



The Twelve Days of Christmas

RBC Chamber Choir & Julian Wilkins

Tracklist

1	Jesus Christ the Apple Tree <i>Elizabeth Poston (1905–1987)</i>	3.32
2	The Unexpected Early Hour <i>Reena Esmail (b.1983)</i>	2.49
3	Bogoroditsye Dyevo, Op. 37, No. 6 <i>Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)</i>	2.49
4	Hodie Christus Natus Est <i>William Byrd (c.1540–1623)</i>	2.30
5	Hymne à la Vierge <i>Pierre Villette (1926–1998)</i>	3.58
6	Cantique de Jean Racine, Op. 11 <i>Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924)</i>	5.03
7	O Magnum Mysterium <i>Francis Poulenc (1899–1963)</i>	3.31
8	Hodie Christus Natus Est <i>Francis Poulenc</i>	2.11
9	A Spotless Rose <i>Herbert Howells (1892–1983)</i>	3.30
10	Road to Refuge <i>Errollyn Wallen (b.1958)</i>	4.55
11	The Saviour's Birth <i>Trad, arr. Marques L.A. Garrett (b.1984)</i>	3.02
12	Ave Maria <i>Anton Bruckner (1824–1896)</i>	3.40
13	Gaudete <i>Piae Cantiones, arr. Suzzie Vango (b.1982)</i>	2.40
14	Coventry Carol <i>Trad, arr. B.E. Boykin (b.1989)</i>	3.48
15	The Twelve Days of Christmas <i>Trad, arr. Bob Chilcott (b.1955)</i>	11.13
16	A Merry Christmas <i>Trad, arr. Arthur Warrell (1883–1939)</i>	1.54

Total running time 1:01:01

Introduction

For a number of years, the RBC Chamber Choir has been a cornerstone of the Christmas festivities at Compton Verney, Warwickshire. Renowned for their candlelit performances in the breathtaking Capability Brown chapel, the choir has brought joy and enchantment to audiences young and old with their moving renditions of seasonal choral music.

Now, this beloved tradition is available for the first time on CD. This recording features a selection of the varied and captivating repertoire the choir has shared in their recent Christmas concerts, offering a musical journey that spans

centuries of Christmas and seasonal choral music. From the timeless beauty of works by William Byrd, Gabriel Fauré, and Sergei Rachmaninoff, to the more contemporary voices of Bob Chilcott, Reena Esmail, and Errollyn Wallen, the choir's expressive performances shine with sensitivity, energy, and panache.

Whether you're discovering these exquisite pieces for the first time or returning to the warmth and wonder of Christmas music, this album brings the magic of the RBC Chamber Choir to your home – capturing the spirit, joy, and timeless beauty of the festive season.

Programme Note

There is a long history of apple trees in New England and it was traditional to wish them health on Christmas Eve. In her most famous work Poston sets an 18th-century text from New Hampshire in a disarmingly simple manner cultivating an aptly folklike tone.

The Unexpected Early Hour is described by the poet as ‘an interfaith eco-carol’ that traces an epiphany journey through dark woods on the winter solstice. The music incorporates a classical Hindustani raga and celebrates the return of light with joyful lilting rhythms.

Bogoroditsye Dyevo is the last item from the Vespers portion of Rachmaninoff’s *All-Night Vigil* and is perhaps the most famous piece from the set. It captures both the gentle simplicity of the Archangel’s greeting and Mary’s awestruck response to God.

There is an almost madrigalian ebullience to Byrd’s *Hodie Christus Natus Est*. The intricate textures evince a suitably joyful response to the birth of Christ, perhaps evoking the entire

company of heaven singing.

Pierre Villette’s widow relates how proud the composer was after hearing his *Hymne à la Vierge* – a piece he believed all but forgotten – performed on the radio by the choir of King’s College, Cambridge. The ‘Hymne’ is a short but expressive work with some particularly French harmonic colouring.

Fauré’s evergreen *Cantique de Jean Racine* is an early work dating from 1865. Dedicated to César Franck, this modest composition won the 20-year-old composer the *premier prix* in his final year as a student at the École Niedermeyer.

O Magnum Mysterium and *Hodie Christus Natus Est* are two of Poulenc’s *Motets pour le temps de Noël*. The ‘wonderful mystery’ is conveyed with a rapt stillness and some characteristically bittersweet harmonic twists. The adroit exuberance of ‘Hodie’ is full of festive jollity with its jubilant cries of Alleluia!

Written in 1919, Howells’s setting of an anonymous 15th-century poem has a level of imagination and technical

refinement that are as remarkable as they are subtle. The metrical freedom and famously indulgent final cadence contribute to this polished gem.

Wallen explains that the harmonic contrasts in *Road to Refuge* are analogous with the Nativity story and modern refugees. The sudden changes in tempo and texture highlight the lived experience in this poignant composition.

The Saviour’s Birth combines the Christmas spiritual ‘Rise up, shepherd, and follow’ with the Latin text ‘Hodie Christus natus est’ celebrating the shepherds’ star-led journey to the newborn Christ. Jazzy, syncopated rhythms convey the joyful scene.

Bruckner’s *Ave Maria* (1861) is the second of two settings he made of this text and is one of the earliest works in which he displays his mature choral style. The work exploits the contrast of upper and lower voices which, when combined, create rich 7-part textures.

Though *Gaudete* dates from the 16th century it owes its modern popularity to

the 1973 version by Steeleye Span, one of only two Latin-text songs to make the UK Top 20. Suzzie Vango’s arrangement begins with fragments before the more familiar theme coalesces.

The *Coventry Carol* first appeared in the 15th-century Corpus Christi mystery play *Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors* with the familiar musical setting possibly dating from the 1530s. Boykin’s version retains the melody with subtle alterations in this most macabre of lullabies.

The text of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, published in 1780, was originally a memory game sung before eating mince pies and Twelfth Cake. Chilcott’s version has the ‘five gold rings’ refrain imaginatively set in a different musical style each time it recurs.

And with that it only remains for everyone at RBC to wish you a very Merry Christmas!

Dr Gareth Thomas FHEA
Senior Lecturer & Assistant Course
Director (Undergraduate), RBC

Performers

Soprano

Alexandra Burstow †
Evelyn Byford *
Phoebe Curcher S
Imogen Fox
Hester Parkin
Sophie Sterry
Beth Taylor †
Alice Williams
Maria Willsher

Alto

Seren Armstrong
Isabella Bartels
Lydia Game
Tyler Gorrell
Anna Middleton
Ellen Smith
Xinru Wang
Rosie Woodhouse †

Tenor

R. Isaac Boulter
Timothy Handley
Thomas Hawkey-Soar †
Sebastien Sgouraditis †

Bass

Oscar Curtis
Gianpiero Greatorex
Linus Hughes
Charles Keeling
William Peutherer
William Swinnerton S
Joshua Thompson

Pianos

James Keefe
Alex Wyatt †

Percussion

William Peutherer

Conductor

Julian Wilkins

Soloists

* Coventry Carol † The Twelve Days of Christmas
‡ A Spotless Rose S Road to Refuge

Acknowledgements

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Biographies

RBC Chamber Choir

The RBC Chamber Choir is an ensemble of auditioned singers drawn from the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and Birmingham City University, renowned for its versatility, technical excellence and expressive range. Directed by Julian Wilkins since 2022, and previously by Paul Spicer, the choir has earned an outstanding reputation for musicianship through acclaimed performances and an exceptional discography unique among UK conservatoires. Its recordings, featuring music by composers including James MacMillan, Charles Villiers Stanford and Herbert Howells, have received numerous distinctions, including a *Gramophone* Editor's Choice. Regular collaborations with Jeffrey Skidmore and Thomas Trotter, partnerships with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Sinfonia Viva, and appearances on BBC Radio 3 reflect the ensemble's continuing commitment to artistic excellence.

Biographies

Julian Wilkins – conductor

Julian Wilkins is a versatile conductor, organist and pianist, renowned for his dynamic musicianship, expressive interpretations and inspiring leadership. He directs the RBC Chamber Choir and RBC Camerata, the CBSO Youth Chorus and CBSO Children's Chorus, and is Associate Chorus Director of the CBSO Chorus, preparing performances with many leading conductors including Kazuki Yamada, Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, John Storgårds, Edward Gardner and John Wilson.

A chorister and specialist musician at Wells Cathedral School and later Organ Scholar at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, Julian has performed as conductor, soloist and accompanist in many of the world's great cathedrals and concert halls. He has collaborated with leading orchestras and choirs across the UK and internationally, preparing choruses for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Czech

Philharmonic, Vienna Philharmonic, the BBC Proms Youth Choir, National Youth Orchestra, and National Youth Choirs of Great Britain, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. His performances have been broadcast on television and radio, and he featured on Peter Gabriel's Grammy-winning soundtrack to Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

A passionate advocate for choral music and young musicians, Julian is also a respected teacher, conductor trainer and adjudicator, teaching at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and University of Birmingham, and leading workshops and masterclasses further afield. His work is marked by musical integrity, warmth and commitment to inspiring the next generation of conductors and singers.



Biographies

James Keefe – piano

James Keefe performs and records with many of the UK's leading orchestras, including the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO), BBC Philharmonic, The Hallé, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the Sinfonia of London. Based in Birmingham, he works extensively with the CBSO, accompanying the choral department, leading and participating in their education and community outreach projects, and regularly performs chamber music with members of the orchestra. Alongside this he works as an accompanist at the University of Birmingham and the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

William Peutherer – percussion

Hailing from Newcastle upon Tyne, William Peutherer is a percussionist at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. He has become a member of a variety of ensembles encompassing genres such as folk fusion, bluegrass, choral, orchestral and Carnatic. Recently on the folk scene, William has released several new singles with his band Crossroads and has played at major festivals across the country with The Conservatoire Folk Ensemble. Outside of performance, he enjoys dancing Forró, exploring in the outdoors and working on small wood carving projects.

Alex Wyatt – piano

Alex Wyatt is an English pianist who studied at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire under Robert Markham and Pascal Nemirovski. He has been a repetiteur for multiple shows, including *Dido and Aeneas*, Ethel Smyth's *Fête Galante*, Menotti's *The Old Maid and the Thief*, and Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. He regularly accompanies singers, vocal classes and conducting classes at the Conservatoire, and has performed in vocal masterclasses with James Gilchrist and Sholto Kynoch. He has received several prizes for song accompaniment and collaborative piano performance.



Credits

The Twelve Days of Christmas

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Mia Osborne

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