

WIGMORE HALL 125

Friday 5 December 2025
7.30pm

A Christmas Carol

Ashley Riches bass-baritone
David Owen Norris piano

Trad/English

Hubert Parry (1848-1918)

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)
Cecil Armstrong Gibbs (1889-1960)
Eric H Thiman (1900-1975)

Peter Warlock (1894-1930)

Peter Cornelius (1824-1874)

Thomas Case Sterndale Bennett (1882-1944) The Carol Singers (1921)

The Boar's Head Carol (pub. 1521)

The Mistletoe (1909)

Nightfall in winter from *English Lyrics, Eighth Set* (1907)

When icicles hang by the wall from *English Lyrics, Second Set* (1886)

Snow in the Street (1928)

The Oxen (1951)

I Saw Three Ships (1927)

The First Mercy (1927)

The Frostbound Wood (1929)

Bethlehem Down (1930)

Three Kings from Persian lands afar
from *Weihnachtslieder* Op. 8 (1856, rev. 1859)

Interval

David Owen Norris (b.1953)

A Christmas Carol (2025) *world première*



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Doing justice to Charles Dickens's most famous work, *A Christmas Carol*, with its four ghosts, its five 'staves' (rather than 'chapters') and its vast supporting cast (including goldfish and rhinoceros), requires a certain spread; and so the second half of tonight's concert is substantial, getting on an hour long. The much briefer first half sets the scene.

Christmas food (everywhere in Dickens) is invoked by a traditional carol from The Queen's College, Oxford, after which we turn to **Sir Hubert Parry** for three pictures of winter: a unison song – a genre to which Parry devoted more and more attention as he grew older, his contributions including *You'll get there* for the suffragettes, *A Hymn for Aviators*, a fundraiser for wounded servicemen, and *Jerusalem*, for the Women's Peace-Pledge Union; a song dedicated to his daughter Gwen, from the Eighth Set of his 12 sets of *English Lyrics*; and one of the Shakespeare settings that comprise the Second Set.

More specifically Christmassy is **Vaughan Williams's** setting of William Morris's snowy poem, from the *Oxford Book of Carols*. **Cecil Armstrong Gibbs** set Hardy's doubts and hopes to music on Christmas Eve 1951. RVW must have kept an eye on his former pupil, for three years later his own setting of 'The Oxen' appeared in the cantata *Hodie*. The unbuttoned setting of *I saw three ships* by **Eric Thiman** (who taught me everything about Palestrina's counterpoint, and a great deal about Sherlock Holmes – Eric was a member of the Baker Street Irregulars, forever off to the Reichenbach Falls) introduces a sycamore tree, whose symbolic powers long pre-date the incomprehensible events at Sycamore Gap.

Peter Cornelius's 'The Three Kings' completes the excitements of the season (*Twelfth Night* and so on) but not until we have explored some of the most remarkable Christmas music ever composed. **Peter Warlock** was the all-too-apt pen-name for the critic and scholar Philip Heseltine. He was a dangerous friend – his boozy parties in the cottage in Eynsford that he rented from Hubert Foss, founder of OUP's Music Department, were the downfall of a number of composers, including Bax, Moeran and Lambert. Yet he inspired fanatical devotion in his lifetime and ever since. Bax and Lambert took part in two memorial concerts on this very Wigmore stage after Warlock's death from gas poisoning just before Christmas 1930. The coroner recorded an open verdict, but Warlock had been careful to put the cat out. One of my brightest memories is a day spent making a radio programme with the Peter Warlock Society on a field trip round Sussex. Felix Aphrahman's vivid commentaries as he clambered over various stiles are as unforgettable as the choral renditions of Belloc's lament for England, *Ha'nacker Mill*, sung in Ha'nacker Mill itself, and *The Fox* in The Fox Inn at Bramdean. Like tonight's three carols, the words of *The Fox*, Warlock's final and most terrifying song, are by Bruce

Blunt, poet and (appropriately) wine merchant. Together, Blunt and Warlock reached strange places they could not quite attain alone.

A Christmas Carol has elicited a number of musical treatments. Leslie Bricusse's songs for Albert Finney's film *Scrooge* (1970) were expanded into a stage musical in 1992 – the same year Carl Davis composed his ballet. Thea Musgrave's eponymous opera was premièred in 1979. It was televised from Covent Garden on Christmas Eve 1982. Dickens would have been pleased – he wrote an opera himself once, with the composer John Hullah. Alas, the opera's score & parts were lost in a fire, and 1836 also saw the runaway success of *The Pickwick Papers*, so Dickens's operatic career was over before it began. Luckily, the songs had been published for voice and piano, so in 2012, Dickens's bi-centenary year, I was able to put on a production of the opera in the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton; I also led Dickens musical workshops at the RAM (where Dickens's sister Fanny was an early student and professor); and in Dickens's own drawing-room, with Simon Callow, I recorded a music programme, *Dickens's Playlist*, for Radio 4. Clearly, Dickens was a very musical man indeed. So when Ashley Riches suggested that I should compose a version of *A Christmas Carol* for baritone and piano, I realised what a very good idea it was.

The gallery of characters had to be pruned – we had a great deal of enjoyable back-and-forth about the libretto. The careless boys of Stave Two and the callous merchants of Stave Three develop the same musical material, reflecting their shared indifference to Scrooge's feelings. Similarly, Scrooge's cheerless boyhood school-room is a musical reflection of the comfortless office of his later years. Fezziwig is introduced with a waltz, and goes on to dance to Jane Austen's favourite tune, *The Fairy Dance* (much in vogue in Fezziwig's day). Bella breaks off her engagement to a sad memory of Fezziwig's waltz.

The flight over the wild, dark sea in Stave Three (which must have been the inspiration for 'Walking in the Air' in *The Snowman*) takes the form of variations on 'God bless (sic) ye merry gentlemen', the one Christmas carol mentioned in Dickens's tale. Everyone they visit – miners, lighthouse-men, sailors – is singing Christmas songs, so the variations incorporate quotations from 'The First Nowell', 'On Christmas Night', and 'A virgin unspotted'.

Just in case you don't know, I won't spoil the ending, except to say that musically I have blended together the music of the callous merchants, callous no longer, with the tune Scrooge remembered from his boyhood and an echo of Fezziwig to make a picture of redemption.

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Trad/English

The Boar's Head Carol (pub. 1521)

Anonymous

The boar's head in hand bear I
Bedecked with bays and rosemary.
And I pray you, my masters, be merry,
Quot estis in convivio. [howsoever many are at the feast]

Refrain

Caput apri defero, [I bring the boar's head]
Reddens laudes Domino. [rendering praises to the Lord.]

The boar's head, as I understand,
Is the rarest dish in all this land,
Which thus bedecked with a gay garland,
Let us *servire cantico* [serve with a song].

Our steward hath provided this
In honour of the King of bliss
Which on this day to be servèd is
In Reginensi atrio. [in the Queen's hall.]

Hubert Parry (1848-1918)

The Mistletoe (1909)

Father Prout

A Druid stood in the dark oak wood
Of a distant northern land;
And he seem'd to hold a sickle of gold
In the grasp of his wither'd hand;

And slowly moved around the girth
Of an aged oak, to see
If a blessed plant of wondrous birth
Had clung to the old oaktree.

And anon he knelt, and from his belt
Unloos'd his golden blade,
Then rose and culled the Mistletoe
Under the woodland shade.

O, blessed bough! meet emblem thou
Of all dark Egypt knew,
Of all foretold to the wise of old,
To Roman, Greek and Jew.

And long, God grant, time honoured plant,
May we behold thee hung
In cottage small, as in Baron's hall,
Banner and shield among.

Thus fitly rule the mirth of Yule,
Aloft in thy the place of pride;
Still usher forth in each land of the North
The solemn Christmas tide.

Nightfall in winter from *English Lyrics, Eighth Set* (1907)

Langdon Elwyn Mitchell

Cold is the air,
The woods are bare
And brown; the herd
Stand in the yard.
The frost doth fall;
And round the hill
The hares move slow;
The homeward crow,
Alone and high,
Crosses the sky
All silently.
The quick streams freeze;
The moving trees
Are still; for now
No breeze will blow:
The wind has gone
With the day, down,
And clouds are come
Bearing the gloom.
The yellow grass
In the clear glass
Of the bright pool
Grows soft and dull.
The water's eye
That held the sky
Now glazes quite;
And now the light
On the cold hill
Fadeth, until
The giant mass
Doth seem to pass
From near to far;
The clouds obscure
The sky with gloom:
The night is come,
The night is come.

Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have ended.

When icicles hang by the wall from *English*

Lyrics, Second Set (1886)

William Shakespeare

When icicles hang by the wall
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail;

When blood is nipt and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl
Tuwhoo! Tuwhit! Tuwhoo! A merry note!
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marian's nose looks red and raw;

And roasted crabs hiss in the bowl
Then nightly sings the staring owl
Tuwhoo! Tuwhit! Tuwhoo! A merry note!
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Snow in the Street (1928)

William Morris

From far away we come to you,
The snow on the street and the wind on the door.
To tell of great tidings strange and true.
Minstrels and maids stand forth on the floor:

Refrain
From far away we come to you,
To tell of great tidings, strange and true.

'O ye shepherds what have you seen,
To slay your sorrow and heal your teen?'

'In an ox-stall this night we saw
A Babe and a Maid without a flaw.'

'News of a fair and a marvellous thing,
Nowell, nowell, nowell, we sing!'

Cecil Armstrong Gibbs (1889-1960)

The Oxen (1951)

Thomas Hardy

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
"Now they are all on their knees,"
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures
As they dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come; see the oxen kneel

In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

Eric H Thiman (1900-1975)

I Saw Three Ships (1927)

Anonymous

As I sat under a sycamore tree,
I looked me out upon the sea
On Christ's Sunday at morn.

I saw three ships a-sailing there,
Jesu, Mary and Joseph they bare
On Christ's Sunday at morn.

O Joseph did whistle and Mary did sing,
And all the bells on earth did ring
For joy our Lord was born.

O they sailed into Bethlehem;
Saint Michael was the steer'sman,
Saint John sate in the horn.

And all the bells on earth did ring;
'Welcome be Thou, Heaven's King,
On Christ's Sunday at morn.

Peter Warlock (1894-1930)

The First Mercy (1927)

Bruce Blunt

Ox and ass at Bethlehem
On a night, ye know of them.
We were only creatures small,
Hid by shadows on the wall.

We were swallow, moth and mouse;
The Child was born in our house,
And the bright eyes of us three
Peeped at His nativity.

Hands of peace upon that place
Hushed our beings for a space
Quiet feet and folded wing,
Nor a sound of any thing.

With a moving star we crept
Closer when the Baby slept;
Men who guarded where He lay
Moved to frighten us away.

But the Babe, awakened, laid
Love on things that were afraid;
With so sweet a gesture He
Called us to His company.

The Frostbound Wood (1929)

Bruce Blunt

Mary that was the Child's mother
Met me in the frostbound wood:
Her face was lovely and careladen
Under a white hood.

She who once was Heaven's chosen
Moved in loneliness to me,
With a slow grace and weary beauty
Pitiful to see.

Bethlehem could hear sweet singing,
"Peace on earth, a Saviour's come."
Here the trees were dark, the Heavens
Without stars, and dumb.

Past she went with no word spoken,
Past the grave of Him I slew,
Myself the sower of the woodland
And my heart the yew.

Mary that was the Child's mother
Met me in the frostbound wood:
Her face was lovely and careladen
Under a white hood.

Bethlehem Down (1930)

Bruce Blunt

"When He is King we will give Him the Kings' gifts,
Myrrh for its sweetness, and gold for a crown,
Beautiful robes", said the young girl to Joseph,
Fair with her first-born on Bethlehem Down.

Bethlehem Down is full of the starlight,
Winds for the spices, and stars for the gold,
Mary for sleep, and for lullaby music,
Songs of a shepherd by Bethlehem fold.

When He is King they will clothe Him in gravesheets,
Myrrh for embalming, and wood for a crown,
He that lies now in the white arms of Mary,
Sleeping so lightly on Bethlehem Down.

Here He has peace and a short while for dreaming,
Close-huddled oxen to keep Him from cold,
Mary for love, and for lullaby music
Songs of a shepherd by Bethlehem fold.

Peter Cornelius (1824-1874)

Three Kings from Persian lands afar

from Weihnachtslieder Op. 8 (1856, rev. 1859)

Peter Cornelius, trans. HN Bate

Three Kings from Persian lands afar
To Jordan follow the pointing star:
And this the quest of the travellers three,
Where the new-born King of the Jews may be.
Full royal gifts they bear for the King;
Gold, incense, myrrh are their offering.

The star shines out with a steadfast ray;
The kings to Bethlehem make their way,
And there in worship they bend the knee,
As Mary's child in her lap they see;
Their royal gifts they show to the King,
Gold, incense, myrrh are their offering.

Thou child of man, lo, to Bethlehem
The Kings are travelling – travel with them!
The star of mercy, the star of grace,
Shall lead thy heart to its resting-place.
Gold, incense, myrrh thou canst not bring;
Offer thy heart to the infant King.

*The artists have requested that the remaining song texts
be omitted so the audience can fully immerse themselves
in the works.*