" by Boris Ord, "Es ist das Heil uns Kommen Her" by Johannes Brahms, and "A Spotless Rose" by Herbert Howells.

From the many fine Christmas recordings available from American college and university choirs, I have chosen one from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, which is well-known for its long history of excellent choral music. The college's Christmas Festival, first held in 1912, is part of its Christian mission in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (It should be noted that other denominations have similar Christmas programs, derived from their faith and musical heritage.) The two-CD set *Where Peace and Love and Hope Abide: Christmas at St. Olaf 2007* (St. Olaf Records E-3008/9, released 2008, \$24.98) is a live recording of the Scripture readings, orchestral music, congregational singing, and choral numbers in the 96<sup>th</sup> Christmas Festival. The St. Olaf Orchestra and five choirs, including the well-known St. Olaf Choir directed by Anton Armstrong, provide the music either individually

or as a mass choir. Many of the pieces were composed or arranged by Lutheran musicians, including John Ferguson, Carl Schalk, Rene Clausen, and F. Melius Christiansen. The combination of pieces and variety of ensembles make this a wonderful collection of sounds and textures.



The final category features major choral works for the Christmas season. These works, which are larger (and longer) than the typical Christmas carol or anthem, are often accompanied by orchestra or brass. There are fine musical settings of the *Gloria*, which opens with the angels' song announcing the Messiah's birth (Luke 2:14), either from an entire mass or in a stand-alone arrangement, by composers including Antonio Vivaldi and John Rutter. Settings of Mary's song of praise, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), are great for the season and prominent composers here would be J. S. Bach and Francesco Durante. Other excellent Christmas works include George Frideric Handel's *Messiah*, Daniel Pinkham's *Christmas Cantata*, and Ralph Vaughan William's *Hodie*.

A piece worth mentioning in more detail is J. S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* or *Weihnachtsoratorium*. A sparkling performance can be heard under the direction of John Eliot Gardiner from his Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists (Archiv 423 232-2, released 1990, \$24.58 CD, \$18.06 MP3 download). The oratorio is a combination of six sections that were performed on the six feast days from Christmas to Epiphany in 1734-1735. The clarity and precision of the instrumental playing along with the musicality of the soloists and choir make this an outstanding recording to enjoy and celebrate the entire Christmas season.

There are hundreds of other recordings of choral music available for wonderful listening during the Christmas season. The CDs reviewed here are my suggestions for revisiting familiar carols and anthems, and learning some new ones.



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