

Programme notes “Christmas Cracker 2022”

4 December 2022

Tonight we have for you a selection of musical offerings with varying levels of seasonal relevance but with the common thread that they are fun to play and entertaining to listen to.

Sergei Prokofiev’s “Lieutenant Kije” suite is a better-orchestrated version of music that he wrote for a film of the same name, released in 1934. The film is available on YouTube and follows the career of the eponymous Lieutenant, whose existence results from Russian wordplay similar to that which might give English speakers “General Knowledge” or “Corporal Punishment”. The Troika tune is sung by two drunken guards charged with bringing the newly promoted General Kije back to court from Siberian exile. The text ungallantly compares a woman’s heart to a roadside inn where travellers can check in and out anytime, day or night. Towards the end of the piece one of them falls off into the snow, a moment marked by a non-harmonious parp from our trombone section.

In 1703 the 24-year-old Vivaldi was appointed violin master at an orphanage called the Devout Hospital of Mercy in Venice, a job he was to hold for nearly forty years in total. There he wrote a large number of works, including concertos, cantatas and other sacred vocal music, for the girl orphans to play and sing (the boys learned a trade). Tonight’s concerto grosso in A minor, featuring two virtuoso solo violin parts, is one of twelve concerti for one, two and four violins with strings which were published as a collection called “L’estro armónico” (The Harmonic Inspiration) in Amsterdam in 1711. This work rapidly became popular throughout Europe, with numerous performances and reprints of the sheet music. Sales actually exceeded those of the later, and now more famous, “Four Seasons”.

“Greensleeves” is (romantically, but probably wrongly) attributed to Henry VIII, with Anne Boleyn identified as the titular lady. It is referred to in Shakespeare’s “The Merry Wives of Windsor” and consequently used in Ralph Vaughan Williams’ 1928 opera “Sir John in Love”, based on that play. There, it is combined with an English folk song, Lovely Joan, which tells how the eponymous Joan pinches the gold ring offered by a suitor and makes off with it on his horse. The orchestral “Fantasia” version, which has since become popular independent of the opera, was arranged with Vaughan Williams’ blessing by Ralph Greaves.

Adolphe Adam’s 1847 *Cantique de Noel* is still used for Midnight Mass in French churches, despite the challenge presented to regular congregations by its wide vocal range. For the same reason, it is mainly used as a performance piece in the English-speaking world.

John Rutter’s *Angels’ Carol* was originally written in the 1980s to be sung by the winners of a competition for choirboys and girls; the competition is no more but the carol has lived on, including being voted one of the UK’s favourite carols in 2017 by listeners of the radio station Classic FM.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky’s “*Marche Slave*” tone poem has no festive credentials at all, but it does have something in common with other items on tonight’s programme: that it is a piece which has transcended its original purpose to take on a life of its own. That original purpose was in response to a commission from the Russian Musical Society for a concert in aid of the Red Cross Society and ultimately for the benefit of wounded veterans of the ongoing war between Serbia and the Ottoman empire. Tchaikovsky appears to have finished the piece within a week of receiving the commission, drawing on the Serbian and Russian folk tunes as well as the Russian imperial anthem “*God Save the Tsar*” which you might recognise from Tchaikovsky’s 1812 overture. The *Marche* was first played, under Nikolay Rubinstein, in

Moscow in 1876, when it was repeated by popular demand. Later performances in Manchester, the US and France attested to Tchaikovsky's growing international reputation.

The ballet *The Nutcracker* was first performed in St Petersburg in 1892. The plotline is banal and some of the characterisations problematic by today's standards, such that ballet would probably have fallen into obscurity were it not for the quality of Tchaikovsky's music. This was described by a contemporary critic as "beautiful, melodious, original and characteristic" and has since inspired treatments by artists as diverse as Duke Ellington, Walt Disney, the Shirim Klezmer Orchestra and Barbie. Our selection tonight consists of entertainments provided in the *Land of Sweets*: an introductory march, followed by dances performed by the Sugar Plum Fairy, Russian candy canes, Arabian coffee, Chinese tea, flute-playing Danish shepherdesses and waltzing flowers.

The text of "Hark! The herald angels sing" was written in the 1730s by Charles Wesley, who intended it to be sung to his tune "Christ the Lord is risen today". Felix Mendelssohn's tune was originally written in 1840 for a cantata commemorating the invention of movable type by Johannes Gutenberg. English composer William H. Cummings takes the credit for the stroke of genius that put the two together. "O Come, all ye faithful" has something in common with "Greensleeves", which is that its authorship has been dubiously attributed to royalty – in this case, King John IV of Portugal in the early seventeenth century. It was first published in England in 1751, with the first English translation ("Ye Faithful, approach ye") following in 1852.

It remains to be seen whether the fame of John Williams' music will outlive that of the purposes that it was written for, in the way that some of tonight's other music has. Right now, his place among the greatest of cinematic composers is unquestioned and confirmed by numerous Grammy, Academy and Golden Globe awards. His *Star Wars* soundtrack is included in the Library of Congress National Registry of recordings that are culturally, historically or aesthetically significant. The main themes of his score for the first of the *Harry Potter* films, which we are performing tonight in an arrangement by Michael Story, are re-used and developed throughout the rest of the film series, although Williams himself wrote only for the first three.

The seventeen-year-old Robert Sheldon was one of 176 trombone players in the 1,076-piece marching band which played for the Grand Opening Parade at Walt Disney World in 1971. Today he is one of the most performed composers of wind band music, and twenty-eight-time recipient of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publisher's Standard Award. His "A Most Wonderful Christmas" brings out the secular side of Christmas, combining a handful of holiday songs popular in the US into a cheerful romp.

Programme notes by The Jabbler