

The Cherwell Singers

present

A Celtic Christmas

Seasonal music from Celtic lands

Daniel Tate

baritone

Gabriele Damiani

organ

James Brown

conductor

Sunday, 7th December, 2025

Chapel of Mansfield College, Oxford

Programme

O Radiant Dawn James MacMillan

Magnificat in F "Collegium regale" Charles Wood
Wexford Carol Irish, arr. John Rutter

Today maiden Mary Irish, arr. Michael Nicholas

(Organ solo)

Celtic Melody, op43 iii Geoffrey O'Connor-Morris

Child in a manger Gaelic, arr. John Rutter
Sans Day Carol Cornish, arr. John Rutter

Interval

A babe is born William Mathias
Wassail Carol William Mathias

(Organ solo)

Noël Écossais Alexandre Guilmant

Rorate coeli desuper! Scottish, arr. Stephen Wilkinson

(Solo songs)

Balulalow Peter Warlock
Balulalow James Burton

Tomorrow shall be my dancing day Cornish, arr. Malcolm Pearce
Deck the hall with boughs of holly Welsh, arr. David Willcocks

The audience is asked not to applaud within the groups of pieces

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A Celtic Christmas

Seasonal music from Celtic lands

The Cherwell Singers continues its series of nation-themed Christmas concerts this year with an exploration of seasonal music from Celtic lands.

Composers from Wales (Mathias), Ireland (Wood) and Scotland (MacMillan) are represented, as well as traditional carol arrangements from Celtic lands, including the evergreen Cornish *Sans Day Carol*. Two Celtic-themed Christmas organ solos will be played by organist Gabrieli Damiani, who is making his first appearance with the Cherwell Singers, and baritone Daniel Tate of Westminster Cathedral joins us again, performing solo items including an arrangement of the *Wexford Carol*, which is one of three arrangements by the leading choral conductor Sir John Rutter included in tonight's concert in honour of his 80th birthday.

We have enjoyed compiling this distinctive programme, and invite you to share it with us in the lofty setting of Mansfield College Chapel.

James Brown

Notes

There is, perhaps, no clearly defined “Celtic” style of music. Yet most of us would probably recognise a modality in the music from the Celtic lands which forms at least some kind of pattern. But maybe not all of the program you are hearing tonight will fit with that pattern, because in some cases it is the words or simply the composer which is the Celtic element. In fact, our first two pieces are simply by composers from Scotland and Ireland respectively.

James MacMillan (1959-) grew up in Ayrshire, and studied composition in Edinburgh and Durham. He is probably the most prominent living Scottish composer, and has also had appointments in other countries, as well as being commissioned to write a cello concerto for Rostropovich. His Catholic faith (he is also a professor of theology) has led to much of his music being religious, and his 2008 *Strathclyde Motets* won a prize for liturgical music.

O Radiant Dawn is one of those motets. It is a setting of an antiphon for 21st December, and the music is reminiscent of Russian music associated with the Orthodox liturgy, a style which can also be heard in religious music by Rachmaninov and Tavener.

O Radiant Dawn, Splendour of eternal Light, Sun of Justice:
Come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.
Isaiah had prophesied, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone".
Amen

The Irish composer **Charles Wood** (1866-1926) studied at the Royal College of Music under Parry and Stanford - whom he later succeeded as Professor of Music at Cambridge. He is best known for his church music, and also for his collaboration with Revd George Ratcliffe Woodward on collections of traditional carols. His grand setting in eight parts of the ***Magnificat*** was written for the choir of King's College, Cambridge, and is in the same vein as Stanford's settings.

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 showed 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.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, Amen.

John Rutter (1945-) is well-known for his carol arrangements (as well as much other choral music intended to be accessible to amateurs), 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.

The ***Wexford Carol*** is an arrangement of a tune and words collected in 1912 near Wexford in Ireland. The tune is clearly Irish, but the words were already known as an English ballad.

Good people all, this Christmas time,
Consider well and bear in mind
What our good God for us has done
In sending His beloved Son.
With Mary holy we should pray
To God with love this Christmas Day;
In Bethlehem upon that morn
There was a blessed Messiah born.

The night before that happy tide
The noble virgin and her guide
Were long time seeking up and down
To find a lodging in the town.
But mark how all things came to pass:
From every door repelled, alas!
As was foretold, their refuge all
Was but an humble oxen stall.

Near Bethlehem did shepherds keep
Their flocks of lambs and feeding sheep;
To whom God's angels did appear,
Which put the shepherds in great fear.
"Prepare and go", the angels said,
"To Bethlehem, be not afraid;
For there you'll find, this happy morn
A princely Babe, sweet Jesus born".

With thankful heart and joyful mind
The shepherds went the babe to find,
And as God's angel had foretold,
They did our Saviour Christ behold.
Within a manger He was laid,
And by his side the virgin maid,
Attending on the Lord of Life,
Who came on earth to end all strife.

Michael Nicholas (1938-) was Organist and Master of Choristers at Norwich Cathedral for nearly 25 years, going on to become Chief Executive of the Royal College of Organists.

Today, maiden Mary was first published by the Revd G R Woodward in the *Cowley Carol Book*. The tune is traditional Irish, and the words are his translation of a Greek Kontakion.

Today maiden Mary, foretold by the seer,
Hath childed an Infant, the which hath no peer:
Earth lendeth the cavern to Him who on high
Abideth in light where to none may draw nigh.

While Angels with herdmen are chanting his birth,
"To God be the glory, and peace upon earth,"
Lo! at the same season, from country afar,
Three Easterlings follow the beams of a star.

For why, for us mortals on Christen-mas morn,
At Bethlehem-Judah, this baby was born,
The Son of the Father, the All-holy One,
God, blessed for ever, or time was begun.

Geoffrey O'Connor-Morris (1886-1964) was born in Switzerland of Irish descent. He studied in Dublin and became Assistant Organist of Carlisle Cathedral at the age of 17. He subsequently played at several churches in London, and for the BBC. Most of his music is now little known, but several pieces were performed at BBC Promenade concerts when first written.

His *Celtic Melody* was written around 1930. It is captivating and haunting, and not unlike some works by Percy Whitlock. The melody is not identified; but it may be that he came by it from W H Vipond Barry, a friend who was an organist and participant in the County Kildare Archaeological Society.

John Rutter's carol *Child in a manger* is a setting of his own words to a Gaelic tune that was first published in Lachlan Macbean's *Songs and Hymns of the Gael* (1888) as a setting for Mary Macdonald's carol *Child in the Manger*. It is characteristic of Rutter, with a straightforward but effective choral setting and a lively dancing accompaniment.

Child in a manger,	Wise men, come seek Him -
Jesus our Saviour,	Christ our Redeemer;
Born of a virgin holy and mild;	Journey to Bethlem, Led by a star.
Sent from the highest,	Offer your treasures:
Come down in glory;	Gold, myrrh, and incense,
Tell the glad story, welcome the child.	Precious oblations brought from afar.
Shepherds, arise now,	Praise to the Christ-child;
Go to the manger;	Praise to his mother;
Find where the infant Jesus is laid.	Glory to God our Father above.
Offer your homage,	Angels are singing
Kneel down before him;	songs of rejoicing,
Praise and adore him, be not afraid.	Greeting the infant born of God's love.

The *Sans Day Carol* has a tune which was collected in the village of St Day, Cornwall in the early twentieth century – St Day was a Breton saint. The words of the first three verses are traditional English, but the fourth verse was originally composed in Cornish by the singer from whom the carol was collected. The tune is one of a large number of related tunes often associated with the words “A Virgin Unspotted”.

Now the holly bears a berry as white as the milk,
And Mary bore Jesus, who was wrapped up in silk:
*And Mary bore Jesus Christ our Saviour for to be,
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly!*

Now the holly bears a berry as green as the grass,
And Mary bore Jesus, who died on the cross: (*chorus*)

Now the holly bears a berry as black as the coal,
And Mary bore Jesus, who died for us all: (*chorus*)

Now the holly bears a berry, as blood is it red,
Then trust we our Saviour, who rose from the dead:
*And Mary bore Jesus Christ our Saviour for to be,
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly!*

The Welsh composer **William Mathias** (1934-1992) was a prodigy who started the piano at the age of three, and composing at five. He studied at Aberystwyth University, and became Professor of Music at the University of Wales, Bangor. His music is largely choral, in the Anglican tradition.

A babe is born is an original setting of traditional English words from the fifteenth century; it exhibits a degree of rhythmic complexity which is characteristic of Mathias.

A babe is born all of a may,
To bring salvation unto us.
To him we sing both night and day.
Veni creator Spiritus.

At Bethlehem, that blessed place,
The child of bliss now born he was;
And him to serve God give us grace,
O lux beata Trinitas.

There came three kings out of the East,
To worship the King that is so free,
With gold and myrrh and frankincense,
A solis ortus cardine.

The angels came down with one cry,
A fair song that night sung they
In worship of that child:
Gloria tibi Domine.

A babe is born all of a may,
To bring salvation unto us.
To him we sing both night and day.
*Veni creator Spiritus,
O lux beata Trinitas,
A solis ortus cardine,
Gloria tibi Domine.*

Noël!

Wassail Carol is also a setting of old English words from the sixteenth century; the words are just one of many variants on the Wassail theme, but without the common secular elements, and the setting is suitably vigorous.

*Wassail, wassail, wassail, sing we
In worship of Christ's nativity.*

Now joy be to the Trinity,
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
That one God is in Trinity,
Father of Heaven, of mightès most.

And joy to the virgin pure
That ever kept her undefiled,
Grounded in grace, in heart full sure,
And bare a child as maiden mild.

Bethlehem and the star so shen,
That shone three kingès for to guide,

Bear witness of this maiden clean;
The kingès three offered that tide.

And shepherds heard, as written is,
The joyful song that there was sung:
Gloria in excelsis!
With angel's voice it was out rung.

Now joy be to the blessedful child,
And joy be to his mother dear;
Joy we all of that maiden mild,
And joy have they that make good cheer.

*Wassail, wassail, wassail, sing we
In worship of Christ's nativity.*

Noel Écossais was written by the Parisian organist **Alexandre Guilmant** (1837-1911). In around 1895, Guilmant was invited to Scotland to open a new organ in Falkirk parish church. During dinner with his host, a piper played, and Guilmant was much taken by the music. After dinner he asked his host to play the bagpipes for him, which he did into the small hours, after which Guilmant declared that he would like to write a piece for organ in the same style. This he subsequently did, dedicating the new piece to his daughter. Some think that the theme may be based on one by Robert Burns.

Stephen Wilkinson (1919-2021) was a chorister at Christ Church, Oxford, and later studied the organ under Thomas Armstrong at St Edward's School. The greater part of his career was at the BBC, where he was a great champion for new music, commissioning new works, and also giving many first performances with the BBC Northern Singers.

He wrote many choral works, among which is *Rorate cæli desuper*, a setting of a poem by William Dunbar (born 1460/65, died before 1530). Dunbar was a Middle Scots poet attached to the court of James IV who was the dominant figure among the Scottish Chaucerians in the golden age of Scottish poetry. It is believed that he was a Franciscan novice.

Rorate cæli desuper!
Heav'ns, distil your balmy showers!
For now is risen the bright daystar,
From the rose Mary, flower of flowers:
The clear Sun, whom no cloud devours,
Surmounting Phœbus in the east,
Is comen of His heav'nly towers,
Et nobis Puer natus est.

Sinners be glad, and penance do,
And thank your Maker heartfully;
For he that ye might not come to,
To you is comen, fully humbly,
Your soulès with His blood to buy
And loose you of the fiend's arrest
And only of His own mercy;
Pro nobis Puer natus est.

Celestial fowlès in the air,
Sing with your notès upon high,
In firthès and in forests fair
Be mirthful now at all your might;
For passèd is your dully night;
Aurora has the cloudès pierced,
The sun is ris'n with gladsome light,
Et nobis Puer natus est.

Sing, heaven imperial most of height!
Regions of air make harmony!
All fish in flood and fowl of flight
Be mirthful and make melody!
All Gloria in excelsis cry!
Heaven, earth, sea, man, bird and beast;
He that is crowned above the sky
Pro nobis Puer natus est.

Balulalow (Scots for lullaby) is a poem by the sixteenth century Scottish poets James, John, and Robert Wedderburn. The words are taken from a longer poem which is a translation of *Vom Himmel hoch*, a Christmas Eve carol written by Martin Luther for his son.

O my deir heart, young Jesus sweet,
prepare thy creddil in my spreit,
and I sall rock thee in my hert
and never mair from thee depart.

But I sall praise thee evermore
with sangis sweit unto thy gloir:
the knees of my hert sall I bow,
And sing that richt Balulalow.

Peter Warlock (1894-1930) was a composer mainly of songs, a champion of Tudor music, bohemian, and melancholic. He wrote perhaps the loveliest English carols of his time, their melodies often inspired by the lute-songs he loved, their harmonic flavour owing something to his hero Frederick Delius. His setting of *Balulalow*, for solo voice with accompaniment (with an optional choral version), was one of a set of three carols dating from 1925.

James Burton (1974-) was a chorister at Westminster Abbey, and was encouraged to take up conducting by Christopher Robinson while he was at Cambridge. He has conducted many major British choirs and orchestra, and was music director for the Schola Cantorum of Oxford for fifteen years; he is currently choral conductor for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. His setting of *Balulalow* was originally written for chorus.

Malcolm Pearce (1950-) was born and raised in Bournemouth, receiving his first significant musical education as a Quirister at Winchester College. At the Royal College of Music he studied the organ, winning the Walford Davies prize for organ performance. His career in teaching took him in 1981 to Magdalen College School Oxford as Director of Music, a post he held for 26 years. He has directed a number of choirs in the Oxford area, including the Cherwell Singers. His compositions are mainly choral, organ, or piano.

Tomorrow shall be my dancing day was first recorded in the early nineteenth century, but clearly it is very much older. Some suggest sixteenth century, but some associate the text with the Mystery Plays, citing "...the legend of my play" in the first verse. The text shows particular similarities with some Cornish-language plays, and may have originated from a translation of them. The first three verses are for Christmas, but the full text carries on to cover the whole of Christ's life up to the ascension – another characteristic of older texts. Pearce's setting is in much the same vein as many of Rutter's carols.

Tomorrow shall be my dancing day;
I would my true love did so chance
To see the legend of my play,
To call my true love to my dance.

*Sing O my love, O my love,
This have I done for my true love.*

Then was I born of a virgin pure;
Of her I took fleshly substance.
Thus was I knit to man's nature,
To call my true love to my dance.

In a manger laid, and wrapp'd I was,
So very poor, this was my chance,
Betwixt an ox and a silly poor ass,
To call my true love to my dance.

Deck the Hall is both Welsh and Scottish. The tune was already old when it was first published as a Welsh dance-carol for the New Year in the early eighteenth century, while the words were written in the mid-nineteenth century by the Scottish musician Thomas Oliphant for a publication consisting of a collection of Welsh melodies with Welsh and English words. This setting is by **David Willcocks** (1919-2015), well-known as a former organist of King's College, Cambridge, and also for his carol arrangements found in the *Carols for Choirs* collections which he edited.

Deck the hall with boughs of holly, *fa la la...*
'Tis the season to be jolly, *fa la la...*
Fill the mead cup, drain the barrel, *fa la la...*
Troll the ancient Christmas carol, *fa la la...*

See the flowing bowl before us, *fa la la...*
Strike the harp, and join in chorus, *fa la la...*
Follow me in merry measure, *fa la la...*
While I sing of beauty's treasure, *fa la la...*

Fast away the old year passes, *fa la la...*
Hail the new, ye lads and lasses, *fa la la...*
Laughing, quaffing all together, *fa la la...*
Heedless of the wind and weather, *fa la la...*

Biographies

Daniel Tate Baritone

“Demonstrating exceptional storytelling” and a “masterful... deep, powerful voice”, Daniel found his passion for singing whilst reading Music at Durham University. For more than a decade he held a Lay Clerkship at New College Oxford, with whom he undertook many international concert tours and recordings. He now sings as a Lay Clerk with Westminster Cathedral Choir.

A lover of English Song, his recent recital programme of First World War songs has been performed in London, Gloucester, and New York. Other recent soloist appearances include many oratorios, and various Bach cantata appearances with Oxford Bach Soloists. He has recently appeared in operas by Walton and Cimarosa.

A committed ensemble musician, he appears regularly with ensembles including John Rutter's Cambridge Singers - with whom he can be heard on their latest recording, *In the Poet's Garden* - and with The Instruments of Time and Truth, and Oxford Consort of Voices. He also directs Cantabulous, who present bespoke *a capella* musical dining and event entertainment, notably as the resident ensemble at the Oxford & Cambridge Club, Pall Mall.

Gabriele Damiani Organ

Gabriele (Gabs) Damiani is an accomplished all-round musician whose work spans conducting, organ, and piano performance. He was educated at the Verdi Conservatoire in Turin and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. Equally at home directing ensembles, performing as a soloist, or accompanying, he combines technical command with deep musical sensitivity. He specialises in Baroque repertoire, continuo playing, and performance practice, while maintaining an active schedule across the UK and internationally. In October 2025, he served as President of the Jury for the Chieri International Music Competition.

Before establishing his current portfolio, Gabs was Director of Music at Our Lady's, Abingdon, overseeing both academic and practical music programmes. Earlier roles include Chapel Organist and Music Teacher at St Edward's, Oxford, and organ scholarships at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, and Westminster Cathedral.

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. From 2006-2024 he was a tenor lay clerk in the choir of New College, Oxford, and 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
Sreya Rao
Elina Screen
Lucy Watson

Tenor

Russell Grant
Simon Murray
David Read
Brian Tibbels

Alto

Jenny Ayres
Flora Carnwath
Elizabeth Kreager
Ann Leggett
Wendy Morris
Claire Naylor
Anna Orlowska

Bass

David Gillespie
Paul Hodges
Brian Leach
Simeon Mitchell
Kieran Suchet

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