

# The Cherwell Singers

present

## *A French Christmas*

**Dónal McCann**

organ

**James Brown**

conductor

Sunday, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2022

St Margaret's Church, Oxford

# Programme

People look East arr. Barry Ferguson

Angels from the realms of glory arr. Louis Halsey

(*Organ Solo:*)

Noël X, pour Grand jeu et Duo Louis-Claude Daquin

Noël - Sors de ton lit Eustache Du Caurroy

O Holy Night Adophe Adam

Christmas Motets Francis Poulenc

O magnum mysterium  
Quem vidistis pastores dicite  
Hodie Christus natus est

## Interval

O leave your sheep arr. Kenneth Leighton

Ave Maria Marcel Dupré

(*Organ Solo:*)

Dieu parmi nous (from *La Nativité du Seigneur*) Olivier Messiaen

Quelle est cette odeur agréable arr. David Willcocks

A maiden most gentle arr. Andrew Carter

Christmas Night arr. John Rutter

Ding dong! merrily on high arr. David Willcocks

Away in a manger arr. Reginald Jacques

Dónal McCann organ  
James Brown conductor

# A French Christmas

Two years ago the Cherwell Singers presented a concert of Christmas music from Germany, and this year we have decided to do a similar one of French Christmas music.

Several of the most popular carols we sing in this country have a traditional French origin, such as “Ding dong! merrily on high”, and “Angels from the realms of glory”, to name but a couple, and we are singing arrangements of a number of these.

Also featured will be some of Poulenc’s Christmas motets, as well as the much loved “O Holy night” by Adolphe Adam, and works by Dupré and Du Caurroy.

French Christmas organ music will be performed by Dónal McCann, assistant organist of New College.

We hope you will enjoy preparing for Christmas with this Gallic collection of carols from the Renaissance to the twentieth century.

James Brown

# *Notes & Words*

The word “carol” is redolent of Christmas; but not all Christmas music is carols (and in truth not all carols are for Christmas either). Tonight’s concert includes both carols and original compositions for choir and organ, all of which are either entirely French, or are arrangements based on French traditional melodies. The words may be the original French, translations of the French, or in a couple of cases, new English words written to carry a tune which might otherwise have remained unknown.

As we are in Advent, we start with a carol looking towards Christmas: ***People look East***. This is a hybrid – the tune of a tradition Besançon carol, “Chantons, bargies, Noué, Noué”, with English words written for the original *Oxford Book of Carols* by **Eleanor Farjeon** (1881-1965). The tune is also known with the older words “Shepherds, shake off your drowsy sleep”. Tonight’s arrangement is by **Barry Ferguson** (1942- )

People look East. The time is near  
Of the crowning of the year.  
Make your house fair as you are able,  
Trim the hearth and set the table.  
People look East, and sing today:  
Love the Guest is on the way.

Furrows, be glad. Though earth is bare,  
One more seed is planted there:  
Give up your strength the seed to nourish,  
That in course the flower may flourish.  
People look East, and sing today:  
Love the Rose is on the way.

Stars, keep the watch. When night is dim  
One more light the bowl shall brim,  
Shining beyond the frosty weather,  
Bright as sun and moon together.  
People look East, and sing today:  
Love the Star is on the way.

Angels announce to man and beast  
Him who cometh from the East.  
Set every peak and valley humming  
With the Word, the Lord is coming.  
People look East, and sing today:  
Love the Lord is on the way.

We move straight on to a carol for Christmas itself: *Angels from the realms of glory*. The tune is first known from around 1800 with the words “Les anges dans nos campagnes”; but the tune is probably much older, most likely from Lorraine. The words we are singing were written by **James Montgomery** (1771-1854); but although the first two verses are remarkably like the start of the French words, they are cannot be a translation, having been published more than a decade earlier. The musical arrangement is by **Louis Halsey** (1929- )

Angels from the realms of glory,  
Wing your flight o’er all the earth,  
Ye who sang creation’s story,  
Now proclaim the Messiah’s birth;  
*Come and worship,  
Worship Christ, the new-born King.*

Shepherds, in the field abiding,  
Watching o’er your flocks by night,  
God with man is now residing,  
Yonder shines the infant-light:

Sages, leave your contemplations,  
Brighter visions beam afar,  
Seek the great Desire of Nations;  
Ye have seen his natal star;

Saints, before the altar bending,  
Watching long in hope and fear,  
Suddenly the Lord descending,  
In His temple shall appear;

Though an infant now we view Him,  
He shall fill His Father’s throne,  
Gather all nations to Him;  
Every knee shall then bow down:

*Come and worship,  
Worship Christ, the new-born King.*

*Noël X, pour Grand jeu et Duo* is one of a book of pieces called “Noël” by **Louis-Claude Daquin** (1694-1772). Many composers of the eighteenth-century French organ school wrote such books of settings of traditional carols, for use at Christmas services especially. The tunes are not always known to us from any other source, but the tune of this Noël is known with the title: “Quand Dieu naquit à Noël”. Daquin’s book is the best known, as those of others, such as Gigault, Dandrieu, and Charpentier have largely remained out of print until recently. But the quality of Daquin’s settings leaves us in no doubt why his have survived in use. The subtitle of tonight’s piece: “pour Grand jeu et Duo” specifies the sounds to be used, in the highly stylised manner of French organ music of the time.

We come now to the first fully composed music in this concert. *Noël – Sors de ton lit* is one of several Christmas motets by the late renaissance composer **Eustache Du Caurroy** (1549-1609), best known for his *Requiem* which was performed at the funerals of the French kings for well over a century. The motet is a setting of words by **Jean-Antoine de Baïf** (1532-1589), a poet who founded the “Académie de Poésie et de Musique“, with the idea of establishing a closer union between music and poetry; Du Caurroy was considerably influenced by his ideas about the setting of words to music.

Noël, Noël.  
Sors de ton lit paré comme un nouveau soleil:  
Romps les cieux et descends, Ange du grand conseil:  
Enfant, mais Homme-Dieu, fils du très-haut,  
qui porte ta grand’ principauté sur ton épaule forte.  
Noël, Noël.

*Noël, Noël.*  
*Rise from your bed, adorned like a new sun:*  
*Rend the heavens and come down, Angel of great counsel:*  
*A child, but God made Man, Son of the most high,*  
*bearing your great princely authority on your strong shoulder.*  
*Noël, Noël.*

In 1843, the poet **Placide Cappeau** (1808-1877) wrote a poem to celebrate the restoration of the organ in the small town of Roquemaure in southern France. Not long after, the poem was set to music by the Parisian composer **Adophe Adam** (1803-1856), best known for his ballet *Giselle*, and his setting is often sung in France at the start of services on

Christmas Eve night. This setting was quickly taken up by an American music critic, **John Sullivan Dwight** (1813 - 1893), who translated the words into English as ***O Holy Night***. The reference to freeing slaves in the last verse understandably caught the American imagination, and the carol has remained very popular in the USA up to the present day.

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining,  
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth;  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn;  
Fall on your knees, oh hear the angel voices!  
O night divine! O night when Christ was born.

Led by the light of a star brightly shining,  
With glowing hearts by his cradle we stand:  
Come from afar, for this sight our hearts are pining,  
We are the wise men from an Eastern land.  
The King of Kings lay thus in lowly manger,  
In all our trials born to be our Lord;  
Christ knows our need, to our sorrows no stranger!  
Behold the Lord! Before Him lowly bend!

Truly He taught us to love one another;  
His law is Love and His gospel is Peace;  
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother,  
And in his name all oppression shall cease,  
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful Chorus raise we;  
Let all within us praise his Holy name!  
Christ is the Lord, then ever! ever praise we!  
His pow'r and glory evermore proclaim!

Noël, Alleluia.

**Francis Poulenc** (1899-1963) was the most successful of a somewhat notorious group of young French composers who became known as 'Les Six', whose aim was to break away from the twin influences of Germanic formality and French impressionism. His very distinctive style contrasts austere, dissonant textures with rich, sensuous harmonies, typically paralleled by abrupt changes in mood from the playful to the solemn. Although Poulenc later saw himself as primarily a composer of religious music, it was not in fact until 1936, following his return to Catholicism, that he produced his first sacred work. In the *Christmas Motets*,

composed in 1952 (there are four, of which we are singing three tonight: *O magnum mysterium*, *Quem vidistis pastores dicite*, and *Hodie Christus natus est*), we find Poulenc at his most relaxed as he joyfully celebrates the events of the Christmas story. The texts are from those traditionally associated with the Gregorian chants set for Christmas.

O magnum mysterium, et admirabile sacramentum,  
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum, iacentem in praeseptio!  
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera meruerunt portare Dominum Iesum Christum.  
Alleluia!

*O great mystery, and wonderful sacrament,  
that animals saw the newborn Lord, lying in a manger!  
Blessed is the virgin whose womb was worthy to bear the Lord, Jesus Christ.  
Alleluia!*

Quem vidistis pastores dicite, annuntiate nobis in terris quis apparuit?  
Natum vidimus et choros angelorum collaudantes Dominum.  
Dicite quidnam vidistis, et annuntiate Christi nativitatem!  
Natum vidimus et choros angelorum collaudantes Dominum.

*Shepherds, tell us who you have seen; who has appeared to us on earth?  
We have seen the new-born and the choir of Angels praising the Lord.  
Tell what you have seen, and announce the birth of Christ!  
We have seen the new-born and the choir of Angels praising the Lord.*

Hodie Christus natus est: Hodie Salvator apparuit:  
Hodie in terra canunt Angeli, laetantur Archangeli  
Hodie exsultant iusti, dicentes:  
Gloria in excelsis Deo. Alleluia.

*Today Christ is born: Today the Saviour appeared:  
Today on Earth the Angels sing, Archangels rejoice:  
Today the righteous rejoice, saying:  
Glory to God in the highest. Alleluia.*

With *O leave your sheep* we return to a traditional French carol, “Quittez, pasteurs”, and like the first carol, this tune is from Besançon. The words were translated by **Alice Raleigh** (fl. 1930), and the musical arrangement is by **Kenneth Leighton** (1929-1988). Although Leighton is sometimes thought of simply as a church music composer, he was not religious; and his musical legacy lies largely in the many notable composers he taught.



O leave your sheep, your lambs that follow after!  
O leave the brook, the pasture and the crook!  
No longer weep: turn weeping into laughter!  
O shepherds, seek your goal:  
Your Lord, who cometh to console.

You'll find him laid within a simple stable,  
A babe new-born, in poverty forlorn:  
In love arrayed, a love so deep 'tis able  
To search the night for you;  
'Tis he! 'tis he, the Shepherd true.

O kings so great, a light is streaming o'er you,  
More radiant far than diadem or star.  
Forgo your state: a baby lies before you  
Whose wonder shall be told:  
Bring myrrh, bring frankincense and gold!

**Marcel Dupré** (1886-1971) was one of the great French organists of the 20th century. From 1906 until his death, he was organist at the church of St Sulpice, Paris. While most of his compositions are for the organ, he did write for other media as well. This setting for sopranos and organ of the familiar Latin devotional text *Ave Maria* was published in 1917 as one of his *Quatre Motets, Op 9*, the others in the set being for chorus. The words comprise two biblical extracts which appear to have been joined to form a prayer in the eleventh century.

Ave Maria gratia plena Dominus tecum,  
Benedicta tu in mulieribus,  
Et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesu.  
Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus.  
Nunc et in hora mortis nostræ. Amen

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou among women,  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,  
now and in the hour of our death. Amen.*

*Dieu parmi nous* is the last movement of *La Nativité du Seigneur* by **Olivier Messiaen** (1908-1992). Messiaen had an uncommon medical condition known as synaesthesia, which in his case involved seeing colours when he heard musical tones and *vice versa*. Chords thus “heard” from stained-glass windows or bucolic landscapes would especially inspire moments of religious ecstasy. His music is often very slow, gradually building up piles of sound; but *Dieu parmi nous* (*God among us*) is lively, commencing with a boisterous fanfare which is then used as a recurring idea juxtaposed with stylized hymns, cadenzas, and fragmented toccatas.

*Quelle est cette odeur agréable?* is a carol whose words and music both date from the seventeenth century, probably from Lorraine. The musical setting is one of the many simple but artful arrangements made by **David Willcocks** (1919-2015) and published in the *Carols for Choirs* series of books which he edited.

Quelle est cette odeur agréable,  
Bergers, qui ravit tous nos sens?  
S'exhale t'il rien de semblable  
Au milieu des fleurs du printemps?  
Quelle est...

Mais quelle éclatante lumière  
Dans la nuit vient frapper nos yeux!  
L'astre du jour, dans sa carrière,  
Fut-il jamais si radieux!  
Mais quelle...

A Bethléem, dans une crèche,  
Il vient de vous naître un Sauveur;  
Allons, que rien ne vous empêche  
D'adorer votre Rédempteur  
A Bethléem,...

Dieu tout puissant, gloire éternelle  
Vous soit renduë jusqu'aux cieux!  
Que la paix soit universelle,  
Que la grâce abonde en tous lieux!  
Dieu tout puissant...

*Whence is that goodly fragrance flowing,  
Stealing our senses all away?  
Never the like did come a-blowing,  
Shepherds, from flowery fields in May.  
Whence ...*

*What is that light so brilliant breaking  
Here in the night across our eyes?  
Never so bright the day-star waking  
Started to climb the morning skies.  
What is that light...*

*Bethlehem, there in manger lying,  
Find your Redeemer, haste away!  
Run ye with eager footsteps hieing,  
Worship the Saviour born today.  
Bethlehem,...*

*All powerful God, and King eternal,  
Glory to God the fount of grace.  
May peace abide in every nation,  
Goodwill in men of every race.  
All powerful God...*

*(Translation, vv1-3: A. B. Ramsey, v4: David Willcocks)*

It was **The Venerable Bede** (673-735), the English divine who entered a monastery at the age of seven and later made his mark as priest, theologian, scientist and historian, who wrote the original words of ***A maiden most gentle***. The present paraphrase is the work of **Andrew Carter** (1939- ) who has set his version to a traditional French melody, adding a sparkling organ accompaniment to alternate verses. His arrangement perfectly catches the mood of the simple Christmas scene and accommodates unaccompanied singing and plenty of contrast between tenors and basses on the one hand and sopranos and altos on the other.

*A maiden most gentle and tender we sing:  
Of Mary the mother of Jesus our King.  
Ave, Ave, Ave Maria.*

*How blest is the birth of her heavenly child,  
Who came to redeem us in Mary so mild.  
Ave, Ave, Ave Maria.*

The Archangel Gabriel foretold by his call  
The Lord of creation and Saviour of all.  
*Ave, Ave, Ave Maria.*

Three kings came to worship with gifts rich and rare,  
And marvelled in awe at the babe in her care.  
*Ave, Ave, Ave Maria.*

Rejoice and be glad at this Christmas we pray;  
Sing praise to the Saviour, sing endless ‘Ave’  
*Ave, Ave, Ave Maria.*

The melodies of the next two carols are both taken from a study of late sixteenth-century French Renaissance social dance called *Orchésographie*. This treatise was published in 1588 under the name of Thoinot Arbeau – an anagram of the real name of the author, **Jehan Tabourot** (1520-1595). The volume contains a number of attractive tunes, one of which: “Branle de l’official”, is now well-known as the carol *Ding dong! merrily on high*. Another, “Branle de Poitou”, was used in Warlock’s *Capriol Suite* for string orchestra, and appears tonight for the carol *Christmas Night*.

**John Rutter** (1945- ) is well-known for his carol arrangements (as well as his other choral music), and he co-edited the second and later volumes of *Carols for Choirs* with David Willcocks. He frequently provides his own translations or original words for his musical settings, as in the case of his carol *Christmas Night* for which he provided original words to go with his arrangement of the French renaissance melody.

Softly through the winter’s darkness shines a light,  
Clear and still in Bethlehem on Christmas Night,  
Round the stable where a virgin mother mild  
Watches over Jesus Christ the holy child.

Shepherds kneel in adoration by his bed,  
Seraphim in glory hover round his head.  
Wise men, guided by the leading of a star,  
Bring him gifts of precious treasure from afar.

Choirs of angels sing to greet his wondrous birth:  
Christ our Lord in human form comes down to earth.  
“Glory to God in highest heav’n” their joyful strain,  
“Peace on earth, goodwill to men” the glad refrain.

Lullaby! the child lies sleeping: sing lullaby!  
Safe in Mary's tender keeping: sing lullaby!  
Guardian angels keep their watch till break of day:  
Lullaby! sweet Jesus sleeps among the hay.

Alleluia! let the earth rejoice today!  
Christ is born to take our sins and guilt away.  
Praise the Lord who sent him down from heav'n above:  
Holy infant, born of God the Father's love.

**George Ratcliffe Woodward** (1848-1934) was an Anglican priest who used his exceptional linguistic and musical talents toward the rehabilitation of ancient church music of many forms. His research was influential in the compilation of *The English Hymnal* of 1906 by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958), and with the help of the Irish composer Charles Wood (1866-1926) he compiled a number of significant carol collections using many of his own translations or original words, and in some cases convincing "seventeenth-century" style harmonisations of tunes. *Ding dong! Merrily on high* was written to use the tune, and published with a harmonisation by Wood in Woodward's *Cambridge Carol Book*; but tonight we are singing the more elaborate setting by **David Willcocks**.

Ding, dong! merrily on high  
In heav'n the bells are ringing:  
Ding, dong! verily the sky  
Is riv'n with angel singing.  
Gloria, Hosanna in excelsis.

E'en so here below, below,  
Let steeple bells be swungen:  
And *i-o, i-o, i-o*,  
By priest and people sungen.  
Gloria, Hosanna in excelsis.

Pray ye dutifully prime  
Your matin chime, ye ringers:  
May ye beautifully rime  
Your evetime song, ye singers.  
Gloria, Hosanna in excelsis.

The first two verses of *Away in a manger* were published in 1882 in an anti-Masonic journal with the title *Luther's Cradle Song*; no real author has ever been identified. The third verse was added in 1892, under the same title, in a Lutheran collection of songs with tunes by **Charles H. Gabriel** (1856-1932); it is possible that Gabriel wrote this verse himself. The carol has been sung to many tunes, and the two currently best known are both American; but for the first volume of *Carols for Choirs* **Reginald Jacques** (1894-1969) provided this arrangement of a traditional tune from Normandy. Jacques was co-editor of this volume alongside Willcocks.

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,  
The little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head.  
The stars in the sky looked down where He lay,  
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes,  
But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes;  
I love Thee, Lord Jesus, look down from the sky  
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.

Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay  
Close by me forever, and love me, I pray;  
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,  
And fit us for Heaven to live with Thee there.

# Biographies

## **Dónal McCann** organ

Originally from Belfast, Dónal read music at King's College, Cambridge, where he was an academic and organ scholar, and accompanied the choir in daily chapel services, as well as in recordings, broadcasts and extensive tours, including to America and Australia. Prior to this, Dónal was the Andrew Lloyd Webber Scholar at Eton College, where he gained the FRCO with the Limpus Prize, subsequently being nominated for the Silver Medal of the Worshipful Company of Musicians. The following year he won the inaugural Dame Gillian Weir Medal at the Northern Ireland International Organ Competition.

Dónal studied piano at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin, and organ with Professor Gerard Gillen at St Mary's Pro Cathedral. He has performed as a soloist with the Ulster Orchestra and the Academy of Ancient Music, and has given many recitals in the UK and abroad.

He is currently Assistant Organist at New College, Oxford.

## **James Brown** conductor

James Brown was organ scholar of Girton College, Cambridge before doing further study of organ with Lionel Rogg at the Geneva Conservatoire, Switzerland. After two years as Guest Artist in Residence at the First United Methodist Church, Lubbock, Texas, USA, he returned to England where he was Organist of Dean Close School.

In 2006 James moved to Oxford where he is Organist of the historic University Church, and teaches organ at Abingdon and New College Schools as well as pursuing freelance work as an organist and pianist. He is also a tenor lay clerk in the choir of New College.

James has given recitals in the UK, USA, Belgium and Switzerland, and appeared on both BBC radio and television. He also performs solo classical piano recitals for Cunard, P&O, and Fred Olsen cruise lines.

James has been conducting the Cherwell Singers since 2007.

# The Cherwell Singers

## **Soprano**

Gaelle Brohard  
Christy Callaway-Gale  
Sian Cattell  
Hester Crombie  
Stephanie Gilroy\*  
Janet Johnson  
Clare Scott-Dempster  
Elina Screen  
Lucy Watson

## **Alto**

Virginia Allport  
Francesca Donnellan  
Elizabeth Kreager  
Ann Leggett  
Wendy Morris  
Anna Orłowska  
Jo Poulton  
Vanessa Sinclair

## **Tenor**

Joshua Crolla  
Jack Lovell  
Simon Murray  
David Read  
Maks Tobiasiewicz

## **Bass**

Paul Hodges  
Simon Jones  
Iain McLean  
Simeon Mitchell

*\* Soprano soloist*

If you are interested in joining us, please contact James Brown at:  
[director@cherwellsingers.org](mailto:director@cherwellsingers.org)

Next concert: Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2023  
Programme and venue: TBA

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](http://www.cherwellsingers.org)