

The Cherwell Singers

present

‘An English Christmas’

Twentieth-century English
seasonal music

James Brown	conductor
Steven Grahl	organ & piano

Sunday, 9th December 2012
The Chapel of Exeter College, Oxford

Programme

Hymn to the Virgin	Benjamin Britten
Magnificat	Gerald Finzi
Adam lay ybounden	John Ireland
<i>Cello Solo</i> : The Holy Boy	John Ireland
Christmas Cantata	Geoffrey Bush

- I Prelude**
- II The Seven Joys of Mary** (traditional)
- III The Birds** – (Hilaire Belloc)
- IV Czech Carol** (trans Percy Dearmer)
- VII Intermezzo** (soprano solo)
- IX Finale** (traditional) and
Epilogue

Interval

<i>Soprano Solo</i> : Corpus Christi Carol	Benjamin Britten
<i>Oboe Solo</i> : ...and there were shepherds in the fields...	Christopher Redgate
Christmas Day	Gustav Holst
Fantasia on Christmas Carols	Ralph Vaughan Williams

Esther Brazil	mezzo-soprano
Rupert Reid	baritone
Christopher Redgate	oboe
Gabriel Amherst	cello
Steven Grahl	organ & piano
James Brown	conductor

Introduction

2012 is the centenary of one of the best loved English Christmas choral works - the *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* by Ralph Vaughan Williams. To mark this, the Cherwell Singers concert this term has as its theme English Christmas music of the past one hundred years that uses traditional carols and weaves them into larger compositions. Thus, as well as the Vaughan Williams *Fantasia* already mentioned, we include *Christmas Day* by Holst and the abbreviated version of the little known *Christmas Cantata* by Geoffrey Bush. Written in 1947, and first performed in Oxford just a few metres away from our venue of Exeter College Chapel in Balliol College, this work exists in a version for choir, solo soprano, oboe and piano. The use of the solo oboe in this piece complements the solo cello part in the Vaughan-Williams *Fantasia*. Oboist Christopher Redgate and cellist Gabriel Amherst are also performing seasonal solo items in this concert, and we are joined as usual by organist Steven Grahl. Advent and Christmas works by Finzi, Britten and Ireland also feature in this celebration of English music to conclude this jubilee year.

James Brown

An English Christmas

The story of Christmas is often viewed as the story of the infant Jesus; but in fact it starts with the Virgin Mary, with the angel's announcement of her motherhood, and the subsequent birth and upbringing of her son. Historically it is also seen as the start of the act of redemption that ended with Christ's death, and many traditional carols also reflect this.

Our exploration of Christmas starts with a prayer and hymn of praise to the Virgin, and then continues with a setting of the *Magnificat*, which was her song in response to the news that she was to bear God's son, and so is

appropriate for the present time of Advent. A setting of *Adam Lay Ybounden* follows, presenting the thought that even original sin has its place in the world, as it led to Mary becoming the mother of God, and the *Corpus Christi Carol* reminds us that Christmas leads inevitably to Good Friday. But the other works we are performing tonight concentrate on Christmas itself, with a number of medleys presenting a wide range of carols, the last of which takes us through to wishing each other a happy new year.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) wrote his setting of *A Hymn to the Virgin* while in the school sanatorium in 1930; it was one of the pieces which gained Britten admission to the Royal College of Music when he was just 16 years old. The thirteenth-century macaronic (*i.e.* alternating English and Latin) text celebrating the virtues of the Virgin Mary is set by dividing the choir into two parts for the Latin and English lines. The text is a selection from a greater number of verses, whose order varies in the sources.

A Hymn to the Virgin (Anon, 13th century)

Of one that is so fair and bright Brighter than the day is light, I cry to thee, thou see to me, Lady, pray thy Son for me That I may come to thee.	Velut maris stella, Parens et puella: Tam pia, Maria!	<i>Like the star of the sea, Mother and maiden: So tender, Mary!</i>
All this world was forlorn Till our Lord was y-born With <i>ave</i> it went away Darkest night, and comes the day The well springeth out of thee.	Eva peccatrice, De te genetrice. Salutis; Virtutis.	<i>Eve having been a sinner, Of you, his mother. Of salvation; Of virtue.</i>
Lady, flow'r of ev'rything, Thou bare Jesu, Heaven's King, Of all thou bear'st the prize, Lady, queen of paradise Maid mild, mother <i>es Effecta</i>	Rosa sine spina, Gratia divina: Electa: Effecta.	<i>Thornless rose, By divine grace: Chosen: You are fulfilled.</i>

The music of **Gerald Finzi** (1901-1956) springs from his love of literature and the English countryside - the same sources that inspired Elgar and Vaughan Williams. Like them he found writing vocal music particularly satisfying, and in fact, about two-thirds of his entire output is either for chorus or solo voice. His music is immediately recognisable by its yearning melodies and wistful harmonies; and his instinctive feeling for the English language is exceptional, the natural speech-rhythms and cadences of his musical lines complementing perfectly each chosen text.

Finzi's setting of the ***Magnificat*** (1952) was not intended for liturgical use (he himself was not a believer), and so the Gloria, which is not part of the *Magnificat* itself, is omitted. The *Magnificat* itself is the song which the gospels tell us was sung by the Virgin Mary in thanks for the news that she was to bear the son of God, and so is suitable to be included in an Advent carol concert.

Magnificat (St Luke's Gospel, trans Book of Common Prayer)

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
 and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden.
For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on them that fear him throughout all generations.
He hath shewed strength with his arm;
 he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat,
 and hath exalted the humble and meek.
He hath filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he hath sent empty away.
He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel
 as he promised to our forefathers Abraham and his seed for ever.
Amen.

John Ireland (1879-1962) studied under Stanford at the Royal College of Music, where he subsequently became a teacher. His pupils included Benjamin Britten (who was not much interested by him) and Geoffrey Bush (who completed some of his unfinished works after his death). As a young composer he was strongly influenced by Debussy and Ravel as well as by the earlier works of Stravinsky and Bartók. From these influences, he developed his own brand of ‘English Impressionism’, related more closely to French and Russian models than to the folk-song style then prevailing in English music. Like most other impressionist composers, Ireland favoured small forms; *Adam lay ybounden* is one of a group of four carols published in 1956.

Adam lay ybounden (Anon, c1400)

Adam lay ybounden, bounden in a bond;
Four thousand winter thought he not too long.
And all was for an apple, an apple that he took,
As clerkès finden written in their book.
Ne had the apple taken been, the apple taken been,
Ne had never our lady abeen heavenè queen.
Blessèd be the time that apple taken was.
Therefore we moun [= must] singen *Deo Gracias!*

The Holy Boy may well be Ireland’s best-known work. It was written initially as one of a set of preludes for piano, with the subtitle ‘The Holy Boy – a carol’, which clearly earns it its place in this concert. It is a deceptively simple setting of an austere but wistful melody accompanied by more complex and subtle harmonies. The composer made this arrangement for solo cello in 1919, and many other arrangements by him and other musicians followed – including a version with Christmas words specially written.

Geoffrey Bush (1920-1998) wrote his *Christmas Cantata* in 1947 for the Musical Society of Balliol College, Oxford, by whom it was premièred that year under the direction of its dedicatee, Ronald Gordon (individual movements are dedicated to other Oxford friends, identified only by their initials.) It is the sort of anthology work which British composers, including Vaughan Williams and Britten, tend to do so well. For his cantata Bush chose a number of well-known, mainly English, traditional carols and wove them into a delightful tapestry. Several of the settings use traditional melodies. The treatment of all the carols, especially the well-known ones, is very thoughtful. There are often unexpected and subtle harmonic touches, either in the accompaniment or within the choir. However, the carols are never overwhelmed and their simple direct spirit is retained.

The selection of movements that we are using this evening is suggested by the composer in the score.

The words set by Bush are all well-known carols, apart from opening and closing prayers, and a poem by Hilaire Belloc (1870 – 1953). This poem relates a miracle by the infant Christ which is described in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, a pseudepigraphical work probably dating from the second century, and also in the *Qur'an*.

The Birds (from Sonnets and Verses, 1910)

When Jesus Christ was four years old,
The angels brought Him toys of gold,
Which no man ever had bought or sold.

And yet with these He would not play.
He made Him small fowl out of clay,
And blessed them till they flew away.

Tu creasti, Domine. [Thou hast created them, O Lord.]

Jesus Christ, Thou child so wise,
Bless mine hands and fill mine eyes,
And bring my soul to Paradise.

In 1933, Britten wrote his first Christmas cantata, *A Boy was Born*, a large set of variations for chorus, which was first performed by the BBC Singers. The fifth movement sets the *Corpus Christi Carol* in combination with *In the Bleak Midwinter*, and many years later, Britten extracted from it the *Corpus Christi Carol* (1962) as a separate setting for solo treble and piano or organ. The tune is based on a mediæval theme, adapted by Britten to suit the fifteenth-century words.

The text is formed of seven couplets, seven representing perfection, with Christ being mentioned in the seventh couplet. Although it is sometimes interpreted as being about the Holy Grail or Anne Boleyn (whose badge was a falcon), the poem is more likely to be an allegory in which the suffering knight is Christ, the falcon is the Holy Spirit, the orchard is Golgotha with its forest of crosses, the hall decked with purple is the tomb, and the maiden is Mary.

Corpus Christi Carol (Anon, 15th century)

*Lully lullay, lully lullay,
The falcon hath borne my make [=mate, love] away.*
He bare him up, he bare him down,
He bare him into an orchard brown.
In that orchard there was an hall
That was hanged with purple and pall,
And in that hall there was a bed.
It was hanged with gold so red.
In that bed there lieth a knight,
His woundes bleeding, day and night.
By that bedside kneeleth a may [=maid],
And she weepeth both night and day.
And by that bedside there standeth a stone,
Corpus Christi written thereon.

Christopher Redgate's piece for solo oboe: '*...and there were shepherds in the fields...*' is a short folk-style piece which both invokes the idea of shepherds in the fields and acts as a brief meditation on this moment before the appearance of the angels.

Several years before the composition of his masterpiece *The Planets*, with its astrological and Theosophist symbolism, **Gustav Holst** (1874-1934) wrote a choral work that was very much motivated by the Christian tradition. *Christmas Day - a choral fantasy on old carols* was written in 1910 shortly after Holst had finished the three groups of Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda. A number of well-known carols are used in this fantasy. It starts with a solo voice singing *Good Christian Men Rejoice*; thereafter the composer makes use of *God rest you merry gentlemen*, *The First Nowell* and a traditional melody derived from Brittany is used to set the words *Come ye lofty; come ye lonely*. The piece alternates between these carols and also combines them. The work has remained obscure; even the composer's daughter Imogen Holst has written little about it, save to note that the composer was 'happy enough with his peppery sprinkling of quaver fifths...'

Cheerful agnostic that he was, **Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872-1958) still loved Christmas, and especially Christmas carols. One of the first things he wrote as a child was a carol and one of the last things he wrote as a very old man was a carol, and in between he wrote more Christmas music than any other first-rank twentieth century composer.

The *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* was dedicated to Cecil Sharp, the folksong collector and founder of the English Folk Dance Society. It combines settings of three traditional English carols: *This is the truth sent from above*, *Come all you worthy gentlemen* and *On Christmas night all Christians sing* (the second and third of which are combined) with hints of the tunes of other carols, including *The First Nowell*. The work is notable for the varied treatment of the choir, which provides an atmospheric choral-orchestral texture. Vaughan Williams may have been influenced in his *Fantasia* by his friend Gustav Holst's *Christmas Day* of 1910, which also includes *The First Nowell*. Like Holst, Vaughan Williams also permitted alternative scorings of his work to facilitate wider performances.

Esther Brazil mezzo-soprano

Esther has appeared as a soloist with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, London Handel Orchestra, English Baroque Soloists, and the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique under Sir John Eliot Gardiner. She was a choral scholar at The Queen's College, Oxford, and subsequently the winner of scholarships from the Kohn Foundation and Lucille Graham Trust to study at the Royal Academy of Music, where she recently gained an MA (Distinction). Roles include Rosina (*Barber of Seville*), Grand Duchess (*A Dinner Engagement*), Lauretta (*Gianni Schicchi*), Juno (*The Judgment of Paris*), Sorceress (*Dido and Aeneas*), Euridice (*L'Orfeo*), and Ninfa/Proserpina (*L'Orfeo*); in RAM Vocal Faculty opera scenes, Erika (*Vanessa*), Sesto (*Clemenza di Tito*), Octavian (*Der Rosenkavalier*), and Minkswoman (*Flight*). Recent appearances have included Ninfa/Prosperina in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* at King's Place with La Nuova Musica, and solos with the OAE in Vivaldi's *Gloria* and Handel's *Dixit Dominus*, under John Butt. She studies with Susan Roberts. More details at www.estherbrazil.com.

Rupert Reid baritone

Rupert Reid is a current member and former apprentice of the Monteverdi Choir directed by Sir John Eliot Gardiner. Before this, he was a Lay Clerk at St John's College, Cambridge with Andrew Nethsingha, and a Choral Scholar in the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, directed by Stephen Cleobury. With King's Cambridge, he performed as a soloist in the internationally renowned BBC World Service broadcasts of Carols from King's. He is currently a deputy Lay Vicar in the Choir of Westminster Abbey.

As a soloist, Rupert has also appeared on BBC Radio and TV and other radio stations in Europe and America, as well as on recordings with EMI. In concert, he regularly performs as a soloist with Choral Societies and Chamber Choirs.

Christopher Redgate oboe

Christopher Redgate is the designer of the Redgate-Howarth system oboe for contemporary music and will be performing on that instrument tonight. He is currently an AHRC Fellow in the Creative and Performing Arts at the Royal Academy of Music and has since the late 1970s specialised in the performance of contemporary oboe music, developing extended techniques and performing many new works that have been written for him. His performing career has taken him to many parts of the world as a soloist, in ensembles and as a teacher.

He broadcasts regularly and has recorded extensively, especially the new repertoire created for him. He writes regularly for professional journals and is currently preparing a book on the interpretation of contemporary oboe music.

www.christopherredgate.co.uk

www.21stcenturyoboe.com

Gabriel Amherst cello

Gabriel Amherst studied at Somerville College Oxford and the Royal College of Music. She has performed and recorded with many leading orchestras including The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, the Academy of Ancient Music, the English Baroque Soloists and the Orchestre Romantique et Revolutionnaire. She is a member of the chamber ensembles Harmoniemusik, the Frideswide Ensemble, St Silas Piano Trio and the Band of Instruments. She lives in Oxford and teaches and performs regularly in the area.

Steven Grahl organ

Steven enjoys a varied career as both organist and conductor. He combines the post of Assistant Organist at New College, Oxford with that of Organist & Director of Music at St Marylebone Parish Church, London, and he was acting Director of the New College Choir during Trinity Term 2010. He is a member of the Oxford University Faculty of Music. Since 2006 he has held the Principal Conductorship of the Guildford Chamber Choir.

Recent years have seen performances in America, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, and at numerous prestigious UK venues, such as Westminster Cathedral and St John's Smith Square.

A prize-winning graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford (where he was Organ Scholar) and the Royal Academy of Music, Steven gained the Limpus (highest mark) and Dixon (improvisation) prizes in his FRCO examination, and he is also a holder of the Worshipful Company of Musicians' Silver Medallion.

James Brown conductor

James was Organ Scholar of Girton College, Cambridge and upon graduating studied organ at the Conservatoire de Musique, Geneva with Lionel Rogg. After two years working as an organist in Texas, James returned to England where he is currently Organist of the University Church, Oxford and a lay clerk in New College Choir, with whom he tours regularly. James currently studies the organ with Stephen Farr, and works as pianist for the operatic trio Canteremo on Swan Hellenic cruises.

The Cherwell Singers

Soprano

Marie Crossland
Clare Scott-Dempster
Stephanie Sumner-Jones
Lucy Watson
Steph White
Lucinda Williams

Alto

Virginia Allport
Jenny Ayres
Rachel Bryans
Katherine Butler
Lizzie Newton
Joanna Poulton
Anna Williams

Tenor

Jeremy Bryans
Timothy Coleman
Iain McLean
David Sutton

Bass

Neil Herington
Paul Hodges
Simon Jones
Jonathan Mapley
Tim Wainwright

The Cherwell Singers is looking to recruit voice members in all parts. If you are interested in joining us please contact James Brown at:

director@cherwellsingers.org

Please visit our web site to learn more about the choir, and listen to some of our recordings online. Use the web form to register yourself on our email list, to ensure you receive notification and full details of future concerts.

www.cherwellsingers.org