

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
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This 2016 edition of “A Madison Symphony Christmas” includes everything you’ve come to expect from this concert, one of Madison’s most beloved Holiday traditions. There are Christmas songs—from old familiar favorites to new discoveries, and music that runs the gamut from Classical to Pop, Jazz and Gospel. Three choirs combine on stage: the Madison Symphony Chorus, the Madison Youth Choirs, and in our finale, the Mt. Zion Gospel Choir, singing arrangements written specifically for this show. Our vocal soloist is Broadway and cabaret star Sylvia McNair.

We open with the well-known *Sussex Carol (On Christmas Night All Christians Sing)*. This text was first published in 1684 by an Irish bishop, Luke Waddinge, though it is possible that Waddinge merely printed a hymn already in circulation. The carol was certainly part of the folk tradition in Britain, and it circulated with a few different melodies. The now-universal tune for the *Sussex Carol* was transcribed in about 1900 by the English song-collector Cecil Sharp and his student, Ralph Vaughan Williams. Vaughan Williams heard this melody from a woman in the English county of Sussex, and published it as the *Sussex Carol* in 1919. It is heard here in a grand arrangement for choir and orchestra by Barlow Bradford.

As the Kantor of Leipzig’s Thomaskirche, Johann Sebastian Bach was expected to produce a multi-movement sacred cantata every week. In his first years at the Thomaskirche, Bach composed no less than five annual cycles of cantatas: each cycle including some 60 works, one appropriate to each Sunday of the Church Year, and special cantatas for Christmas, and the main feasts of Advent and Lent. Of these 300 works, nearly 200 survive—certainly among the greatest monuments of Lutheran church music. He composed *Bringet dem Herrn Ehre seines Namens* (Bring to the Lord the Glory of His Name) BWV 148 in 1723, as part of his first annual cycle. The great majority of Bach’s sacred cantatas were written with texts appropriate to the proper Biblical verse for that day in the Church Year. In the case of *Cantata No.148*, it was the 17th Sunday after Trinity (September 19, 1723), and the text of the day was the joyful Psalm 29. The opening movement heard here begins with a short fugal *sinfonia*, with a bright trumpet lead—and then the voices pick up this brilliant fugal texture.

The Venetian violinist and composer Antonio Vivaldi, nicknamed the “Red Priest,” was the most prominent and influential Italian composer of his generation. His concertos—over 500 in all—were particularly popular: widely circulated and emulated in his day. Vivaldi’s Opus 8 collection of 1725 begins with the famous set of four violin concertos collectively known as *The Four Seasons*. Each is given a descriptive title: *La Primavera (Spring)*, *L’Estate (Summer)*, *L’Autunno (Autumn)*, and *L’Inverno (Winter)*. Programmatic titles like this were not unusual for Vivaldi, but here he went a step further, publishing sonnets with each concerto that describe the action of each season—and, as if you could miss the point, the sonnets also provide cues to specific measures in the music. Vivaldi himself may have been responsible for these picturesque bits of poetry. The shivering violin lines at the beginning of *Winter* set the tone for the entire movement. Vivaldi uses the imagery of wind and cold as the inspiration for the most virtuosic solo passages in the entire set. In contrast, the *Largo* is a cozy picture of a winter day spent inside in a warm room: a lovely solo melody set above a string background that suggests a gently crackling fire. Vivaldi seems to have meant the last movement in part as slapstick comedy: tiptoeing across the ice, falling on your butt, and eventually scooting across the ice happily until it finally cracks. The final line of his sonnet is a fitting end to the piece as a whole: “This is Winter, but it brings joy!”

Madison Youth Choirs then have a pair of features. César Franck spent much of his career working as a church musician. He composed his beloved *Panis angelicus* in 1872 when he was organist at the Parisian church of Ste. Clothilde. This setting of a Latin communion hymn shows his gift for presenting a straightforward and lyrical melody above skillful and complex counterpoint. Mack Wilberg, director of the famed Mormon Tabernacle Choir, wrote his *One December Bright and Clear* in 2001 for treble-voice choir. This is a bright, folklike melody that breaks joyfully into a round and then into full harmony.

Ms. McNair is featured in a medley of three Christmas songs, old and new. Though he was respected in his day as a composer of operas and ballet scores (including the well-known *Giselle*) Adolphe Adam is known to American audiences almost exclusively for his Christmas carol *Cantique de Noël*. Written in 1847 as a setting of a two-verse Christmas poem by Mary Cappeau, this carol was later adapted by J. S. Wright as a three-verse English carol, *O Holy Night*. The traditional English carol *The First Noel* dates from the 16th century, and possibly earlier. It was first published—with its familiar tune attributed to the county of Cornwall—in 1823. One of the most popular Christmas songs of the last few years—*Mary, Did You Know?*—was written as a lyric in 1984 by singer Mark Lowry, as an interlude for a church Advent play. In an interview several years later, Lowry said, “I tried to

picture Mary holding the baby Jesus on the first Christmas morning and wondered what she was thinking about that child...when I wrote it, I felt there was something special there, but I never imagined how wide-reaching it would become.” In 1990, composer Buddy Greene set the lyric to music, and the song quickly became a holiday favorite, with recordings by dozens of singers, and it became a hit for American Idol star Clay Aiken and several others.

John Rutter, born in London and educated at Cambridge University, is equally well known as a choral conductor and as a composer of church music. Rutter’s musical style is eclectic and varied: his pieces include evocations of Renaissance and Baroque choral music, staunch foursquare English Church music in the style of Holst or Vaughan Williams, and works in a thoroughly modern idiom. His *Magnificat* was composed in 1990, following the success of two earlier large-scale Latin choral works, the *Gloria* (1974) and the *Requiem* (1985). The *Magnificat*, one of the Biblical canticles (Luke 1:46-55), is in the voice of Mary, a heartfelt response to the Annunciation that she had conceived a child by the Holy Spirit. This evocative text appears in the earliest Christian liturgies, and since the earliest polyphonic settings in the 15th century, it has been set by literally hundreds of composers. The text was chanted during the Vespers service in the Catholic liturgy, but it was also taken up enthusiastically by Martin Luther, and it remains a part of the liturgy of the Church of England. Rutter’s setting breaks the text into seven movements—three of them heard here—and incorporates other devotional and liturgical texts. The opening, *Magnificat anima mea*, sets the text above an insistent rhythmic background, with a moment of hushed reverence near the end. *Fecit potentiam*, the only relatively strident section of the *Magnificat*, is set to driving music that makes heavy use of the low brass, only to turn suddenly quiet and prayerful at the line “et exaltavit humiles” (“and exalted the humble”). The closing movement, *Gloria Patri*, opens with a majestic choral statement. Rutter then inserts a Marian antiphon text, *Sancta Maria succurre*, a humble prayer set for solo voice. The closing section is a joyous reprise of the main theme of the first movement.

In 1717 George Frideric Handel moved to England to compose and produce opera. For nearly two decades, Handel was the most successful impresario in England, but by the 1730s, Handel’s Italian opera had gone out of fashion, and he turned increasingly to the English oratorio. His oratorios—dramatic renderings of Biblical stories familiar to his English audiences—were enormously successful, and their popularity endured and grew long after Handel’s death. *Messiah* of 1741 is, of course, Handel’s most enduring “hit,” and the finale to our first half is the concluding *Hallelujah* chorus from Part II of *Messiah*. And if you feel like

following the lead of King George III and standing for this great choral acclamation, go right ahead!

Though he is acclaimed as a conductor and composer of concert music, John Williams is most famous as a composer of over 80 film scores. We begin the second half of this program with combined choirs singing a selection from Williams's music for the *Home Alone* movies. *Home Alone* was the hit of the holiday season in 1990. This film, pitting young Kevin (Macaulay Culkin) against a pair of bumbling burglars was an enjoyable blend of sentimentality and slapstick nastiness. *Home Alone II: Lost in New York*, released in 1992, repeated the same formula. Williams wrote music for both movies, and his scores feature just the right mixture of naughty and nice. *Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas* first appeared in the second movie, an irrepressible holiday song packed with good cheer.

The most familiar of all Christmas songs, *Jingle Bells*, was written in the 1850s by James Pierpont, a Unitarian minister, organist, photographer, and sometime songwriter who worked in Massachusetts, California, Georgia, and Florida. Published in 1857, *Jingle Bells* was not intended as a "Christmas song" at all, but rather a "sleighting song"—a popular genre at the time. It was not really popular until the later 19th century, when it gained its exclusive association with the Holiday season. The lively arrangement sung here by the high school members of the Madison Youth Choirs is by the eminent English choral director and arranger David Willcocks.

My Grown Up Christmas List, sung by Ms. McNair, was written in 1990 by lyricist Linda Thompson-Jenner and composer David Foster. This lovely song tells of an adult revisiting Santa and listing a more mature set of wishes: peace, healing, friendship, justice, and love. It was first recorded in 1990 by Natalie Cole, but has also been covered by Kelly Clarkson, Amy Grant, and many others—a contemporary holiday classic.

The Madison Symphony Chorus is featured in a Mack Wilberg arrangement, a festive setting of *I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing In*. This is an old English carol, dating from at least the 17th century. The notion that ships could somehow sail into the city of Bethlehem is geographical wishful thinking, but the text is metaphorical and joyous, possibly relating to the three wise men who visited the baby Jesus.

Baby It's Cold Outside was written by Frank Loesser for the thoroughly forgettable 1949 Esther Williams movie *Neptune's Daughter*, where it was sung as a duet by

Williams and Ricardo Montalban. Much better known is the classic recording by Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald: a playful conversation between two lovers looking for an excuse not to part.

The Mt. Zion Gospel Choir begins their set with a medley of *Away in a Manger* and *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*. *Away in a Manger* is relatively unusual among Christmas carols in existing with two equally well-known melodies—it is familiar both as a hymn tune published in 1887 by James Murray and as a lilting “cradle song” written in 1895 by William Kirkpatrick—it is this second version that Mr. Stanley has adapted here. (There are, by the way, some 40 other tunes written to these words!) The words first appeared in a Sunday school magazine in 1884, attributed—undoubtedly incorrectly—to Martin Luther. Kirkpatrick, a prolific songwriter, wrote his version of *Away in a Manger*—itself an adaptation of an earlier hymn tune—for a Christmas musical in Philadelphia. *Sweet Little Jesus Boy* was composed in 1934 by composer Robert MacGimsey. MacGimsey, who was white, grew up in Louisiana surrounded by African-American music, which had a deep and lasting impact on his own musical style. Like many of his works, *Sweet Little Jesus Boy* adopts a distinctly African-American style, in this case the sound of a classic spiritual.

Norman Hutchins, a native of Delaware, is a prominent minister and a successful Gospel musician. His recording career began in 1992, and several of his albums have charted on *Billboard*'s gospel albums list and he has collected several Grammy and Dove Award nominations. Mr. Stanley has adapted Hutchins's 2001 song *Emmanuel*—an exultant song to the baby Jesus. Combined choirs end our program with a Leotha Stanley original, *The Joy of Christmas*.

And then, friends, it's *your* turn to sing!

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