



Festive disc of the year: Apollo's Fire bring a huge variation of mood, geography and style to Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain

It's the most musical time of the year

Andrew Mellor settles down to long winter evenings with a mixed bag of this year's Christmas albums, from the ultra-traditional to the exotically folksy

Another year, another lesson in how difficult it is to make a Christmas record that satisfies a particular market and offers a warm seasonal embrace at the same time. Still, as this is the season of goodwill, I sincerely hope you'll consider allowing one or more of these Yuletide waifs and strays into your home this holiday season.

You have plenty of choice. There's the elbow-patched academic who'll lull you into a satisfied sleep after Christmas lunch with tales of discrepancies in the surviving manuscripts of a well-known carol. There's the local organist who genuinely believes he metamorphoses into the most risqué of entertainers the moment he dons a paper hat. There's the American hippie-fiddler who'll infuriate you on Christmas Eve but be your new best friend by Boxing Day. There's the Swede with flowers in her hair and an affecting voice whose combination

of innocent freshness and folkloric darkness will be playing on your mind until March. There's your precociously clever niece back from her studies at the Sorbonne, an endless source of knowledge but with a lot to learn about how to kick back during the holidays. There's the visitor from Japan, full of expertise and admiration for Western culture but with something lost in translation. And among the many more are those old regulars who might set your eyes rolling when you see them coming, but when all's said and done, help make Christmas Christmas.

One such guest is King's College Choir, whose Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols was first presented a century ago in 1918. The choir's **100 Years of Nine Lessons & Carols** takes previously unpublished broadcast material dating back to the David Willcocks regime and sets it alongside new studio recordings on a separate disc. Given the centenary,

to the festive 'Noels' that cap Philips's *O beatum et sacrosanctum diem* (track 17 of 19). Would I have been so uninterested in the tender singing of The Sixteen in Tallis, Byrd, Eccard and Lassus if I hadn't been waiting for the ringing of jingle bells? Perhaps not, but there's a slight sense of some works here rattled through, Guerrero's *Pastores loquebantur* among them. Perhaps they were: this is the only disc of the batch actually recorded at Christmas.

Another top-drawer ensemble gifting us a Christmas let-down is the Bach Collegium Japan. **A Christmas Greeting** starts out as a touching meeting of Lutheran decency with Japanese order but quickly devolves into something more syrupy and odd. Nobody told the performers, however, who approach the schmaltzy key changes sprinkled through a series of carol medleys as if they're still singing Bach. The highlight is Masaaki Suzuki's beautiful performance, at the organ, of numbers from Louis-Claude Daquin's *Livre des Noël's pour l'orgue et le clavecin*. Scattered throughout a disorderly sequence, they quickly become islands of nourishment.

There are other ways to reveal fresh musical truths in the context of Christmas, and the determination of another early music group to do so has produced my vote for festive disc of the year. **Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain** from Apollo's Fire charts the passage of Scottish and Irish immigrants to the Appalachian Mountains in the 1830s. The Baroque music group gives us sounds we don't often associate with Bethlehem but are probably far closer to what was heard there: zingy harps, reedy winds and plenteous modality.

At first it sounds like a try-hard jamboree. You quickly realise it is far more, built of extreme focus yet huge variation in mood, geography and style – from Medieval to Soul, Somerset to Kentucky. It is sung and played with an expertise that doesn't trespass on enjoyment and it draws you deeper and deeper in across its six chapters. Jeannette Sorrell's arrangements get to the point: *I wonder as I wander* is urgent in its whimsy; her *Yorkshire Carol* has a tasteful brand of musical humour not often heard in seasonal music. For all the breathless rollicking and earnest exploration, there are tears under the surface that highlight a vital part of the Christmas story, enforced emigration and all. The southern folk hymns *Bright Morning Stars* and the quiet finale *The Parting Glass* remind us that, sometimes, two beautiful voices entwined together and imbued with feeling are powerful enough.

THE CHRISTMAS LIST

Your guide to the festive season's recordings

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|---|---|
|  | 100 Years of Nine Lessons and Carols
Choir of King's College, Cambridge / Various
King's College, Cambridge
King's College, Cambridge © @ KGS0033 |
|  | Cantique de Noël
Choir of Gonville & Caius College,
Cambridge / Geoffrey Webber
Delphian © DCD34197 |
|  | An Ely Christmas
Girls and Lay Clerks of Ely Cathedral /
Sarah MacDonald
Regent © REGCD527 |
|  | Christmas with Sonoro
Sonoro / Neil Ferris
Resonus © RES10226 |
|  | A Vaughan Williams Christmas
Choir of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea /
William Vann
Albion © ALBCD035 |
|  | A Renaissance Christmas
The Sixteen / Harry Christophers
Coro © COR16167 |
|  | A Christmas Greeting
Bach Collegium Japan / Masaaki Suzuki
BIS © BIS2291 |
|  | Christmas on Sugarloaf Mountain
Apollo's Fire
Avie © AV2396 |
|  | Darkest Midnight
Papagena
Somm Céleste © SOMMO189 |
|  | Snow Queens
Juice Vocal Ensemble
Resonus © RES10224 |
|  | Folkjul II
Gunnar Idenstam
BIS © BIS2334 |

Darkest Midnight from single-voice vocal ensemble Papagena returns to roots, too, but here the feeling is of a new age Christmas circa 1998 rather than 1838 (yes, *Gaudete!* is included). Papagena pride themselves on lack of amplification but the arid sound production on their recording is anything but warm and embracing. There are some beautiful moments, Taverner's *A Nativity* and the traditional *Es ist ein Ros* among them, but a lack of focus – *Balulalow* into Joni Mitchell's *The River* into *Jingle Bells* – ultimately proves as frustrating as that sterile studio sound.

Snow Queens, from another female vocal ensemble, provides copious lessons in how distillation and discipline can be effective even in communal seasonal music. There is a real power to this Yuletide *Winterreise* through bespoke new commissions and homespun arrangements, all from musicians interested in progressing the language of Christmas music by unravelling its DNA rather than slathering it with dad-dancing rhythms and added-note harmonies. The rhetoric of *A Coventry Carol* is turned on its head in Anna Snow's questing, cyclic arrangement; there is nothing contrived or predictable here and the results make for an unsettling, beautiful, consistent and cleansing album sung with style and individuality by Juice.

Individuality is one word you could append to the Swede Gunnar Idenstam, whose organ improvisations occupy their own universe – part hard apocalyptic rock, part elfin folklore, part nave-shaking French symphony. **Folkjul II** is a follow-up to 2007's 'Folkjul' ('Folk Christmas') but if you haven't come across Idenstam's exotic art before, I'd heartily recommend his 'Songs for Jukkasjärvi' (BIS).

'Folkjul II' trades that album's herding yoihs for chorales and carols, similarly embedded in the Idenstam sound of folk flutes and fiddles, electronics and voices, all of which are egged on to spine-tingling climaxes by Idenstam's capering, roaring organ (an acquired taste, I can hear some saying). Sandra Marteleur's fiddle ariosos have a strange wonder, Ulrika Bodén's vocal solos are mesmeric, Idenstam's touch on the organ is as funky as it is majestic, Gary Graden's St Jacobs Chamber Choir sounds full-bodied and bright. There are special moments and ground-moving modulations around every corner. But it doesn't dilute the experience, nor the deep sense of mystery, that you often know from the start of many a piece – as in the pregnant organ rumblings that open *Från himlens höjd* – that an almighty climax is in the pipeline. It is the journey to Christmas encapsulated. **G**