

Christmas Music Past and Present A short survey by Brian Wilson

By having the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future visit Scrooge in rapid succession, Dickens was effectively anticipating T S Eliot's dictum that 'Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past'. At Christmas, music from all periods of history and all styles seem to meet. Which is a complex way of justifying my passing on some thoughts about music for the season, past and present, which I'm likely to revisit this year – have, in fact, mostly already revisited for this survey. It's a purely subjective listing and I'm not presuming to recommend 'the best' or to make detailed comparisons.

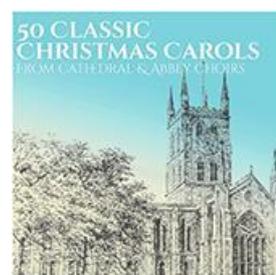
It should be taken in conjunction with my first set of Christmas 2018 musings in my most recent edition of [Second Thoughts and Short Reviews](#):

- **Advent Live** from St John's, a selection from the BBC broadcasts from 2014-2017, directed by Andrew Nethsingha (SIGCD535 – [review](#)).
- **100 Years of Nine Lessons and Carols** King's College, Cambridge (KGS0033 – [review](#)). Other Christmas own-label recordings, KGS0001, KGS0008 or KGS0013 (DVD).
- **Noël Éternel** (Alpha 422).
- **Verbum caro factum est: A Christmas Greeting** from **Bach Collegium Japan**, directed by Masaaki Suzuki (BIS-2291 SACD).
- **Nicola PORPORA (1686-1768)** Christmas Oratorio *Il verbo in carne* (SONY 19075868452).

If you want non-stop wall-to-wall festive music there's DG's brightly-packaged catch-all budget-price compilation of **100 Christmas Masterpieces** (4836001, 5 CDs or downloads). It's all rather bitty, but many people who can't or won't listen to classical music in any other way will go for it – those who enjoy albums of disconnected arias but won't even try highlights from one opera, let alone the complete thing. The recordings, drawn from the catalogues of the Universal labels, are mostly very good: excerpts from **Sir David Willocks'** King's College carol recordings, **Trevor Pinnock's** *Messiah* and **Sir John Eliot Gardiner's** **BACH** *Christmas Oratorio*, for example.



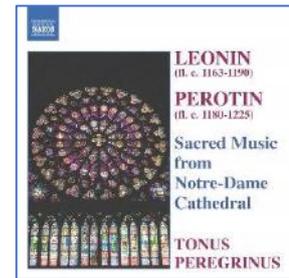
On a slightly smaller scale, Herald have raided their back catalogue of recordings from Brentwood Cathedral, St Chad's Cathedral, Wellington Cathedral, St Mary's Edinburgh, and elsewhere for **50 Classic Christmas Carols** (3663729064233 [2:34:06] – stream from [Naxos Music Library](#) or download from [Qobuz](#)).



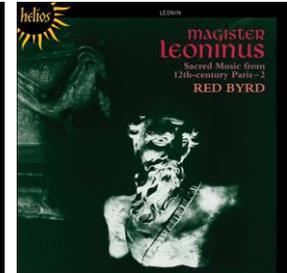
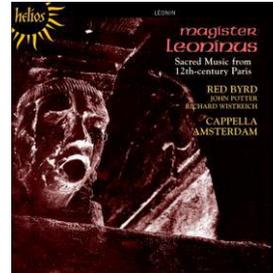
Ensemble Organum directed by **Marcel Pérès** take us back to the twelfth-century origins of polyphony with the **École de Notre Dame Mass of Christmas Day** on super-budget-price Harmonia Mundi Musique d'Abord **HMA1951148**. I'm no great fan of Pérès and his tenuous theories about how to perform the music of the past but, mercifully, this is somewhat of an exception to his normal manner and very worthwhile. The presentation is inadequate, however, as it is with all of this 'white-label' series.



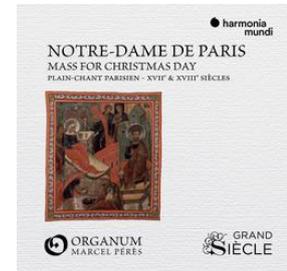
The music of Master **PÉROTIN** or Perotinus features on that DG whopper in the form of his *Beata viscera*, sung by Cecilia Bartoli with the papal choir in 2017, but my choice for the music of this late twelfth-century master comes from **Tonus Peregrinus** and **Anthony Pitts** alongside that of his older contemporary **LÉONIN** or Leoninus (Naxos **8.557340**). Along with *Beata viscera*, in honour of Mary's giving birth to Jesus, there are three Léonin settings of the Christmas *Viderunt omnes* (The eyes of all shall see ...).



There's more Christmastide music by Léonin sung by **Red Byrd** on Hyperion: on Volume 1 *Viderunt omnes* (**CDH55328**); *Iudea et Iherusalem* and *Descendit de celis* on Volume 2 (**CDH55338**). In both cases it's mingled with music for other times of the year. Read my [review](#) of Volume 1 first, however: though I recommended it, this may not be to all tastes. Volume 2 may be more amenable to the modern ear – [DL Roundup February 2011](#).

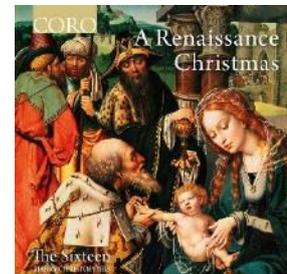


Rather more affected by the **Pérès** theories, but still well worth hearing is a recording of **André CAMBRA** **Mass for Christmas Day** with plainsong according to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Parisian rite (Harmonia Mundi **HMO8901480**, mid-price).

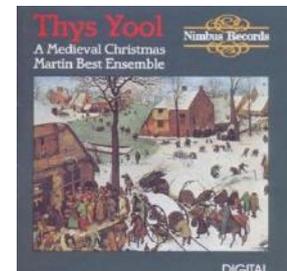


The combined addition of the treble voices of Les Pages de la Chapelle and of Maîtrise du centre de musique baroque de Versailles very much leavens the Pérès style here.

One of the most persistent Christmas tunes and one of the earliest to be written down is *Resonemus laudibus* or *Resonet in laudibus*. There used to be a CBS recording tracing the history and development of this piece – it's somewhere at the back of the cabinet housing my Christmas CDs – but I'm more than happy to hear it at the beginning of a new offering from **The Sixteen** directed by **Harry Christophers**: **A Renaissance Christmas** (CORO **COR16167** – texts included [67:02]). Settings by **ECCARD**, **HANDL** (Gallus) and **LASSUS** follow later in the programme. Putting the Advent prose *Veni, veni Emanuel* on track 5 after some of the music for the Nativity is a bit like setting the cart before the horse, but that's my only reservation about this attractive addition to the group's distinguished catalogue of Christmas music, reviewed in 24-bit sound from thesixteenshop.com.



A recording which opens with *Personent hodie*, a Christmas tune almost as persistent as *Resonet in laudibus*, was recorded in 1988 by **Martin Best** and his **Ensemble**. D deservedly reissued, not for the first time, it's well worth turning to for the spirited performances. (**Thys Yool**, A Medieval Christmas, Nimbus **NI7103**). I sometimes complain about booklets which contain original texts but not translations, but this time it's the other way around, and even so not all the texts are included, so unless your Middle English, medieval French and Latin are especially good you won't get more than the gist of what's going on. No matter; it mostly reminds us what relief the medieval Christmas brought, light in a very dark time, with the blasts of medieval winter so powerfully present in *Miri it is while sumer ilast*, the earliest surviving song in Middle English.



A different take on *Personent hodie* is included on a BIS album entitled **Folkjul**, which does exactly what it says on the tin – Christmas music in Swedish folk-music style. (BIS-CD-5031, reviewed as 24/44.1 download with pdf booklet from eclassical.com). Gunnar Idenstam (organ and arranger), Lisa Rydberg (violin), Sofia Karlsson and Emma Härdelin (vocals) and the St Jacob's Chamber Choir are directed by Gary Graden. Most of the music will be unfamiliar to UK and US ears and even the familiar items are sung in Swedish, with texts and translations provided. *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen* becomes *Det är en ros utsprungen*, and *Stille Nacht* is *Stille natt*, for example, which is pretty easy for even those devoid of any Scandinavian languages to decipher. Familiar or otherwise, it adds up to a very enjoyably different Christmas offering.



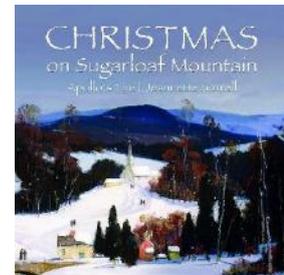
Göran Forsling appreciated all but the final setting of *Veni, veni Emanuel*, concluding in *kulning* style on the final track – [review](#). Yes, that is a bit much – a lot much, in fact, so I recommend ditching that one track.

That was recorded in 2007, so quite a wait for its successor, **Folkjul II**; Ulrika Bodén (vocals) and Sandra Marteleur (violin) replace their equivalents, but the other performers remain the same (BIS-2334 SACD [73:21]). With brilliant timing, the SACD seems to be out of stock in the UK – all the more reason to download the 24/96 version, with pdf booklet, from eclassical.com. Once again familiar music appears in unfamiliar guise – *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* as *Var hälsad sköna morgonstund*, the first verse in a North-Swedish dialect, and the music borrowed from a traditional Norwegian male dance, accompanied with the violin sounding like a Hardanger fiddle. If anything, I liked this even more than its predecessor. Better still, 24-bit can be obtained for the same price (\$10.98) as 16-bit initially.



Be warned that the final track contains more of the *kulning* singing that upset Göran Forsling, though his time with just one voice, not two, and less obtrusively.

Folk influences, this time from Britain and chiefly Ireland, permeate another recent release, **Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain** on which Apollo's Fire and Jeannette Sorrell capitalise on the success of their earlier Avie recording of music from the Appalachian Mountains. (AV2396). Full details of this very attractive album in [review by Mark Sebastian Jordan](#). I may be sceptical about details – could the middle-English *Nowell sing* we ever have been sung by the migrants 'in a festive Christmas Eve service in the Cathedral'? If so, certainly not with the perfect pre-vowel-shift pronunciation displayed here, but that's just me nit-picking.



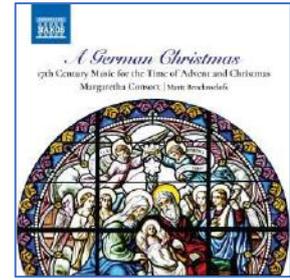
We seem to have missed that earlier release, *Sugarloaf Mountain, An Appalachian Gathering* (AV2329), so allow me to draw that to your attention, too.

Another recent release spreads its net from the late medieval and renaissance to modern settings of the same words: **The Mystery of Christmas, Ora Singers/Suzi Digby** (Harmonia Mundi HMM905305 [76:37]). The opening **BYRD** *O magnum mysterium* is paired with the closing **LAURIDSEN** setting of the same words, while within the programme, for example, *The Coventry Carol* is followed by a modern setting by **Richard ALLAIN**. It wouldn't be Christmas without a new carol from **John RUTTER** – *Suzi's Carol*, specially composed for Suzi Digby and her team, won't disappoint his many fans. The beautiful singing challenges even The Sixteen, though once again it's odd that Advent texts on tracks 3 and 4 follow those of Christmas. Texts are included and the notes are written



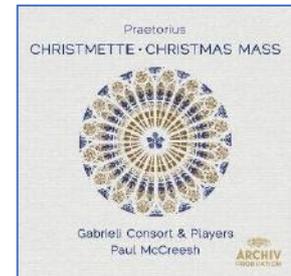
by Jeremy Summerly. Best of all, the very fine 24/96 download from eclassical.com is offered for the same price (\$13.76) as 16-bit for an introductory period.

A German Christmas features the **Margaretha Consort**, directed by **Marit Broekroelofs** in Seventeenth Century vocal and instrumental music for Advent and Christmas (NAXOS **8.551398**, reviewed as lossless press preview and from Naxos Music Library with pdf booklet [78:15]). There are no jolly japes here – the performances of music by **PRÆTORIUS** (M and J), **SCHÜTZ** and contemporaries are tastefully understated if anything, with even the brass accompaniment not allowed to get out of hand. I enjoyed this offering from a group new to me and, I think, making their first recording. Like Paul McCreech's reconstructed Lutheran Mass, with which much of the music is in common, the Consort include a congregation in the mix. The texts, translations, and full details of the music are available online.



Incidentally, I'm concerned to see a price of almost £10 being asked for this CD by one dealer. Of course, Naxos prices have risen since the days when they cost £3.99 in Woolworths, but that seems to me like cashing in on the seasonal appeal of this album, which can be found for a regular £6.60 or a specially reduced £6.50 elsewhere, with downloads for as little as £3.63 (mp3) or £3.83 (lossless).

My marginal preference would be to spend a little more for a liturgical reconstruction; the **Gabrieli Consort** and **Paul McCreech's Lutheran Christmas Mass** with music mainly by **PRÆTORIUS**, much of it also contained on the Naxos; in its earlier incarnation, I shall certainly be listening to this for Christmas (DG Archiv **4791757**, mid-price).



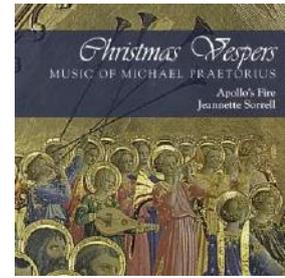
I see that McCreech has recently repeated the programme on DVD (Château de Versailles Spectacles **CVS003**). His *Venetian Christmas* (DG Archiv **4713332**), *Christmas Mass in Rome* (**4378332**), **SHEPPARD** *Missa Cantate*, with the third Mass of Christmas (**4576582**) and **SCHÜTZ** *Christmas Vespers* (**E4630642**), all essential seasonal listening, are download only now – and mostly very inexpensive.

All the McCreech recordings and, of course, the Naxos can be streamed by subscribers to Naxos Music Library.

The music of Michael Schultheiss, better known by his fashionably Latinised name **PRÆTORIUS**, has become almost synonymous with Christmas ever since David Munrow's Early Music Consort published an LP of *Dances from Terpsichore* and choral works from his collection *Musæ Sionis*. The *Terpsichore* music survives on a super-budget twofer (Warner Veritas **3500032**, *Renaissance Dance Music*) but not the other works. There are, however, plenty of other collections, such as that from **Westminster Cathedral Choir** with **The Parley of Instruments** directed by David Hill in Prætorius' Christmas Music, with two interludes of dances from *Terpsichore* (Hyperion **CDH55446**, mid-price CD – [review](http://hyperion-records.co.uk) – or download for £5.99, with pdf booklet from hyperion-records.co.uk). Like the new Naxos recording, the performances are under-stated by comparison with David Munrow's enthusiasm but still enjoyable. There's a fair amount of overlap with the Gabrieli and Margaretha Consorts, but I can take lots of different interpretations of Prætorius at Christmas.



Apollo's Fire directed by **Jeannette Sorrell** perform **Prætorius'** Christmas music in the context of an Advent service and a Lutheran festal Vespers, complete with German *Magnificat* on an attractive release from Avie (**AV2306** – [review](#)). Johan van Veen commented in that review on some strange pronunciations; perhaps he hadn't noticed that *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*, which punctuates the *Magnificat* and *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen*, which follows it, are, bizarrely, sung in English.

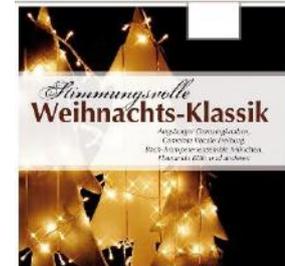


I must also mention a super-budget 7-CD set of **German Baroque Christmas Music** on Ricercar, featuring the Ricercar Consort and other distinguished performers (**RIC349**, rec. 1982-2010). I thought I had reviewed this some time ago (2015?) but can't find the review – so better late than never.

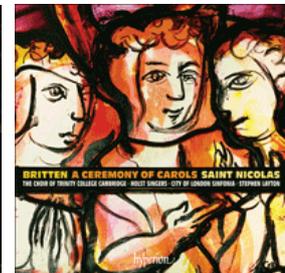
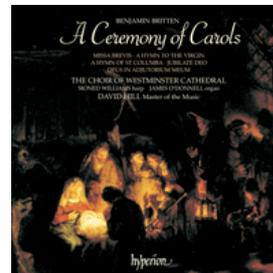


Among the longer works included are the **SCHÜTZ Christmas Story** and some of **BACH's** cantatas for the Christmas season, but even if you have some or all of these, the set contains some rarer material, including some c.20-minute settings by JSB's contemporary **GRAUPNER**, whom the Leipzig fathers originally preferred, and is very good value – it's currently on offer for £26.25 from [Presto](#). CD2 reconstructs a Christmas Mass, with music by **PRÆTORIUS** and others. The lack of texts is only partially offset by the detailed notes.

Even less expensive is a 10-CD set **Weihnachts-Klassik** (Christmas Classics) from Ars Musici. The performers include the **Augsburg Boys' Choir**, **Camerata Vocale Freiburg**, **Bach-trompetenensemble München** and **Flautando Köln**. (Ars Musici **233745**, around £19). I can't report on the whole set, but I can confirm that an earlier 2-CD selection, *Christmas throughout the Centuries II*, no longer available, contains some variable, sometimes painful, performances in a mainly good mix – [DL News 2013/17](#).



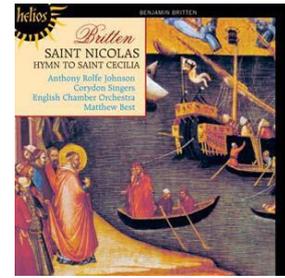
Hyperion have done very well by the seasonal music of **Benjamin BRITTEN**. They offer two very fine recordings of the **Ceremony of Carols**, Op.28, one from **Sally Pryce** (harp), **Katherine Watson**, **Zoë Brown** (sopranos), **Allan Clayton** (tenor), **Trinity College Choir Cambridge**, **City of London Sinfonia**, **Holst Singers** and **Temple Church Choristers** directed by **Stephen Layton** (**CDA67946**, with *St Nicolas*, Op.42). The other, earlier, recording comes from **James O'Donnell** (organ), **Sioned Williams** (harp), the **Choir of Westminster Cathedral** and **David Hill** (**CDA66220**, with *Missa Brevis*, Op.63, *Jubilate Deo*, *A Hymn to the Virgin*, etc.).



With Britten's own Decca recording now download only (**E4363942**) or embedded in a 16-CD box (**4785450**), these Hyperion albums now have a strong claim to top the tree, even in preference to fine versions from the likes of **The Sixteen** and **Harry Christophers** (Coro **COR16034**, with *Missa Brevis*, Op.63, *A Boy was born*, Op.3, etc.). Michael Greenhalgh made CDA67946 a **Recording of the Month** – [review](#) – and you'll find a review from Geoff Molyneux alongside my appraisal of the Coro in [DL News 2012/24](#).

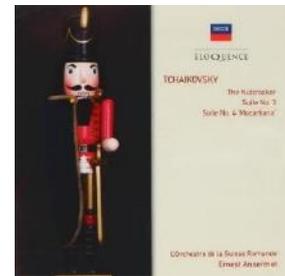
The two Hyperion recordings are full-price but can be downloaded in lossless sound, with pdf booklets, for £5.99 (**CDA66220**) or £8.99 (**CDA67946**). If you don't want to download but must have a budget-price version, the **King's College, Cambridge** account directed by **Philip Ledger** can be found on a well-filled Classics for Pleasure CD for around £6 (**9689492**, with *Hymn to St Cecilia*, *Missa Brevis*, *Te Deum* in C and D and *Rejoice in the Lamb*).

The Layton recording includes *St Nicolas*, but if you want that work, Hyperion can also cater for you with a more recent recording from **Anthony Rolfe Johnson** (tenor), **Harry Briggs** (treble), **Corydon Singers**, **Girls of Warwick University Chamber Choir**, **Choristers of St George's Chapel Windsor** and the **English Chamber Orchestra** directed by **Matthew Best** (Helios **CDH55378**, with *Hymn to St Cecilia* – [review](#)). I've included that because St Nicholas' Day (December 6) anticipates Christmas in some countries in that children receive presents – or lumps of coal for the naughty – from the Saint himself, later to be re-imagined and his name corrupted as Santa Claus. St Nicolas is, however, a piece more interesting to sing than to hear, in my view.

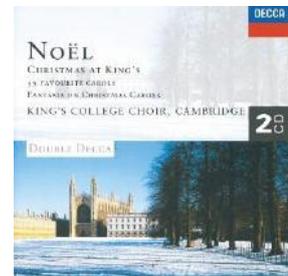


Mention of St Nicholas' Day reminds me of a DVD/blu-ray recording re-imagining **Pyotr Ilyich TCHAIKOVSKY** *The Nutcracker* from Christmas to December 6 (Arthaus **108087**). I mostly enjoyed that but you'll see from my [review](#) that it evoked different responses from two of my colleagues, one positive, one negative.

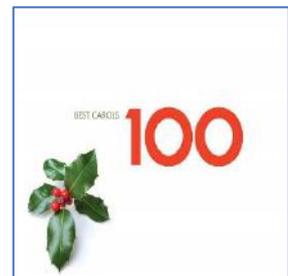
For a CD recording of *Nutcracker*, my vote still goes to the classic **OSR/Ernest Ansermet** – my old Decca Weekend set, still available from [ArkivMusic](#), comes out every Christmas; it's now on Eloquence (**4800557**, 2 CDs, mid-price, with Suite No.3 and Suite No.4). If you want the work in more modern sound and fitted on one CD, Valery Gergiev with the Kirov Orchestra wins many people's votes (Philips **4621142**). Less expensive than either, target price £7.66, is another classic account which I like, from André Previn and the LSO (Warner **9676942**, with Løvenskiold *La Sylphide*). It's also available on two LPs, just the *Nutcracker*, for around £22. It restores the original attractive cover, but wild horses would never drag me back to vinyl. (See below for more on *The Nutcracker*.)



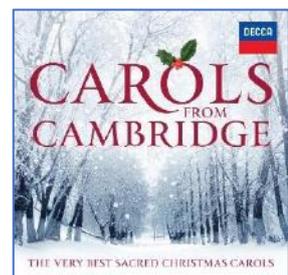
I've welcomed the new release on **King's College Cambridge's** own label of **100 Years of Nine Lessons and Carols** in my [Autumn 2018/3 roundup](#), as has Marc Rochester in more detail – [review](#). There are five items there from the **David Willcocks** era; if you want more Christmas music from his incumbency, there's a 2-for-1 Double Decca recording **Noël – Christmas at King's** (**4448482**) which is well worth exploring, not least because it concludes with **Ralph Vaughan WILLIAMS' Fantasia on Christmas Carols**, a work to which I'm very partial. Avoid only if you are allergic to Willcocks' insistence on very correct pronunciation, part of the deal at King's in those days. For a shorter selection which also includes the VW, Alto **ALC1190** – [review](#).



King's under **David Willcocks**, **Philip Ledger** and **Stephen Cleobury** also recorded for EMI and innumerable remainders still dot the Warner catalogue. I've mentioned their *Ceremony of Carols* above (Classics for Pleasure) and there's a 74-minute selection of carols from the Willcocks era on the same label (download only, around £6 in lossless sound), but there's better value on a 2-hour-23-minutes collection (Willcocks and Ledger, **2435861215**, download only, around £4 mp3, or £5 lossless). Better value still, **100 Best Carols** mixes King's material (Ledger and Willcocks) with **Clare College/John Rutter**, **Taverner Choir**, *et al.* in a 5-hour jamboree for around £15 (**5002452** on offer currently for £9.91; download around £6 in mp3 or £7.50, lossless).



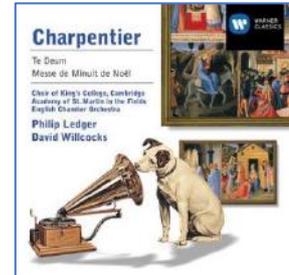
Returning to Decca, **Willcocks** and **Rutter** also rub shoulders together and with **Stephen Cleobury** on a single-CD 78-minute budget download **Carols**



from **Cambridge (4808632)**, around £4 in mp3 or £5 in lossless sound). That repeats some of the material from the 2-CD Decca set, but not the Vaughan Williams *Fantasia*.

If you're looking for the *Fantasia* on an all-VW album, it's coupled with his *Hodie* on Naxos (**8.570439**) and on Warner (**5674272**), with *Serenade to Music* (Hyperion **CDA30025**, mid-price, or **CDS44321**, 4 CDs, budget-price), and with *The First Nowell* (Chandos **CHAN10385**).

The ex-EMI **King's College/Willcocks** recording of **Marc-Antoine CHARPENTIER's** stirring *Messe de Minuit de Noël*, the Midnight Mass of Christmas, is hardly authentic; it may not be first choice, but I shall still be playing it, and not just for old times' sake. It's coupled with the *Te Deum*, directed by **Philip Ledger** on Warner Encore **5747262**, download only and far too expensive for what was a budget CD not too long ago and, before that, at mid-price.

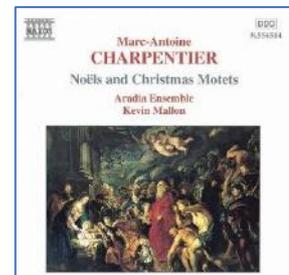
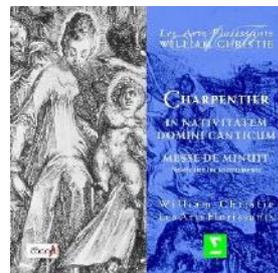


Less expensive, more authentic, and my ultimate choice, is a Naxos album, also coupling the Midnight Mass and the *Te Deum* (**Aradia Ensemble/Kevin Mallon, 8.557229**). That can be downloaded, with pdf booklet, for as little as £3.83 from Qobuz.

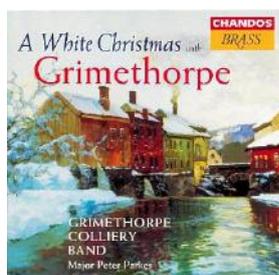
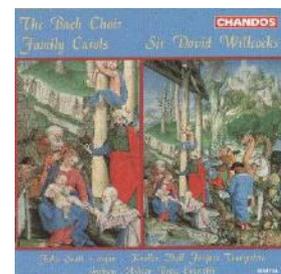


The same recording is also included under licence on a 3-CD super-budget **Brilliant Classics** set which additionally offers other French Christmas music (**95569**). One of the many advantages of this recording, whether you choose the Naxos or Brilliant Classics: Mallon prefaces each section of the Mass with the traditional tune which it borrows.

Also very inexpensive as a download, though still full-price on CD, is the very fine recording of the Mass by **Les Arts Florissants** with **William Christie**, interspersed with instrumental *Noëls* and coupled with Charpentier's Christmas cantata *In Nativitatem Domini canticum*, H416, one of many such works which he wrote (Erato **8573858202**). Excerpts from H416 and more of Charpentier's Christmas motets and Noëls come from **Kevin Mallon** and his team on Naxos **8.554514**.



After his retirement from King's, **David Willcocks** continued for many years to conduct **The Bach Choir** at Christmas and on other occasions and there's an inexpensive reminder of their Christmas concerts, recorded in 1990 with **Guildford Cathedral Choir**, **Fanfare Trumpeters of the Royal Military School of Music**, **Kneller Hall** and **Graham Ashton Brass Ensemble** (**CHAN8953**, download only from chandos.net, for £4.80/£4.99, mp3/lossless, with pdf booklet).

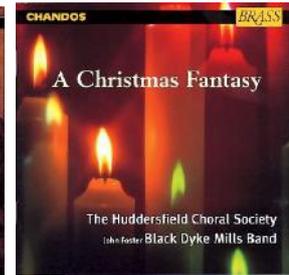


For the same price and with even more brass on offer, there's **A White Christmas from Grimethorpe** (**CHAN4550**, rec. 1997 – from chandos.net), offering what it says on the tin and directed by Major Peter Parkes. It costs even less on CD (£4.50 from chandos.net) and the same price as the other downloads.

A different, equally distinguished brass band features on **A Christmas Celebration** with **Huddersfield Choral Society** and **Black Dyke Mills**

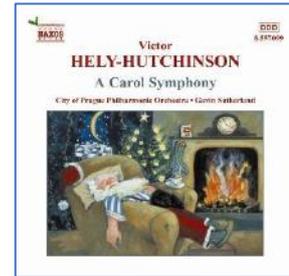
Band/Brian Kay (CHAN4530 – from chandos.net £4.50, CD, £4.80, mp3, £4.99, lossless, with pdf booklet.)

Also on the Chandos Brass label, **Huddersfield Choral Society** and **Black Dyke Mills Band** again, this time with **Roy Newsome** at the helm in **A Christmas Fantasy** (CHAN4541 – from chandos.net, prices as CHAN4530).

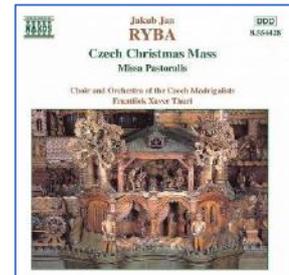


Any or all of these will serve to remind us of the importance and popularity of brass bands at this time of year.

Even more fun than the VW *Fantasia*, there's **Victor HELY-HUTCHINSON A Carol Symphony**, performed by the **City of Prague Philharmonic** and light-music specialist **Gavin Sutherland** on **NAXOS 8.557099**, together with other Christmas light-music arrangements by **Bryan George KELLY**, **Peter WARLOCK**, **Philip LANE** and **Patric STANDFORD**. That's my modern Christmas japes music, perhaps even more entertaining than the medieval and Tudor versions – [review](#) – [review](#).



Earlier composers could also write fun music for Christmas; though not always with the approval of the church authorities. Bohemia in the eighteenth century produced several Masses in the vernacular, often replete with the noises of the animals around the crib. The best known of these came from **Jakub Jan RYBA**, whose **Czech Christmas Mass** has received a number of recordings. The **Czech Madrigalists** perform it with his *Missa Pastoralis* on Naxos (**8.554428** – [DL Roundup December 2009](#)) and there are two Supraphon recordings, from **Vaclav Smetacek (SU36582** – [DL Roundup December 2011/2](#)) and **Jaroslav Krcek (SU70139, DVD)**. There are also two Arco Diva recordings, directed by **Marek Štrýncl (UP0142-2, download only** – [review](#)) and **Petr Fiala (UP0155)**. Listen via [Naxos Music Library](#) and you won't be surprised that there are so many recordings.



Edmund PASCHA's similar *Czech Christmas Mass* has fared far less well, with extracts only generally available, as part of a valuable 4-CD super-budget Erato offering from **The Taverner Consort (Christmas Carols, 5036802**, currently £9.97 from [Presto](#)).

By contrast, there may not be too much fun in the music of **Olivier Eugène MESSIAEN (1908-1992)** but there's plenty of food for thought in a new recording of his Christmas meditations on the Nativity:

La Nativité du Seigneur (Neuf méditations pour orgue, 1935) [67:40]

La Vierge et l'Enfant (The Virgin and Child) [6:54]

Les Bergers (The Shepherds) [7:10]

Desseins éternels (Eternal Purposes) [6:51]

Le Verbe (The Word) [16:19]

Les Enfants de Dieu (The Children of God) [3:59]

Les Anges (The Angels) [3:42]

Jésus accepte la souffrance (Jesus accepts suffering) [5:13]

Les Mages (The Magi) [7:56]

Dieu parmi nous (God with us) [9:32]

Richard Gowers (organ of King's College Cambridge)



rec. 17-18 July 2017. DSD.

Reviewed as 24/96 download with pdf booklet from hyperion-records.co.uk. Also available in mp3, 16-bit and 24/192 formats.

KING'S COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE KGS0025 [67:40]

I've been thinking long and hard about this recording. My initial reaction was to reject it almost out of hand because of the very slow tempi which organ-scholar Richard Gowers adopts – well outside the range of other recordings of this Christmas-tide meditation.

I was forcibly reminded of the difference by a recent reissue of **Louis Thiry's** recordings made for Calliope in the 1970s and released with ringing endorsements from Messiaen. The contents of six LPs come in a limited edition 3-CD set for around £15 (**LDV491**) or as three separate download albums for as little as £3 each in lossless sound, with pdf booklet: *La Nativité* with *Le Banquet céleste* and *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* are on **LDV51D**. Thiry plays the Metzler organ of the Cathedral of Saint-Pierre, Geneva, the specification of which is included in the booklet.

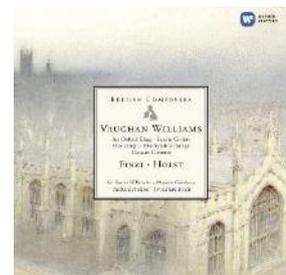


With adjectives such as 'special' employed on their appearance and afterwards, and with the Geneva organ a very acceptable substitute for Messiaen's own, these recordings must be taken very seriously, especially at the very attractive new prices. All in all, the Dolce Volta set now vies with the very stiff competition as a mainstream recommendation for a library choice. Not only is Thiry's a very fine recording of *La Nativité*, much more in line with the consensus on tempi at 59:07 overall, it costs considerably less than the King's on CD or download, and comes with *Le Banquet céleste* and *Apparition de l'Église éternelle* to boot. Nor is the ADD recording wholly put to shame by the 24-bit King's.

The booklet, which covers all three CDs, takes the form of an interview; it does contain a full specification of the organ, but it's rudimentary compared with the King's, except that the latter does not include the organ spec.

So the King's recording comes with something of an allergy warning from me; if you don't like your Messiaen slow and meditative, this is not for you. It was, however, emphatically just right for Dan Morgan, who made it a **Recording of the Month** – [review](#) – and others have expressed similarly high opinions, including John Quinn – [review](#). I'm still coming around to it – I think I might get there by Christmas. If you're not sure and you subscribe to the very valuable Naxos Music Library, [you can try it there](#). Not in full-cream 24-bit sound, of course, but the NML files will give you a very fair idea. You can also compare it there with Andrew Canning's more conventionally-paced [recording on Sheva](#) which received such a positive [review](#) from Marc Rochester.

Gerald FINZI's *Dies Natalis* is not strictly Christmas music, despite its title; it's a setting of the mystic Thomas Traherne's wonderfully Wordsworth-anticipating account of his boyhood. The 1963 EMI recording, with **William Brown**, the ECO and the composer's son **Christopher Finzi** is now thoroughly ensconced in a multi-CD collection. I normally dislike such sets, but I'll make an exception for this very fine recording, especially as the box also contains the Willcocks recording of Vaughan Williams *Oxford Elegy* and other recommendable recordings.



Hyperion at mid-price combine Finzi's setting of this pre-Wordsworth view of childhood with that of the later poet's own *Intimations of Immortality* in fine performances from **John Mark Ainsley** (tenor), the **Corydon Singers and Orchestra/Matthew Best** (CDH55432).



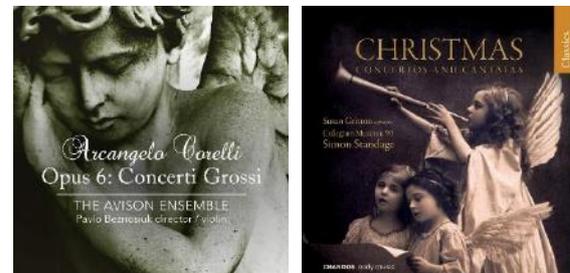
Less appropriately coupled, with *Farewell to Arms* and *Two Sonnets*, but also well performed, and at budget-price: **James Gilchrist** (tenor), **Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra** and **David Hill** (Naxos 8.570417).

I haven't heard 'the dude' Gustavo Dudamel's new recording of *The Nutcracker*, but I have been listening to the recent Decca Eloquence reissue of the classic **Anatole Fistoulari** *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker Suites 1 and 2*, the former recorded with the LSO in 1951 and the latter with the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra in 1952 (4825225, 2 CDs, budget-price). That's better value than the Naxos Classical Archives download-only reissue of *Swan Lake* only (980724/5, around £10).



The sound quality, good for its age, is tolerable, and I can't think of any modern recording to equal the performances, though **André Previn** comes close in both works and each can be obtained even more inexpensively than the Eloquence (*Swan Lake* Warner 9676842; *Nutcracker* 9676942). Previn's recordings of all three Tchaikovsky ballets are also available in a super-budget 7-CD set (Warner 9029597489). A (generally favourable) review by Dan Morgan of that set is pending. I'm happy to endorse Dan's high opinion, but my own preference in *Nutcracker* – the complete ballet, not just the suites as recorded by Fistoulari – remains for another classic account, in reasonable stereo sound, from Ernest Ansermet and the OSR on another Eloquence twofer (see above).

Apart from *The Nutcracker*, most of these recordings have been of choral music, but I can't close without referring to that baroque phenomenon, the Christmas concerto. If you don't have a recording of **Arcangelo CORELLI's** complete **Op.6 concertos**, now is a good time to put that right. No.8 is labelled *fatto per una notte di Natale* and the closing *pastorale* especially refers to the birth of Jesus. There's a wealth of recordings of the complete set to choose from, summed up in my [review](#) of the **Avison Consort** recording on Linn (NB: catalogue number now **CKR411**, 2 CDs).



For a collection of **Christmas Concertos and Cantatas**, from **MANFREDINI**, **A SCARLATTI**, **VIVALDI**, **TELEMANN** and, of course, the **CORELLI**, **Collegium Musicum 90** and **Simon Standage** on mid-price Chandos are hard to beat (**CHAN0754**).

In TS Eliot mode, I'll end as I began with a bumper collection. Brilliant Classics already had a 10-CD set entitled **A Bach Christmas**, about which Johan van Veen was pretty scathing – [review](#). That has now been expanded to 11 CDs, with organ music added, and Stuart Sillitoe thought it 'intriguing and welcome' (95853 – [review](#)). Dipping into it from [Naxos Music Library](#), I find myself somewhere between the two colleagues. The old-style *Christmas Oratorio* is good of its kind, with some of the best soloists of the 1970s, but the Netherlands Bach Collegium in the cantatas leave something to be desired. It's all decent enough at the attractive price, but can't compete with the likes of John Eliot



Gardiner and Masaaki Suzuki in the Oratorio and the Cantatas – see my Christmas section in [Second Thoughts and Short Reviews](#) for further details. Those who prefer good old-style Bach should investigate Karl Richter on DG Archiv (75 Cantatas on two blu-rays, **4835037**; Advent and Christmas Cantatas **4835197**, download only; *Christmas Oratorio* **4272362**). Details of the blu-rays and the download selection in [Autumn 2018/1](#).

The Mystery of Christmas: Greek *Kalanda* by Cilia PETRIDOU (b.1945)

The Veil¹ [4:24]

The Star¹ [3:53]

In the Manger² [3:48]

Children Awake!¹ [4:05]

Praise the Newborn² [1:34]

Christmas² [1:50]

The Joys of our Virgin!¹ [3:52]

Don't say I do not know!³ [2:52]

Hail Mary!¹ [9:42]

Christ is Born!¹ [4:36]

Bells³ [4:47]

Holy Night³ [5:14]

Father Christmas!^{1, 2, 3} [4:04]

Congratulations!^{1, 2, 3} [2:45]

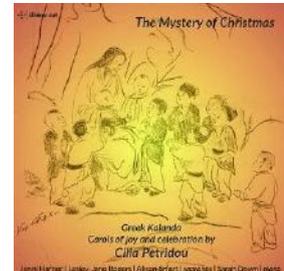
Jenni Harper (soprano¹), Lesley-Jane Rogers (soprano²) Alison Smart (soprano³) Sarah Down (piano: Steinway Model D)

rec. Potton Hall, Suffolk, England, 19 & 20 July, 2018.

Greek texts and translations included.

Reviewed as streamed, with pdf booklet, from [Naxos Music Library](#).

DIVINE ART DDA25186 [57:31]



This qualifies as both old and new: the Greek *kalanda*, or carols, an old format, are given new life by this modern Cyprus-born composer. If you are sated with *Jingle Bells* and all the *faux-bonhomie* pumped out by the likes of Magic FM – a hazard of my podiatrist's waiting room – most of the music listed here and in my main article will soothe the troubled breast, but this soprano(s)-plus-piano recital will do especially well. The delicate drawing by Cilia Petridou's father on the cover neatly sums up the mood of the music.

If, like me, you retain a few rags and tatters of classical and New Testament Greek – 'these fragments I have shored against my ruins' – part of the fun of reading the booklet is to pick out the odd word which survives in almost unaltered form. I don't think, however, that there was a classical word for 'reindeer' or 'sleigh' (*elaphakia*, *elkéthro*). Saint Basil (*Ayios Basileios*) takes the role of Father Christmas in the Greek Orthodox tradition; his feast day is January 1st, the day for giving gifts as it was in England in Tudor times. In the Roman and Anglican calendars, his day is June 14th.

Now may we singen - Music for Advent and Christmas

Matthew MARTIN *Novo profusi gaudio* [3:54]

Judith WEIR *Drop down, ye heavens, from above* [2:00]

Henry John GAUNTLETT, arr. **James O'Donnell** *Once in Royal David's City* [5:11]

Sir James MacMILLAN *O Radiant Dawn* [4:23]

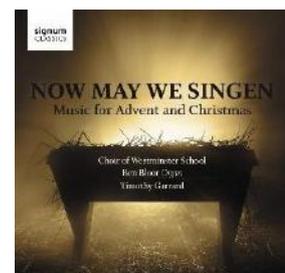
Ghislaine REECE-TRAPP *Alleluia! A new work is come on hand* [1:51]

Andrew CARTER *Mary's Magnificat* [3:31]

John TAVENER *Ex Maria Virgine: Ave Rex Angelorum* [3:10]

TRAD adapted **SULLIVAN** arr. **David Willcocks** *It came upon the midnight clear* [3:27]

Richard ALLAIN *Lullay, myn lyking* [5:08]



Cecilia McDOWALL *Now may we singen* [3:15]
John RUTTER *The King of Blis* [3:57]
TRAD arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams (descant by **Timothy Garrard**) *O little town of Bethlehem* [3:45]
Elizabeth POSTON (1905-1987) *Jesus Christ, the Apple Tree* [3:26]
Roxanna PANUFNIK *Angels Sing: Jesus Christ is Born* [1:13]
Richard WILBERFORCE *My Musick Shine* [5:07]
MENDELSSOHN arr. David Willcocks *Hark! The herald angels sing* [3:31]
William MATHIAS (1934-1992) *Sir Christèmas* [1:33]
Alexander CAMPKIN *Sleep, Holy Babe* [4:40]
ANON arr. David Willcocks *O come, all ye faithful* [4:09]
 Ben Bloor (organ)
 Choir of Westminster School/Timothy Garrard
 rec. 2018, Keble College Chapel, Oxford, UK
SIGNUM CLASSICS SIGCD595 [67:15] Download only – no booklet.

I also missed this Signum release, which Rob Barnett [reviewed](#), but I have an even better excuse there: I'm informed that it's not due for release on CD until Christmas 2019 and I couldn't obtain a download from my usual source. It is, however, available to download from Presto and Amazon UK, albeit without booklet – follow the links in Rob's review; if you had problems with the Amazon link, it's now been corrected. I'm grateful to Steve Long at The Sound Corporation who furnished me the 24/96 files just in time for inclusion in this appendix.

As I was writing about the recent Coro recording *The Eton Choirbook Legacy* – review pending – my wife raised an interesting question – what would the current Eton School Choir be able to make of the music in that collection? I suppose that's not quite as intractable a question as Sir Thomas Browne's 'what song the sirens sang', but I don't know the answer. I do know, however, that Westminster School Choir have made a very good job on this new album; it's definitely well worth considering even if you have no connection with the school. It offers a good mix of the well-known and less familiar and it's well recorded, so I recommend paying a little more for the Presto 16-bit or even the 24-bit download in preference to the mp3 offered by them, which is the sole version available from Amazon.

Still through the cloven skies they come. Stuart Sillitoe's recent review of the music of Fasch includes a cantata for the Annunciation (March 25), traditionally regarded as the prelude to Christmas, when the angel announced the forthcoming birth of Jesus to Mary:

Johann Friedrich FASCH (1688-1758)

Missa in G (mid 1720s) [34:24]

Suite in A, FaWV K:A3 [18:53]

Ich danke dem Herrn von ganzem Herzen, FaWV D:12 (1736) [20:26]

Veronika Winter (soprano), David Erler (alto), Tobias Hunger (tenor),
 Matthias Vieweg (bass), Rheinische Kantorei, Das Kleine Konzert / Hermann
 Max

rec. April 2017, Kirche St. Trinitatis zu Zerbst, Anhalt, Germany. DDD.

Texts and translations included.

CPO 555176-2 [73:55]



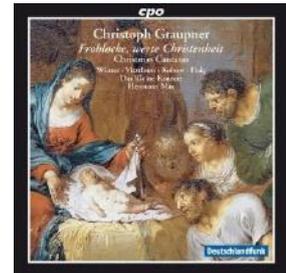
The carol *Angelus ad Virginem*, which relates to the Annunciation, has become established as a Christmas work, so I see no reason not to appropriate this Fasch cantata, especially when it comes as part of such a desirable collection. For the details I refer you to SSI's [review](#), simply noting that the Suite is in A *major* (not minor as stated in his heading) and that the *Missa* is not simply a short Lutheran *missa brevis*, since it includes a Latin setting of the creed, spoken or sung in German in the Lutheran liturgy, often in the paraphrase *Wir glauben all' an einen Gott*. The *Missa* was probably composed for

the Catholic court at Dresden, the *Hofkirche*, where Fasch served briefly. I've added the FaWV numbers of the Suite and Cantata, which CPO have omitted.

This is the only recording of these works, but it will serve very well indeed; the performance of the Suite is preferable to the three Chandos releases of Fasch's orchestral music from *Tempesta di Mare*. If you are looking for more of these suites, another CPO recording will better provide what you need ([777952-2](#) – [review](#)).

Another contemporary of Bach whom I should have included – and, like Fasch, one who was in consideration for the post of cantor at Leipzig, which Bach obtained – is **Christoph GRAUPNER**. None of the duo cantatas which Johan van Veen recently [reviewed](#) relates to Christmas – all three are for those nondescript Sundays after Trinity – though that's no reason not to go for this fine Christophorus recording.

Graupner's Christmas music features on the 7-CD *Ricercar* collection which I recommended in my main roundup. There's a single CD of five of his Christmas cantatas, *Frohlocke, werte Christenheit*, and other works, from Hermann Max and his team on CPO [777572-2](#), which shares the virtues of the new Fasch release and means repeating only one work from the *Ricercar* set. ([Review](#) by Johan van Veen.) It appears not to be available to download, but the CD is currently on offer from [Presto](#) for £10.20 and subscribers can stream it, with pdf booklet, from [Naxos Music Library](#).



What's billed as Graupner's *Weihnachts Oratorium* (Christmas Oratorio) is, like Bach's, actually a collection of cantatas for various days in the Christmas season, in this case beginning with *Die Nacht ist vergangen*, for Advent, and running through to Epiphany. The title is actually not Graupner's, but given by Florian Heyerick, whose PhD thesis was on Graupner, and who directs Ex Tempore and the Mannheim Hofkapelle on *Ricercar* ([RIC307](#), 2 CDs). In most cases these are the only recordings of these very worthwhile works and they do the music ample justice.



Finally, inevitably, to baroque Italy. In commending Collegium 90's beautiful recording of Christmas Concertos by Corelli, Manfredini and Vivaldi, I forgot to mention **Susan Gritton's** wonderful contribution in **Alessandro SCARLATTI's** enchanting Christmastide *Cantata pastorale per la nascita di Nostro Signore*. The inclusion of Telemann's *In dulci jubilo* is an additional bonus among this Italian fare (Chandos [CHAN0634](#)). I should also have warned readers not to be tempted by the Botticelli *Mystic Nativity* cover on the alternative download of this recording – it costs more, but you can grab the cover art and the booklet free if you prefer them. (I've used them for this appendix.)



Though a long-standing fan of **Emma Kirkby**, I find it impossible to choose between Gritton and Kirkby in this beautiful piece. The latter, who takes the music very slightly faster, is on [BIS-CD-1135](#), also with the Corelli Christmas Concerto, another Scarlatti Christmas cantata, Pachelbel's 'Greatest hit', the *canon and gigue*, and short pieces by Bodekker, Bach and Luther.

With accompaniment by London Baroque and Charles Medlam, this album can be downloaded for a very inexpensive \$6.80, with pdf booklet, from [eclassical.com](#).

