

THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

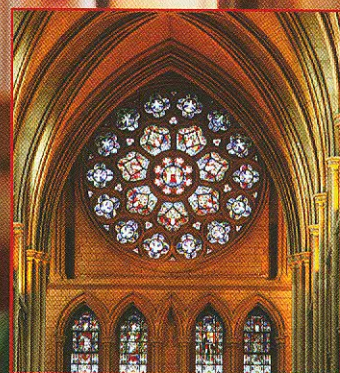
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GRAMOPHONE

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CHRISTMAS *Ancient & Modern*

The carol tradition shines as bright as ever, thanks to today's composers



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The importance of Christmas music

Christmas music, usually in the form of carols (or what we generally refer to as carols), is perhaps the classical music most heard, by the most people. (By 'Christmas music' I'm willfully ignoring the infuriatingly ubiquitous pop songs of the genre, which are already serenading shoppers as I write this in mid-November). The reasons are many, and foremost among them is that the music is often wonderful.

Many carols are of course from the 19th century, even if the tunes are older, and evoke for us the kind of Christmas which owes far more to Dickens than a Middle-Eastern nativity. But even if they do, what of it? Our great churches mostly draw on classical antiquity or Gothic architecture for inspiration, rather than the biblical Holy Land, and are no less inspiring for it. If holly, ivy, candles and choruses best communicate the Christmas message of peace, love and hope, then so be it. Another reason is that, more than any other time, Christmas causes us to reflect on these things collectively, and there are precious few shared, collective experiences in society today. And entwined with all that, like tinsel around a tree, is nostalgia, for childhood, for family and friends present and past. All this somehow places us in touching distance of something we may not fully understand, but know to be good. And few things get us there so well as the likes of *Once in Royal* echoing in a chapel otherwise holding its breath, or *In the Bleak Midwinter*, leading us from the foul winds outside towards a moving meditation on the humility of love.



Martin

I've digressed slightly, but only to ponder the popularity of Christmas music, for it serves another important role, too, for those of us who love classical music, specifically here choral music. It finds an audience far beyond the stalls or pews of those who normally hear it. There are few occasions when classical music is afforded the attention of wider society: the BBC Proms is one, and I might suggest our annual *Gramophone Awards* does its bit too. But nothing rivals Christmas in this regard: the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's, Cambridge, most of all perhaps, when measured in sheer numbers of listeners. But even more important than this are those who might find themselves actually at a service, joining in carols, but between that, hearing a choir singing something complex and beautiful, perhaps for the first time. Or marvelling at an invigorating organ voluntary shaking the stone work, while the congregation becomes slowly aware of the smell of mince pies and mulled wine awaiting at the back.

Music needs to take all opportunities to reach out, and we all have a role to play. So turn on the radio when Nine Lessons and Carols is broadcast for your Christmas visitors less acquainted with choral music to hear. Buy them one of our recommended Christmas recordings as a gift. Invite a friend along to a carol service – and who knows where it will lead? At the very least, you can enjoy sharing stories of the year past over the mince pies and mulled wine, and that's part of the spirit of the season too. A very happy Christmas to you all.

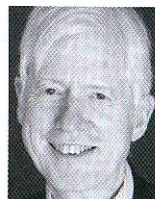
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THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS



PAUL GRIFFITHS, who provides this month's Contemporary Composers feature, says of his subject: 'I've

been a Gerald Barry fan for years – certainly from the time he sat firmly on his hands after a performance he had no desire at all to applaud. Just listen: there's nobody like him.'



'Having been to many of her performances in the theatre, it was a delight to meet Emmanuelle Haïm,' says

RICHARD LAWRENCE, author of *Musician and the Score*. 'Her passionate enthusiasm for Handel has inspired me to seek out her recording of *Arcadian Duets*, a couple of which were recycled for *Messiah*.'



'As a composer, it is always enormously interesting to reflect on other composers' experiences

and points of view,' writes **IVAN MOODY**, author of our feature about modern carols. 'The diversity I encountered while writing about contemporary music for Christmas was unexpectedly fascinating.'

Gramophone, which has been serving the classical music world since 1923, is first and foremost a monthly review magazine, delivered today in both print and digital formats. It boasts an eminent and knowledgeable panel of experts, which reviews the full range of classical music recordings. Its reviews are completely independent. In addition to reviews, its interviews and features help readers to explore in greater depth the recordings that the magazine covers, as well as offer insight into the work of composers and performers. It is *the* magazine for the classical record collector, as well as for the enthusiast starting a voyage of discovery.

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