

It's that time of year again, when we join forces with The Chilton Saint James School's Seraphim Choir to bring you a selection of more-or-less seasonal favourites, old and new.

Léo Delibes' ballet **Coppélia** concerns a doll who comes to life (or does she?) in a comic version of the old Pygmalion story. Its first performance was in Paris in 1870 in the presence of the Emperor Napoleon III and it became one of the Paris Opera's most performed ballets after a temporary interruption due to the Franco-Prussian war and the siege of Paris. The *czárdás*, a traditional Hungarian dance characterised by variations in tempo, is danced for reasons which don't seem to have much to do with the plot towards the end of Act I.

Mary, Did You Know? combines lyrics written by Mark Lowry in 1984 and music written by Buddy Greene in 1991. It has become a modern Christmas classic, recorded by hundreds of artists including Dolly Parton and Pentatonix, despite getting into trouble in 2019 for being sexist and un-biblical.

Benjamin Britten's **A Ceremony of Carols** was composed in 1942 on a sea voyage from the United States to England. The text for this movement, *This Little Babe*, is taken from Robert Southwell's *Newe Heaven, Newe Warre* (1595) and depicts a battle between baby Jesus and Satan.

The text of **God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen** goes back to the 1650s, when its first line was "Sit you merry gentlemen". Authorship of the tune is not known, although the earliest printed edition of the melody appears to be in an arrangement by Samuel Wesley, which was already reviewed in 1815. It has not always been popular; in 1824 *The Gentleman's Magazine* complained that, in London, no Christmas carols are heard "excepting some croaking ballad-singer bawling out 'God rest you, merry gentlemen', or a like doggerel". This arrangement is by South Carolina's Larry Shackley.

In **Christmas at the Castle** (2023) Nicola Kirkup, one of our awesome viola section, tests out the hypothesis that all Christmas carols are improved by being transposed into G minor and mashed up with "Carol of the Bells". The piece takes us on a journey across a desolate moorland to an ominous castle where a Christmas fair is underway. Inside, knights and ladies are elegant; but the great lord, on his deathbed, is not in an entertaining mood, so we leave the way we came. Several carols are quoted, some of which appear again, in more familiar form, elsewhere in today's programme.

Ruth Elaine Schram's **Holy Night, Silent Night** (2009) brings together Adolphe Adam's *Cantique de Noël* (O Holy Night) and Franz Xaver Gruber's *Stille Nacht* (Silent Night). "Ruthie" Schram composes mainly for church and school choirs but has also had music featured on *The Sopranos*.

John Rutter originally composed his **Angels' Carol**, using his own text, in the 1980s to be performed by the winners of a competition for choirboys and choirlads in London. The competition is no more but the carol remains popular, with at least three recordings having been made.

Today's arrangement of **The Twelve Days of Christmas** is by Otago's Anthony Ritchie. The English text goes back to about 1780. It may have been French in origin, suggested by the fact that English partridges don't sit in trees whereas French ones do, and also by the fact that the French for "partridge" is *perdrix*, which would have sounded like "pear-tree" to English folk singers. The most recent estimate of the total cost of the gifts, from December 2022, is just over US\$45,500 (about NZ\$78,000); or US\$197,000 (NZ\$338,000) if you do it properly and send twelve partridges, twenty-two turtle doves etc over the twelve days. This is not recommended by Hutt Valley Orchestra or its associates.

Interval

Mozart's **Eine Kleine Nachtmusik** (1787) needs little introduction, which is just as well because nothing is known about why and for whom it was written, or when and whether it was performed during the composer's lifetime. It was not published until 1827, long after Mozart's death in 1791, having been sold to a publisher in 1799 by his canny widow Constanze as part of a large bundle of his compositions. It rapidly became one of Mozart's most popular works; twentieth-century German author Wolfgang Hildesheimer wrote that "even if we hear it on every street corner, its high quality is undisputed, an occasional piece from a light but happy pen."

The Phantom of the Opera is set at the Paris Opera in 1881, meaning that the Phantom would have seen *Coppélia* while he was in residence there. Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical opened at Her Majesty's Theatre in London in October 1986 and is still playing, now at His Majesty's Theatre, today. It has also played on Broadway, where it became the first production to celebrate its 10,000th performance in February 2012, and in some thirty other countries including this one. This medley arrangement by Calvin Custer kicks off with the signature five-note downward chromatic scale, which was claimed by Pink Floyd to have been plagiarised although they could not be bothered to sue; and then we bring you "Think of Me", "Angel of Music", "The Music of the Night", "Masquerade" and "All I Ask of You".

Charles E Peery's **Carillon on Forest Green** (2011) sets an English folk ballad, "The Ploughboy's Dream", which was collected by Ralph Vaughan Williams from a Mr. Garman of Forest Green, Surrey, UK in 1903. The title may not be familiar but the tune will ring a bell. "Chuck" Peery taught public school choral music and served as musical director for over 60 community, college and semi-professional theatre productions in New York State and Missouri before retiring to California. As a composer he has specialised in handbell, brass, and choral music.

Leroy Anderson had a distinguished military career, serving during the Second World War in Iceland with the U.S. Counterintelligence Corps as a translator and interpreter, and from 1945 at the Pentagon as Chief of the Scandinavian Desk of Military Intelligence. More to the point here, he is described by no less an authority than John Williams as "one of the great American masters of light orchestral music." As a composer he is best known for "Sleigh Ride" which was a hit in 1948, but he also did a lot of arranging, including this jolly **Christmas Festival**, from 1950, which gives us a succession of seasonal songs both sacred and secular.

We hope that this selection has left you energised and in a party mood.

Programme notes by The Jabbler