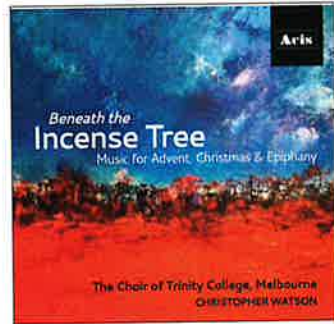


RECORDINGS



BENEATH THE INCENSE TREE: MUSIC FOR ADVENT, CHRISTMAS, AND EPIPHANY. The Choir of Trinity College, Melbourne, Christopher Watson, director. Gillian McNaughton and Jack Lindsay, organists. Acis APLI7427. AcisProductions.com. The Choir of Trinity College, Melbourne, consists—according to the liner notes—of “students and recent graduates from the University of Melbourne and nearby tertiary institutions.” Comprising just under 30 members, it has concertized in the U.K., Europe, Asia, and the United States as well as in its native Australia. The choir is in the British tradition, and the music on this disc largely explores the grand choral tradition so many Americans associate with St. Thomas Fifth Avenue, King’s College, Cambridge, and the like. While the sound of the classic boy choir tradition is clearly influential, the choir is mixed. The result, to my ears, is very successful.

This recording offers 18 tracks of such substantial choral music, some unaccompanied and some with organ accompaniment, all devoted to the seasons of Advent through Epiphany. The choir is really beautiful: its blend, balance, intonation, and sense of ensemble are all superb. The organists are Gillian McNaughton, who is the N. Bruce Munro Senior Organ Scholar, and Jack Lindsay, the Junior Organ Scholar. Both do a fine job and demonstrate a deep affinity with the high style of the music.

McNaughton is heard on the difficult accompanied choral works and several organ solos. While these solos are short

and familiar pieces—the Brahms *Es ist ein Ros*, the Bach *In dulci jubilo*, BWV 729, and the Pachelbel *Wie schön leuchtet*—she handles the organ admirably. Her full powers are on display on the first and last tracks, “A Babe Is Born” by William Mathias and “Angel Song” by Dan Locklair. Here, her playing is electric and absolutely of a piece with the choir.

Jack Lindsay handles Anthony Piccolo’s setting of “Jesus Christ the Apple Tree” and Daniel Riley’s “Coventry Carol” with subtlety and skill. Neither of these pieces is easy: the Riley setting, in particular, requires hair-splitting accuracy in tuning the many cross relationships in the choir and saves the organ for later in the piece, giving it the all-important last word. Kudos to both organ scholars.

Space does not permit a discussion of each and every piece—though that would be time well spent. My personal favorites include the aforementioned Mathias and Locklair pieces, both of which are grand and glorious, as well as very challenging. The styles of these two works differ; Mathias begins with quiet intensity in a minor mode, while Locklair begins in a thrilling rush of upward scales and colorful harmonies. Both offer richly contrasting sections for choir and organ. Both are great vehicles for an advanced choir and organist, real showpieces for a Lessons and Carols service.

Also, I must mention “Behold a Simple Tender Babe” by June Nixon. Nixon is an institution; not only in Australia, where she is now emerita at St. Paul’s Cathedral, Melbourne, but also now in the States. Those of us who happily took part in OrganFest 2020 experienced her commissioned work *Intrada: St. Anne* for organ and two trumpets. The choral setting on this CD is lyrical, sweet, simple, and inevitable, winning the heart in just under two minutes. Nixon is also a DMus (Cantuar), honoring her long tenure in Melbourne; she is the first woman to hold this doctorate, which is granted by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The recording is not only for those who never miss Lessons and Carols from Cambridge, but for those who appreciate excellent choral music in the English tradition, with concomitant organ playing. It joins my ever-growing Christmas playlist, and I think it would find a happy niche in yours too.

JONATHAN B. HALL, FAGO, ChM



CHRISTMAS IN NEW YORK. New York City Children’s Chorus, Mary Huff, artistic director; Andrew Henderson, piano and organ. Chamber orchestra, handbells, etc., with David Enlow, organ; David Carleton, piano. MSR Classics MS-1700. NYCchildrenschorus.org; iTunes, Spotify, Google Play, Amazon.



MAKE WE MERRY. Christmas Music for Upper Voices by David Bednall, Bob Chilcott, and Sarah Quartel. Benenden Chapel Choir; London Metropolitan Brass; Edward Whiting, director. Regent Records REGCD547. RegentRecords.com; OHScatalog.org.

Whether you’re listening in the dog days of summer or the grey depths of winter, whatever depressing political shenanigans may be occurring as you read this, these

two recordings will lift your spirits and fill you with hope, for the future of our art and for humanity. While these two compilations come from different cultures and different milieus, they share one all-important attribute—glorious, radiant singing.

The 80-member New York City Children’s Chorus is a relatively new addition to the city’s musical life, having been founded in 2012 as a ministry of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. Andrew Henderson, the church’s music director, is accompanist and executive director of the chorus. There was certainly nothing of this caliber in this genre during my days in the city, just up the street at St. James’ as Robert Baker’s assistant in the early 1970s.

Benenden School is one of the toniest girls’ “public” (i.e., private) schools in Britain, with beautiful facilities in “the Garden of England” in Kent; their first CD was a Gramophone Editor’s Choice in 2016. The 36-voice chapel choir has performed throughout the U.K., as well as places such as Venice, Slovenia, Paris, and New York.

One of the differences between these two discs is in the approach to repertoire. Whereas the English disc features just three major works by contemporary figures, the New York compilation shows a kaleidoscopic musical smorgasbord typical of the city, with music of Norman Luboff, Paul Halley, and Pietro Yon among others. The one larger work is a premiere recording of New York City native Randall Thompson’s “The Place of the Blest.” While typically mellifluous and elegantly performed, it makes rather less impact through frequent use of Thompson’s well-known musical clichés from other works.

One of the most striking tracks on the American disc is the lovely work “Angel” by Daniel Roehl, with its intriguingly enigmatic text by North Carolina poet Reynolds Price. Here director Mary Wannamaker Huff builds a thrilling climax with exquisite tuning and a gloriously open sound. Also striking is the fine

singing of the high school tenors and basses in her group, in no fewer than eight of the eighteen tracks. Soloist Katie Gurney’s rich, expressive singing in Corlynn Hanney’s “Christmas Angel” also deserves special mention.

The NYCCC clearly enjoys itself in the holiday season, with performances in Carnegie Hall, Radio City Music Hall, St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and on NBC’s *Today Show* to mention just a few, and prides itself on its range of musical styles “from Bach to Broadway.” Thus Patrick Wedd’s unusual “Carol for the Animals” (including whistling!) sits alongside Paul Halley’s jazzy piano accompaniment to the plainsong “Rorate coeli” (!); and Wilhousky’s “Carol of the Bells” rubs shoulders with Luboff’s “A la Nanita Nana.” There is an exhilarating set of carol arrangements by Reginald Unterseher, and a perky take on “Noël Nouvelet” by Erica Phare-Bergh. Accompaniments combine piano, organ, harp, handbells, violin, and string quartet, woodwinds, and percussion for the closing Randall Thompson work.

Bob Chilcott, David Bednall, and Sarah Quartel are the featured composers on the Benenden disc. The first name is entirely familiar on both sides of the Atlantic, with his works for the King’s Singers, King’s College Choir, and other groups, and his frequent guest conducting appearances for the American Choral Directors Association; he does not disappoint here with the multi-movement work *The Midnight of Your Birth*. This compilation of pieces commissioned for a variety of treble choirs hangs together well because of the consistency of style. The final movement, “The Rain-Tree Carol,” reflects, with its raindrop piano motive, the more frequent occurrence of rain rather than snow on Christmas Day in the U.K., in these days of climate change. “The Midnight of Your Birth,” the title track, has an engaging off-beat rhythm. And the elegant, sophisticated solo singing of Sophia Laycock lends distinction to the first movement, “The Angel Did Fly.”



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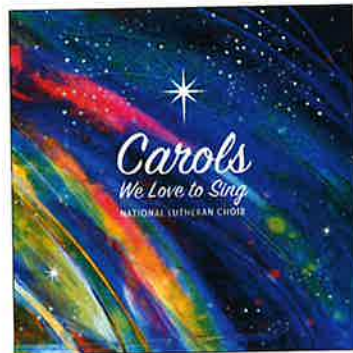
David Bednall is becoming widely known as concert organist and composer, with several major works to his credit, including *Stabat Mater* and *Welcome All Wonders*. He is also known as a skilled improviser. His work *Make We Merry* opens this disc, and involves the very fine London Metropolitan Brass and the young percussionist Kizzy Brooks. The opening and closing movements make dramatic use of this combination, as does “All This Night Shri! Chanticleer” in the middle of the work. More lyrical movements (“The Christ-Child on Mary’s Lap,” “Sweet Was the Song the Virgin Sang”) intervene, and the penultimate movement, “Let Others Look for Pearl and Gold,” for three-part unaccompanied chorus, is particularly nicely sung by Edward Whiting’s finely tuned chorus.

The most striking work on this British disc is the five-movement work *Snow Angel*, by the up-and-coming Canadian composer and conductor Sarah Quartel. This work draws perhaps the most radiant and involved singing from this group of highly educated young women. The opening mood is set by the evocative cello playing of Rebecca McNaught, which pervades the opening Prologue and the settings of “Creatures of Light” and “God Will Give Orders.” At the end of this movement, the very different and percussive sounds of Adam Harrod’s djembe bring a Nigerian flavor to the work; and the singing too acquires an African energy and urgency. Then the tranquility of the first movement returns, with a slowly building climax subsiding into a gentle ending. This is a remarkable performance of a remarkable work.

Taken together, these two discs bring a very fresh vision of Christmas music for young people. Whether in the concrete canyons of Manhattan or the verdant pastures of Kent, a gorgeous, sophisticated, elegant singing culture is alive and well in these young people today; and composers of our time are clearly creating challenging and rewarding music for them to sing. Buy these discs to find

sophisticated music for your young choirs—but buy them also to feed your own soul.

MURRAY SOMERVILLE

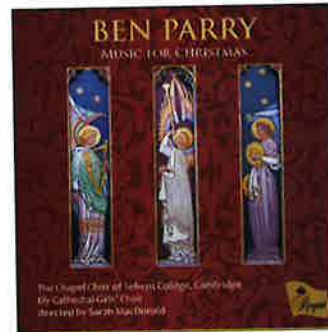


CAROLS WE LOVE TO SING. National Lutheran Choir; David Cherwien, conductor and organist; Adam Reinwald, assistant conductor; Rachel Brandwein, harp; Sarah Carmack, oboe. Recorded in 2005, 2010, 2018, and 2019 at St. Michael’s Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Minn., and the Basilica of St. Mary, Minneapolis, Minn. NLCA.com/shop. Anyone who has attended a hymn festival led by David Cherwien knows what an inspiring, exciting, and exhilarating experience it is. Cherwien is the worthy successor of Paul Manz as cantor at Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, and artistic director of the National Lutheran Choir, based in the Twin Cities. This recording, culled from several live performances over a 14-year period, lives up to expectations. In addition to his own inimitable arrangements and treatments, Cherwien includes settings by David Willcocks, Larry Fleming, Paul Manz, and Stephen Paulus.

Fourteen of the most familiar carols of the Christmas season are given a variety of settings featuring the excellent, well-trained National Lutheran Choir, supplemented occasionally by lusty (and well-disciplined!) singing of a large congregation, supported by Cherwien’s spirited and creative organ playing. Many of the introductions, accompaniments, and arrangements are taken from his publications. The organ of St. Michael’s Lutheran

Church is not identified in the CD booklet, but it is well suited for supporting and enhancing the diversity of settings, with strong, bright foundations and ensembles, powerful solo reeds, and lovely quieter voices. Harp and oboe provide exquisite color to three unpublished settings by Cherwien, providing additional variety and beauty. Hopefully these too will be published soon, for they will add significantly to any program or service.

From the beloved Willcocks settings to the fresh settings of Cherwien and his American colleagues, there is something here for everyone to enjoy. Singing and playing are of the highest level of excellence, beautifully and consistently captured by the recording engineers. This recording is a must-have for any Christmas collection. It will give great enjoyment during the season, or any time of the year, and offer inspiration for choral directors in future programming.



BEN PARRY: MUSIC FOR CHRISTMAS. The Chapel Choir of Selwyn College, Cambridge; Ely Cathedral Girls’ Choir; Prime Brass; Craig Apps and Sam Wilson, percussion; Adam McDonagh, piano; Michael Stephens-Jones and Aaron Shilson, organ; Sarah MacDonald, director. Recorded in Ely Cathedral, January 2019. Harrison & Harrison organ (IV/95, 1908, restored 1974/75, 1999–2001). RegentRecords.com. Ben Parry, currently assistant director of music at King’s College, Cambridge, and former singer, arranger, and music director for the Swingle Singers, is one of England’s most

highly regarded musicians. In addition to his extensive and diverse output as a composer and arranger, he is active as a singer, conductor, producer, director, choral and orchestral conductor, and recording artist. He was made honorary associate of the Royal Academy of Music in 2013. This recording offers 19 of his original compositions and arrangements, covering the entire Christmas season from Advent through Epiphany. Several of Parry’s original works are settings of texts by author and lyricist Garth Bardsley, with whom Parry has enjoyed a long-lasting collaboration. From the brief a cappella original setting of the carol “Adam Lay Ybounden” to the large-scale setting of a Bardsley text, “Magi,” employing the full choral forces with organ, brass, and percussion, the program showcases myriad musical styles and textures, including homophonic, polytonal, double choir, a cappella, and accompanied, clothed in rich harmonic tapestries and vigorous rhythmic energy. The organ accompaniments are often demanding, skillfully rendered here by Michael Stephens-Jones and Aaron Shilson. A lovely diversion is the set of *Five Carols* for SATB and piano. These are attractive, uncomplicated settings of four carols from the British Isles as well as one composed by a teenage Parry. Pianist Adam McDonagh provides sensitive accompaniments. The entire program listing can be found at the Regent website.

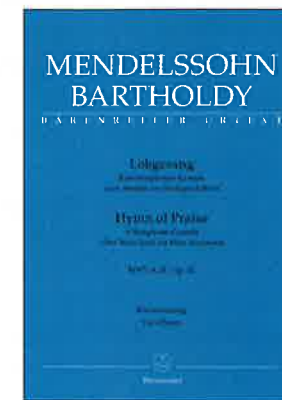
Native Canadian Sarah MacDonald is well known to readers of this journal through her monthly UK Report. Her comments there are illuminating as they pertain to the rigors, challenges, and joys of the daily routines and preparations of university and cathedral life for services, concerts, or recordings such as this one. As director of music at Selwyn College, Cambridge, and director of Ely Cathedral Girls’ Choir, she demonstrates her consummate skill in guiding and shaping young voices into a highly disciplined ensemble that exhibits all of the best qualities of choral singing. The 27-voice Chapel Choir of Selwyn College and 21-voice Ely

Cathedral Girls’ Choir combine in various ways throughout the program, including some fine solo singing. Intonation, blend, balance, and diction are superb, as are dynamic sensitivity and phrasing. The addition of the excellent brass and percussion in the dramatic tableau describing the sometimes-harrowing journey of the Magi provides an exhilarating conclusion to the program.

The music of Ben Parry is engaging in its harmonic richness and diversity, rhythmic energy, and spiritual uplift. It would be difficult to imagine a finer representation than the one given here. This music deserves its rightful place among the great wealth of British choral literature of our time.

JAMES HILDRETH

SCORES



MENDELSSOHN BARTHOLDY: LOBGESANG, EINE SYMPHONIE-KANTATE NACH DER HEILIGEN SCHRIFT, ed. John Michael Cooper. Bärenreiter Urtext, 2020. €89 (score), €13.50 (piano-vocal). Baerenreiter.com. At Christmas, when you play the favorite carol, Charles Wesley’s “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” you may think of its composer, Felix Mendelssohn. Less likely is that you will recall its original source, the second movement of *Festgesang*, a cantata for men’s chorus and brass band, written in 1840 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Johann Gutenberg’s invention of printing by movable type.

In the same year (1840) and for another Gutenberg commemoration, Mendelssohn

