

The Cherwell Singers

present

# An Italian Christmas

*Italian choral and organ music  
for the Christmas season*

**Daniel Tate**

Baritone

**George Caird**

Oboe

**Dónal McCann**

Organ

**James Brown**

Conductor

Sunday, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2024  
Chapel of Mansfield College, Oxford

# Programme

Alma Redemptoris Mater	G. P. da Palestrina
Magnificat à 4, 1 <sup>st</sup> movement	Francesco Durante
Tribus miraculis	Luca Marenzio

*Organ Solo:*

Pastorale	Domenico Zipoli
Ave maris stella	Claudio Monteverdi
Hodie Christus natus est	Giovanni Gabrieli

*Organ Solo:*

Canzona quarta	Girolamo Frescobaldi
O magnum mysterium	Giovanni Gabrieli
Hodie Christus natus est	G. P. da Palestrina

## Interval

Ave Maria (attr. Giulio Caccini)	Vladimir Vavilov
Hail! Blessed Virgin Mary	arr. Harrison Oxley

*Organ Solo:*

Prelude-Pastorale “Dies est lætitiæ”	Pietro A. Yon
Once, as I remember	arr. Charles Wood
Quanno nascette Ninno	arr. New Oxford Book of Carols
Ninna-nanna a Gesù bambino	Lavinio Virgili
Gesù bambino	Pietro A. Yon

Daniel Tate	Baritone
George Caird	Oboe
Dónal McCann	Organ
James Brown	Conductor

# An Italian Christmas

*Seasonal choral and organ music from Italy*

The Cherwell Singers are continuing their exploration of Christmas music from different lands by this year focusing exclusively on Italy.

The glories of Italian Renaissance music, which reached its height with the polyphony of Palestrina, as well as the polychoral tradition of the Venetian masters like Gabrieli and Monteverdi, are explored in the first half of this concert, with some of their most famous Christmas motets. This is indeed a rich seam for us to mine, and the choir will frequently be split into eight parts.

Unfortunately, Italian choral music in later centuries never reached the heights of the Renaissance and Baroque masters, but we have nonetheless included in the second half of the concert some charming arrangements of traditional Italian carol melodies that I feel confident will be enjoyed by all. In two of these carols the choir will be joined once again by local baritone soloist Daniel Tate, and the organist for the concert will be Dónal McCann.

We hope you will enjoy our Italian Christmas celebration here in the lofty setting of Mansfield College Chapel.

James Brown

# Notes

In Northern Europe, Christmas celebrations merged with Yule, which celebrated the turn-around of the seasons at the coldest and darkest point of the year; and some pagan songs became carols, adapted to the Christmas story. But in the Mediterranean Catholic Christian worship was more deeply integrated into society, and so the music of worship has been dominant, especially at Christmas. The first part of this concert of Italian music for Christmas presents some of the greatest of this body of music, written specifically for performance in church, and as part of worship.

The late Renaissance and early Baroque period produced some of the greatest of all choral music. Foremost among the composers of this time was **Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina** (c.1525-1594), who took the prevailing dominant musical styles from France and the Netherlands and forged from them a new truly Italian style of polyphony. He was initially organist in his home town of Palestrina (for which he is named), and when the local bishop became pope, he followed him to Rome, where he was influential in establishing how music could meet the requirements of the liturgy, as well as for his music itself. He is buried in St Peter's, Rome.

***Alma Redemptoris Mater*** is a setting of a hymn for Compline on the first Sunday of Advent, words which Palestrina set several times; this four-part setting is the most straightforward.

Alma Redemptoris Mater, quæ pervia cæli porta manes,  
et stella maris, succurre cadenti surgere qui curat populo:  
Tu quæ genuisti, natura mirante, tuum sanctum Genitorem:  
Virgo prius ac posterius, Gabrielis ab ore sumens illud  
Ave, peccatorum miserere.

*Loving Mother of the Redeemer, the gate by which we mortals enter heaven,  
and star of the sea, help your fallen people who strive to rise:  
You who gave birth, amazing nature, to your sacred Creator:  
Virgin before and after, taking from the mouth of Gabriel the words  
Hail! have mercy on our sins.*

With the music of **Francesco Durante** (1684-1755) we jump to the Baroque. Durante was from Naples, and worked there most of his life, teaching (Pergolesi is his best-known pupil), and writing music, not only in baroque style, but also consciously in the style of Palestrina. His setting of the **Magnificat** (Mary's response to Gabriel's message mentioned in the previous piece) in four parts - he made a later version in five parts - was for

a time attributed to Pergolesi, which came about because he encouraged his pupils to copy his music for study, and Pergolesi's copy survived. It's a large work, of which we are performing just the opening movement.

Magnificat, anima mea, Dominum et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo, salutari meo.  
Quia respexit humilitatem ancillæ suæ:  
ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generationes.  
Quia fecit mihi magna, qui potens est, et sanctum nomen eius.

*My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.  
For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:  
for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.  
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.*

While Palestrina's music is seen as the peak of the High Renaissance period, **Luca Marenzio** (c.1554-1599) hints at the start of the transition to Early Baroque. He worked mainly at the Papal Chapel in Rome, but also in Verona, Venice, Florence, and as far afield as the Polish court; he even corresponded with the English composer John Dowland. He is best known for his large output of madrigals and other secular songs.

In the Epiphany motet *Tribus miraculis* Marenzio shows the same facility with word-painting that is characteristic of his madrigals, with remarkable changes of texture as the different miracles are described.

Tribus miraculis ornatum, diem sanctum colimus:  
Hodie stella Magos duxit ad præsepium:  
Hodie vinum ex aqua factum est ad nuptias:  
Hodie in Jordane a Joanne Christus baptizari voluit,  
ut salvaret nos, Alleluia.

*We observe this holy day, ornamented with three miracles:  
Today a star led the Magi to the manger;  
Today wine was made from water at the wedding;  
Today in the Jordan Christ desired to be baptised by John,  
so that He might save us, Alleluia.*

**Domenico Zipoli** (1688-1726) was born and studied in Italy, but was recruited by the Jesuits to work in Latin America; he died and was buried in Argentina. His music was mainly liturgical, including both vocal and organ music. This *Pastorale* evokes the image of the shepherds in the fields, which is part of the Christmas story.

With **Claudio Monteverdi** (1567-1643) the stylistic transition to the Baroque is well under way. He first worked in Cremona and Mantua, and later moved to Venice. His music encompasses many genres, vocal and instrumental, secular and liturgical. He was a notable pioneer in opera.

*Ave maris stella* is one of the pieces in the loose collection we know as the Vespers of 1610. These are thought to have been written in support of his looking for a job in Venice, and demonstrate a range of styles. Even in this single hymn setting, he uses four- and eight-part choirs, solos and instrumental interludes; but the elaborate polyphony of the Renaissance is not present in this piece.

Ave, maris stella,  
Dei Mater alma,  
Atque semper Virgo,  
Felix cæli porta.

Sumens illud Ave  
Gabrielis ore,  
Funda nos in pace,  
Mutans Evæ nomen.

Solve vincla reis,  
Profer lumen cæcis,  
Mala nostra pelle,  
Bona cuncta posce.

Monstra te esse matrem  
Sumat per te preces,  
Qui pro nobis natus  
Tulit esse tuus.

Virgo singularis,  
Inter omnes mitis,  
Nos culpis solutos,  
Mites fac et castos.

Vitam præsta puram,  
Iter para tutum,  
Ut videntes Jesum,  
Semper collætémur.

Sit laus Deo Patri,  
Summo Christo decus  
Spiritus Sancto,  
Trinus honor unus. Amen.

*Hail, star of the sea,  
loving Mother of God,  
and also always a virgin,  
Happy gate of heaven.*

*Receiving that Ave  
from Gabriel's mouth  
confirm us in peace,  
Reversing Eva's name.*

*Break the chains of sinners,  
Bring light to the blind,  
Drive away our evils,  
Ask for all good.*

*Show yourself to be a mother,  
May he accept prayers through you,  
he who, born for us,  
Chose to be yours.*

*O unique virgin,  
Meek above all,  
Make us, absolved from sin,  
Gentle and chaste.*

*Keep life pure,  
Make the journey safe,  
So that, seeing Jesus,  
We may always rejoice together.*

*Let there be praise to God the Father,  
Glory to Christ in the highest,  
To the Holy Spirit,  
One honour to all three. Amen*

**Giovanni Gabrieli** (c.1555-1612) was a Venetian composer, and followed his uncle Andrea (1533-1585) as organist of St Mark's, Venice. Like his uncle he excelled in using the architectural space of St Mark's to generate special antiphonic effects, which Monteverdi was able to build on.

*Hodie Christus natus est* is a fine example of the way in which Gabrieli uses two choirs in alternation and together. Of course, when contrasting blocks of sound in this way, polyphony becomes irrelevant and so the choirs each have basically homophonic music.

Hodie Christus natus est  
hodie Salvator apparuit:  
hodie in terra canunt Angeli,  
lætantur Archangeli:  
hodie exsultant iusti, dicentes:  
Gloria in excelsis Deo,  
et in terra pax,  
hominibus bonæ voluntatis.

*Today Christ is born;  
today the Saviour has appeared;  
today the Angels sing,  
the Archangels rejoice;  
today the righteous rejoice, saying:  
Glory to God in the highest  
and in Earth peace,  
goodwill to all men.*

**Girolamo Frescobaldi** (1683-1643) was an organist in Rome, Mantua and Florence at various times. Although he wrote a certain amount of vocal music of minor interest, he is best known for his extensive output of pieces for organ and harpsichord in fantasia style, nearly half of which are called “Canzona”. The *Canzona quarta* we hear tonight is a typical example, with a number of sections in alternating styles.

The previous two-choir pieces employed two identical choirs. But both Palestrina and Gabrieli sometimes increased the contrast between the choirs by giving them different tessituras.

In Gabrieli’s setting of *O magnum mysterium* there is a pattern of the higher choir and the lower choir singing alternately and then together to increase the richness of the sound.

O magnum mysterium, et admirabile sacramentum,  
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum, iacentem in præsepio!  
O beata virgo, cuius viscera meruerunt portare Dominum Christum.  
Alleluia!

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

Palestrina’s setting of *Hodie Christus natus est* also has choirs of different tessituras, with perhaps more emphasis on alternating them, especially in the “Noe” sections.

Hodie Christus natus est, (Noe)  
hodie Salvator apparuit, (Noe)  
hodie in terra canunt Angeli,  
lætantur Archangeli, (Noe)  
hodie exsultant iusti, dicentes:  
Gloria in excelsis Deo. (Noe)

*Today Christ is born; (Noel)  
today the Saviour has appeared; (Noel)  
today the Angels sing,  
the Archangels rejoice; (Noel)  
today the righteous rejoice, saying:  
Glory to God in the highest. (Noel)*

In the second part of this concert we are offering arrangements from the twentieth century of mainly traditional Italian Christmas tunes.

We start with a popular arrangement of *Ave Maria* by **Giulio Caccini** (1545-1618) who worked for the Medici family in Florence; except that we don't! In fact, this piece was composed in 1970 by the Russian lutenist and singer **Vladimir Vavilov** (1925-1973) who liked to compose pastiche pieces for himself to perform, much as the violinist Fritz Kreisler had done earlier in the century. Vavilov recorded this piece with the attribution "Anonymous", but after his death it was published by a colleague with Caccini's name attached, and has since become widely known in that form. The words are unusually simple:

Ave Maria!

*Hail Mary!*

The Revd G. R. Woodward (1848-1934) together with his composer friend Charles Wood (1866-1926) edited several collections of carols in the first part of the twentieth century. One of these was *An Italian Carol Book* (1920). Woodward provided English texts for the carols, usually translations, but sometimes so far from the sources as to be called original. His words are typically a stylised form of doggerel, but none the less a considerable number of his carol settings have become well-loved, such as *Ding-dong merrily on high*. Wood's settings are often hymn-like, but always beautifully crafted and never detracting from the melody.

***Hail! Blessed Virgin Mary*** is one of Woodward's translations of an actual Italian carol. The tune is as was published in *An Italian Carol Book*, but here presented in an arrangement by **Harrison Oxley** (1933-2009), who was organist of St Edmundsbury Cathedral – where he was, notably, the first English cathedral organist to admit girls to the cathedral choir.

"Hail blessed virgin Mary",  
For so when he did meet thee,  
Spake mighty Gabriel,  
And thus we greet thee.  
Come weal, come woe,  
Our hymn shall never vary:  
"Hail blessed virgin Mary!"

Ave, ave Maria,  
To gladden priest and people,  
The Angelus shall ring  
From every steeple;  
To sound his virgin birth,  
Alleluia,  
Ave, ave Maria.

Archangels chant, "Osanna",  
And, "Holy, holy, holy",  
Before the infant born  
Of thee, thou lowly;  
Aye maiden child of  
Joachim and Anna,  
Archangels chant, "Osanna!"

**Pietro Alessandro Yon** (1886-1943) was an Italian-born organist and composer who made his career in the USA after a visiting cardinal from Manhattan heard him in St Peter's, Rome and recruited him for his own church. Some years later the pope gave him the singular title of "Titular Organist to the Vatican", which prompted the New York church to promote him. His *Prelude-Pastorale "Dies est laetitiae"* was written shortly after the pope's honour, and alternates passages in grand and pastoral styles.

*Once, as I remember* is an original text by Revd G. R. Woodward. In this case we are singing the arrangement by **Charles Wood**.

Once, as I remember,  
 At the time of Yule,  
 After mid December,  
 When it bloweth cool,  
 I o'erheard a Mother  
 Was a-singing: 'Sweet Jesu,  
 La-lullay-lu, Lullay, La-lu'.

Near as man was able,  
 On my knee fell I,  
 in the Bethlem stable  
 Where the Babe did lie,  
 And the Virgin-mother  
 Was a-singing: 'Sweet Jesu,  
 La-lullay-lu, Lullay, La-lu'.

Ox and ass around him,  
 Courtier-like, did stand:  
 Fair white linen bound him,  
 Spun by Mary's hand.  
 While the Virgin-mother  
 Was a-singing: 'Sweet Jesu,  
 La-lullay-lu, Lullay, La-lu'.

Ever among and o'er us  
 Angel-quire 'gan sing  
 Antiphons in chorus  
 To the new-born King.  
 Then the Virgin-mother  
 Fell a-singing: 'Sweet Jesu,  
 La-lullay-lu, Lullay, La-lu'.

In spite of Woodward and Wood's efforts there was not a single Italian carol in *The Oxford Book of Carols* published a few years later in 1928. *The New Oxford Book of Carols* of 1992 improved on this by having just one Italian carol, *Quanno nascette Ninno*, also known elsewhere as *Carol of the Bagpipers*, which we now sing. The traditional Neopolitan words were first published in the eighteenth century, and translated more recently by Gordon Hitchcock (fl. 1960). The music is arranged by "the editors".

When Christ, the Son of Mary, in Bethlehem was born,  
 'Twas night, and yet the light was bright as summer's morn!  
 Stars were gleaming, Brightly beaming  
 O'er the town of Bethlehem;  
 A brighter star there shone  
 For magi far, a guiding star that led them on.

When Christ, the Son of Mary, within her arms was laid,  
 The lion with the lamb, the bear with fatling strayed.  
 Close to the shepherd Wandered the leopard,  
 Every creature was at peace;  
 The great and small were one;  
 For calf or lamb that night no fright, but joy, did come.

When Christ, the Son of Mary, within the crib did lie,  
There came to shepherds drowsy a voice which sang on high:  
'Peace on the earth is come with this birth;  
Go, seek the Babe in yonder stall,  
Your King, though weak and small;  
The world's true light is come this night to save you all'.

We end tonight with two carols composed by modern Italian composers.

**Lavinio Virgili** (1902-1976) taught music and, after he was ordained, fundamental dogmatics at a high school and seminary in the central Italian town of Fermo. He also wrote much sacred music, and was a contributor to a complete edition of the works of Palestrina.

*Ninna-nanna a Gesù bambino* is a setting of a traditional Christmas lullaby from northern Italy.

Ne le braccia de la mamma  
dormi amore e fai la nanna.  
Dormi e sogna in fragil velo,  
sul tuo sonno veglia il cielo.

Veglia il cielo, o Dio Bambino,  
che con l'astro rilucente  
segnai ai Magi il pio cammino  
sopra i monti, sopra il mare.

Dormi e lasciati cullare,  
dormi, dormi e sogna.  
Dormi e sogna in fragil velo,  
sul tuo capo veglia il cielo.

*In thy mother's arms lie sleeping,  
Blessed Jesu, lullaby.  
Sleep and dream, with angels keeping  
watch above thee in the sky.*

*Watching the sky, oh Child of Heaven,  
by the star above thee shining  
wise men find the sacred way  
o'er the hills, o'er the sea.*

*Sleep and let the cradle rock you,  
sleep, sleep and dream.  
Sleep and dream, with angels keeping  
watch above thee in the sky.*

Yon (see above) wrote his setting of the traditional carol *Gesù bambino* shortly after he arrived in America. It quickly became popular, and is performed in many different arrangements. Tonight we are using a loose English paraphrase of the words by the Belgian violinist Frederick H. Martens (1874-1932), which is as widely performed as the Italian original.

When blossoms flowered 'mid the snows  
Upon a winter night,  
Was born the Child, the Christmas Rose,  
The King of Love and Light.

The angels sang, the shepherds sang,  
The grateful earth rejoiced;  
And at His blessed birth the stars  
Their exultation voiced.

*Venite adoremus, Dominum.*

Again the heart with rapture glows  
To greet the holy night,  
That gave the world its Christmas Rose,  
Its King of Love and Light.

Let every voice acclaim His name,  
The grateful chorus swell.  
From paradise to earth He came  
That we with Him might dwell.

*Venite adoremus, Dominum.*

# Biographies

## **Daniel Tate** Baritone

Daniel enjoys an active career in Oxford and London as a professional singer and director, and has also performed in New York. He has sung with New College and Christ Church Cathedral choirs, and many distinguished choirs in London including BBC Singers and St Paul's Cathedral. He currently sings as a lay clerk at Westminster Cathedral. His bespoke vocal group Cantabulous perform regularly at the Oxford and Cambridge Club as the resident musical entertainment, and Daniel is also a founding member of The Davey Consort, based in Dorchester-on-Thames, who sing 16th and 17th century sacred music alongside Gregorian chant.

Daniel also teaches singing, violin, and music theory at leading schools including Bruern Abbey School, and performs as the bass guitarist for the blues-funk band Reverend Blue.

## **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 Director of Chapel Music at Winchester College.

## **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 School as well as pursuing freelance work as an organist and pianist. He is also organist at St John's College. In 2023 he was appointed Director of Music at Mansfield 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, and appeared as the solo classical artist on the Cunard flagship Queen Mary 2 twice in 2023.

James has been conducting the Cherwell Singers since 2007.

# The Cherwell Singers

## **Soprano**

Sian Cattell  
Stephanie Garner  
Alice Green  
Judith Homann  
Janet Johnson  
Elina Screen  
Lucy Watson  
Eve-Marie Wenger

## **Tenor**

Nathan Mulcock  
Simon Murray  
David Read  
Brian Tibbels  
Machs Tobiasiewicz

## **Alto**

Virginia Allport  
Hester Crombie  
Elizabeth Kreager  
Ann Leggett  
Wendy Morris  
Anna Orłowska

## **Bass**

David Gillespie  
Paul Hodges  
Simon Jones  
Brian Leach  
Simeon Mitchell  
Kieran Suchet

If you are interested in joining us, please contact James Brown at:

[director@cherwellsingers.org](mailto:director@cherwellsingers.org)

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