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Sir John Rutter's Christmas Celebration

Thursday 4 December 2025, 3pm and 7.30pm
Royal Albert Hall

Sir John Rutter CBE Composer/Conductor

The King's Singers

The Bach Choir

Andrew Lucas Organ

Angie Newman BSL Interpreter (evening)

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra



**ROYAL
ALBERT
HALL**

Associate Orchestra
at the **Royal Albert Hall**



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ENGLAND**

Sir John Rutter's Christmas Celebration

Today's Programme



Christmas Fanfare *leading into...*

Audience: O come, all ye faithful

Please see worksheet for text

Three traditional carols

I. Ding dong! merrily on high

(English, arr. Stuart Nicholson)

II. Wexford Carol (Irish, arr. John Rutter)

III. I saw three ships

(English, arr. Stuart Nicholson)

Gloria in excelsis from Mass in B minor

Johann Sebastian Bach

Three medieval carols

I. Angelus ad Virginem (Irish)

II. Es ist ein' Ros' entsprungen

(Michael Praetorius, arr. John Rutter)

III. Gaudete (Traditional, arr. Brian Kay)

Audience: The first Nowell

Please see worksheet for text

MYSTERY ITEM

70th birthday tribute to Bob Chilcott

I. I wonder as I wander

(Appalachian Carol, arr. Bob Chilcott)

II. The Shepherd's Carol (Bob Chilcott)

III. A Thanksgiving (Bob Chilcott)

Audience: The twelve days of Christmas

(arr. Bob Chilcott)

Please see worksheet for text

Interval 25 minutes

Dance of the Comedians

from The Bartered Bride

Bedřich Smetana

Audience: Good King Wenceslas

Please see worksheet for text

Carols by John Rutter

I. What sweeter music

II. Shepherd's Pipe Carol

The King's Singers in harmony

I. When you wish upon a star

(Leigh Harline and Ned Washington,
arr. John Rutter)

II. Have yourself a merry little Christmas

(Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane,
arr. Peter Knight)

III. Deck the hall

(Welsh, arr. Gordon Langford)

Sleigh Ride

Leroy Anderson

QUIZ and Prize Draw for Mystery Item

We wish you a merry Christmas

Traditional, arr. John Rutter

Audience: Hark! the herald angels sing

*Please see worksheet for text,
and hold applause till after...*

Closing Fanfare

David Willcocks

Today's Music

Sing-along carols, rousing fanfares, Yuletide classics and more!



Christmas Fanfare *leading into...*

O come, all ye faithful

John Francis Wade, arr. David Willcocks

Please see worksheet for text

Three traditional carols

I. Ding dong! merrily on high

English traditional, arr. Stuart Nicholson

Where does the word 'carol' come from? It's typical of the form's tangled history that we're not entirely sure. But two possible origins – the Old French 'carole' and the Greek 'choros' – share something important: both refer to a dance rather than a song. It's this original spirit that jigs and pulses through *Ding dong! merrily on high* with its irrepressible energy and pealing chorus (borrowed so brilliantly by David Willcocks for his 'Sing choirs of angels' descant for *O come, all ye faithful*).

The words, by 19th-century English priest and poet George Ratcliffe Woodward, only join the story in 1924. But dance is key to the melody's origins in 16th-century France. Known formally as *Branle de l'Official*, the tune first appears in a 1589 instruction manual and history of dance assembled by one Thoinot Arbeau – a pseudonym for priest Jehan Tabourot. An elaborate fictional preface excuses the contents as mere 'scribbles', written 'to kill time'. Apparently, Tabourot was keen to distance himself from music whose energy was more ale-house than altar.

II. Wexford Carol

Irish traditional, arr. John Rutter

We know little of the *Wexford Carol*'s origins, though what we do suggests it might more accurately be called the *Enniscorthy Carol* – since all historical roads seem to lead its origins back to County Wexford's second town (home more recently, and perhaps famously, to novelist Colm Toibin). Dating this lilting, modal, folk-tune – a contemplative account of the Nativity, rocked in Rutter's arrangement on a lulling, wordless accompaniment – is difficult, and scholars place its origins anywhere between the 12th and 16th centuries.

But speculation turns into history in the 20th century, when Dr William Grattan Flood – Musical Director of St Aidan's Cathedral in Enniscorthy – first transcribed the carol from a local singer, before arranging it for the Cathedral's Christmas Eve service, where it has been a fixture ever since. Published in *The Oxford Book of Carols* in 1928, the carol finally found its place not just in local, but national and even international repertoire.

III. I saw three ships

English traditional, arr. Stuart Nicholson

Stop for a moment and consider the words of this familiar carol. 'I saw three ships come sailing in...

O they sailed into Bethlehem.' Something strange is clearly afoot. How did those ships come to arrive at the landlocked town? And why were three required to transport Mary and the baby Jesus anyway?

There's an element of fantasy, of innocence, to the text of this traditional English carol, which has been traced back to 17th-century Derbyshire. Together with the nimble, dancing melody and repeated lines, they add up to a breathless celebration of the Nativity – perhaps as seen through the eyes of a child.

History does offer one possible explanation. Saint Helena, the mother of Constantine I, is said to have transported the remains of the Magi up the Rhine to Cologne – precious relics for the new cathedral. Each arrived on a separate ship – a splendid procession that might possibly provide the seed that grew into *I saw three ships*.

Gloria in excelsis from Mass in B minor

Johann Sebastian Bach

There is no evidence that Bach's mighty Mass in B minor – composed over nearly a quarter of a century, and too big for the confines of liturgical performance – was ever performed during the composer's lifetime. But what might have been a white elephant, a sprawling compendium, is instead one of the most powerful, unified statements of faith in the classical repertoire: the apotheosis of both a musical career and a spiritual life.

The *Gloria* – the second movement of the Mass, glorifying God's power – arrives after the sober, fugal intensity of the *Kyrie* in a sudden burst of energy: musical sun emerging from behind clouds. For the first time we hear the brass who, together with the timpani, launch the movement's perpetual, dancing motion in a series of brilliant fanfares. Did the music start life as an instrumental concerto? Musicologists think it might, but the urgent waves of celebration that pass between the voices, arching above the lively counterpoint of the orchestra, feel utterly organic to this joyful paean of praise.

Three medieval carols

I. Angelus ad Virginem

Irish traditional

Christmas carols were not born in church – in fact, it took several centuries for them to make their way across the threshold at all. If you were searching for a rousing festive tune in medieval England, you'd find it on doorsteps or orchards, sung by thirsty wassailers, or shouted lustily in the ale house. Carols were associated with secular dances, not sacred services.

The 13th century saw the very first proto-carols sneak into the nave in the form of processional music – like the delightful *Angelus ad Virginem*, whose lilting rhythms and tune skip with barely suppressed joy. The Latin words tell the story of the Annunciation and Nativity – though (mercifully) rarely today in the original 26 verses: one starting with each subsequent letter of the alphabet.

II. Es ist ein' Ros' entsprungen

Michael Praetorius, arr. John Rutter

According to poet RS Thomas, 'the meaning is in the waiting', and nowhere is this truer than Advent: the season of hope and anticipation. Advent gives us some of the loveliest carols, not the blazing trumpet-fanfares of Christmas Day, but a distant musical glow – wonder that whispers because it doesn't yet dare shout.

Few are lovelier than *Es ist ein' Ros' entsprungen* (or *Lo, how a rose e'er blooming*, as it is more often known in English). The rose of the title is the infant Jesus – flowering from the ancestral Tree of Jesse. A 16th-century German hymnal gives us the lovely chorale melody, and John Rutter's arrangement weaves a solo oboe into the texture. The carol's beauty is its simplicity: a tune that turns the stark clarity of a 'cold winter night' into sound, swaddled in harmonies that suffuse it with gentle warmth.

III. Gaudete

Traditional, arr. Brian Kay

Ancient carols often survive more by luck than judgement; a single lost manuscript can be the difference between a popular classic and an unknown one. Just one Finnish manuscript – 1582's *Piae Cantiones* – is the original source for not only *Good King Wenceslas*, *In Dulci Jubilo* and *Unto us is born a son*, but also the ever-popular *Gaudete*.

By rights, the latter's title should have an exclamation mark after it, because it's a command: Rejoice! The 16th-century carol author wants everyone to celebrate the miracle of the Virgin Birth. The wriggling, tongue-twisting verses – perhaps intended to be sung by a soloist – deal with the scriptural intricacies, while the catchy, syncopated chorus invites all to join in a rousing shout at both start and close.

The first Nowell

Traditional, arr. David Willcocks

Please see worksheet for text

MYSTERY ITEM

70th birthday tribute to Bob Chilcott

I. I wonder as I wander

Appalachian Carol, arr. Bob Chilcott

A sequence of three carols celebrates the 70th birthday of Bob Chilcott – John Rutter's long-time friend and composer-colleague. The first, an arrangement of the traditional American folk-hymn *I wonder as I wander*, dates from 1986. Composed for The King's Singers and the Minnesota Orchestra, the arrangement frames the close-harmony of the voices – a rhythmically offset, wordless accompaniment pulsing against the simple solo melody for baritone – with a rich orchestral backdrop.

At first, the voices occupy the foreground, glimmers of orchestral detail barely audible in flute and celeste, but as the verse reaches its climax – 'And the weary world woke to the saviour's call' – the orchestra surges forward for an extended interlude, weaving new textures and themes from the carol.

II. The Shepherd's Carol

Bob Chilcott

In 1983, Stephen Cleobury – Director of Music at King's College, Cambridge – instigated a tradition: commissioning a new carol to be premiered at the college choir's service of *Nine Lessons and Carols*, broadcast annually on BBC television. The result has been a sequence of modern classics, as diverse as Judith Weir's icily atmospheric *Illuminare, Jerusalem* and Rutter's *What sweeter music* (heard later in the programme).

In 2000, the commission went to former King's chorister Bob Chilcott, who responded with *The Shepherd's Carol* – a piece that brings folksong and contemporary song-writing together to paint the shepherds' arrival at the manger. They address Mary directly – 'And so we have come, Lady, our day's work done...' – in an unaccompanied melody that gradually swells with confidence and intensity, climaxing in a blazing outpouring, before fading gradually back to close as it opened – in absolute simplicity.

III. A Thanksgiving

Bob Chilcott

Composed for the 40th anniversary of The King's Singers in 2008, for a concert bringing the group together with the Choir of King's College, Cambridge, *A Thanksgiving* is scored for double-choir: the six-voice King's Singers combined with SATB chorus. The text – a prayer by the 14th-century Bishop of Chichester Richard de Wych, possibly spoken on his deathbed – is best-known for its final lines: 'May we know Thee more clearly, Love Thee more dearly, And follow Thee more nearly, Day by day.' Chilcott preserves the artlessness of the words in a hymn-like setting for The King's Singers, subtly amplified by SATB echoes and textural embellishments. The effect is direct, prayerful: a musical invocation.

The twelve days of Christmas

Traditional, arr. Bob Chilcott

Please see worksheet for text

Interval

Dance of the Comedians *from The Bartered Bride*

Bedřich Smetana

A comic story of love-against-the-odds in a Czech village, Bedřich Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* is a riotous tangle of secret identities, disapproving parents, bribery, deception and (eventually) happily-ever-after. Coolly received by the public at its 1866 Prague premiere, the work would soon become the original and definitive Czech opera – the beginning of a new national style that would go on to flourish in works by Dvořák and Janáček.

In Act III, a circus rolls into town, setting up stall on the village green in some of Smetana's most exhilarating orchestral music. The *Dance of the Comedians* takes a *Skočná* – a lively Czech dance – as its starting point, creating a breathless rondo that pits a series of contrasting themes and episodes against the recurring dance, always ready to whip up the energy again. Brass and timpani, woodwind and strings all take their turn in the spotlight, each suggesting a different circus act: a wobbling tightrope walker, a martial ringmaster, acrobats and clowns.

Good King Wenceslas

Traditional, arr. John Rutter

Please see worksheet for text

Carols by John Rutter

I. What sweeter music

John Rutter

Like Christina Rossetti's *In the bleak midwinter*, Robert Herrick's poem *What sweeter music* asks what offerings we can bring to the infant Jesus. Herrick's answer? A carol. It's a gift of a text for a composer, and John Rutter takes full advantage of it in his exquisite 1988 setting for the Choir of King's College, Cambridge.

One of Rutter's loveliest, long-breathed melodies unfolds in a continuous arc, skimming over barlines and lines of poetry to give us a lyrical, soaring carol that celebrates the transformative power of Christ – whose birth 'sees December turned to May', filling fields with corn and hearts with hope. Warm strings hold voices in the softest of harmonic embraces, exploiting the distinctive, blooming sonority of King's Chapel, a building well known to Rutter through his long association with Cambridge.

II. Shepherd's Pipe Carol

John Rutter

Written and premiered while Rutter was still an undergraduate at Clare College, Cambridge, 1965's *Shepherd's Pipe Carol* is the composer's earliest published work – a piece inspired by Rutter's experience as a boy soprano, singing in Menotti's evocative Christmas opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.

The piping that leads Amahl and the Wise Men to Bethlehem stuck in the composer's head, crystallising into the jaunty jubilation and irrepressible energy of the carol's melody, passed between upper and lower voices. The dancing, syncopated rhythms of the chorus pulse with joy and impatient anticipation, but the mood shifts and softens in verse three, introduced by a plaintive oboe, as the shepherd boy himself speaks: a lonely figure at the centre of the bustle. But he's quickly engulfed in the action again; onlookers join his quest, and the carol comes to an exultant, unison conclusion.

The King's Singers in harmony

I. When you wish upon a star

Leigh Harline and Ned Washington, arr. John Rutter

Now synonymous with all-things-Disney, *When you wish upon a star* was originally composed for Walt Disney's second feature animation: 1940's *Pinocchio*. The story of the wooden puppet who dreams of becoming a real boy is narrated by Jiminy Cricket – a talking cricket who sings several of the film's big musical numbers. Accompanying the opening credits, this wistful song promises an answer to all heartfelt dreamers.

Ned Washington and Leigh Harline's original is updated here in an arrangement by John Rutter written especially for The King's Singers. The Disney magic gets a little sprinkling of classical stardust courtesy of Rutter's nostalgic harmonies.

II. Have yourself a merry little Christmas

Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, arr. Peter Knight

Written for one of the big hits of 1944 (Judy Garland film *Meet Me in St Louis*), *Have yourself a merry little Christmas* almost didn't make it into the soundtrack at all after a series of conflicts and false starts. First there was the difficulty with the melody itself; songwriter Hugh Martin had been messing around

with a ‘madrigal-like’ tune for a few days, but threw it away unfinished. Luckily his writing partner Ralph Blane had overheard and persuaded him to dig through the wastepaper to rescue and complete it.

Then there were the words. Neither director Vincente Minelli nor Garland herself felt comfortable with the original ‘lugubrious’ lyrics (‘If I sing that to sweet little Margaret O’Brien they’ll think I’m a monster,’ Garland famously observed). Luckily Martin was persuaded to adapt them, giving us the poignant smiling-through-tears song we know today.

III. Deck the hall

Welsh traditional, arr. Gordon Langford

Deck the hall may have given us the phrase ‘Tis the season’, but the question we should be asking is ‘Which season?’ Because the carol has absolutely nothing to do with Christmas.

The tune we know today started life as a Welsh folksong, *Nôs Galan*, first published in the 18th century but with roots stretching back a lot further. There’s a distinct lack of either festivity or foliage in this first version: a love song of a rather forthright kind, whose opening sets the tone. ‘Oh! How soft my fair one’s bosom, fal lal lal lal lal lal lal la.’

It wasn’t until the 19th century that the song got its PG makeover, reimagined by – who else? – the Victorians as a New Year’s carol celebrating the tradition of decorating the house (or ‘hall’ if you’re very grand) with evergreens, and having a drink to celebrate. At last, the dancing melody and all those tongue-twisting ‘fa la las’ had found their festive home.

Sleigh Ride

Leroy Anderson

‘It’s lovely weather for a sleigh ride together with you.’ It’s hard to believe that when American king of light music Leroy Anderson composed his *Sleigh Ride*, with its jingling sleigh bells, neighing trumpet-horses and whip-cracking energy, he was sweating his way through a Connecticut heatwave in the summer of 1946.

But something about that imagined winter landscape, vividly created by the initially wordless orchestral standard, caught the public imagination, and the piece has gone on to have musical life after life – not just with orchestras, but sung to Mitchell Parish’s lyrics by everyone from The Andrews Sisters and Ella Fitzgerald to Sufjan Stevens.

QUIZ and Prize Draw for Mystery Item

We wish you a merry Christmas

Traditional, arr. John Rutter

Today it’s Halloween that sees hordes of children trooping from house to house, demanding treats in return for an elaborately costumed fright. But in earlier centuries, it was Christmas that brought visitors to the door. The traditions of both mumming – which involved amateur theatricals, usually telling the story of St George vanquishing his foes – and wassailing – which involved singing – were active across England until the 19th century. Villagers would traditionally visit the big houses, performing in return for spiced cider, beer and ‘figgy pudding’ – an early form of Christmas pudding.

This catchy West Country carol memorialises those traditions, its marching rhythm well suited to a ragged, perhaps not entirely sober procession across fields, and its insistent demands for refreshment part of an ancient ritual and relationship stretching back to feudal days.

Hark! the herald angels sing

Felix Mendelssohn, arr. David Willcocks

Please see worksheet for text, and hold applause till after...

Closing Fanfare

David Willcocks

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Christmas
Challenge

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