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THE MUSIC OF THE SEASON

by
Francis X. Maier

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The Pennsylvania state lottery has, as its spokesperson, a talking groundhog. This supersized rodent shows up with his criminal gang of faux carolers every December. They then hijack the airwaves and rework the lyrics of “The Twelve Days of Christmas” into a siren song for gambling. And why not? When the holiday snow glistens, so the marketing hypnosis suggests, everyone can afford to risk a few (or more than a few) dollars on the prospect of winning mythically fantastic wealth. And winning can, and occasionally does, happen, just like miracles. The heart secretly knows that some fairy tales, like a pot of lottery gold, can come true; after all, Jack did pretty well trading his cow for those magic beans. *Somebody* has to have the ticket that transmogrifies his or her life.

Still, it’s annoying. My beef isn’t with the lottery, though. And I don’t really mind the huckster rodent. He’s just another state employee doing his job. It’s the singers who deserve jail time for aggravated assault on a carol otherwise redolent with medieval history. In fact, there’s a whole industry of “holiday” music-abusers who warrant an acquaintance with our penal system. The barking “Jingle Bells” pooch should be put down. The late John Lennon’s song “Happy Xmas (War is Over)” is second only to his other triumph, “Imagine,” in stupefying shallowness. With harmonies by the hideous Yoko Ono and a captive choir of innocent children, it has “guilty” written all over it in any future culture-war Nuremberg trials. May it roast on an open fire with Lennon’s chestnuts. Plus, somebody obviously shredded the “War is Over” memo before it even left the

recording studio.

I'm not a crank. Really. There's room in the Christmas season for plenty of secular fun and nostalgia. Think "Santa Baby," sung by the fabulous and immortal Eartha Kitt; Chuck Berry's "Run, Run Rudolph"; "Santa Claus is Back in Town," by Elvis; Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas is You"; Mel Tormé and "The Christmas Song"; and—a personal favorite—Elmo and Patsy's "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer."

But aside from Hanukkah, woke capitalist blather about holiday "inclusiveness," and some eccentric, postmodern Druids who think the shortest day of the year (the winter solstice) is actually a big deal, December is really about Christmas—as in Christ-Mass; the nativity of Jesus Christ, messiah. Once upon a time, in a saner, more humane age, the faraway Age of Faith, the joy and beauty of the season didn't need to be manufactured, or hawked, or bought, or turned into kitsch. The joy was authentic. The beauty was organic. Together they shaped an astonishing body of sacred music, including scores of memorable carols; a corpus of transcendent hope and praise that still endures and renews the searching soul.

And here's the good news: The Age of Faith *isn't* over. It's never over in a believing heart. Its soundtrack is available on CD and elsewhere, just outside the junkyard noise and hysteria of modern commerce. Listening to the real music of the Christmas season is how my family spends the December days, and our playlist, in no particular order, is worth sharing here:

I. Joel Cohen and the Boston Camerata

A Medieval Christmas

Noel, Noel! French Christmas Music, 1200-1600

A Renaissance Christmas

A Baroque Christmas

The Camerata, founded in 1954 in Boston, is an early music ensemble led by Joel Cohen from 1968–2008, and

now by Anne Azéma. The albums above are uniformly superb.

2. Richard Westenburg/Musica Sacra (in English; Deutsche Grammophon)

Christmas Carols

A collection of classic carols, marvelously performed.

3. Benedictines of Mary, Queen of Apostles

Advent at Ephesus

A CD of carols focusing on Advent, from a choir of women religious sounding celestial.

4. Christian Desbordes/Ensemble Choral du Bout du Monde

Noels Celtiques

Founded in Brittany in 1977, the ensemble has a special focus on promoting Breton culture and language.

Collected here are Breton and other French Christmas carols performed hauntingly.

5. Andrew Parrott/Taverner Consort

The Carol Album: Seven Centuries of Christmas Music

Self-explanatory—and terrific.

6. Anonymous 4

Noel: Carols and Chants for Christmas

The Anonymous 4 was a female *a capella* quartet founded in 1986 and specializing (though not exclusively) in medieval music. They disbanded in 2016 after a brilliant and critically acclaimed career. *Noel* is actually a collection of four Anonymous 4 CDs that can also be bought separately:

Legends of St. Nicholas: European Chant and Polyphony

Wolcum Yule: Celtic and British Songs and Carols

On Yoolis Night: Medieval Carols and Motets

A Star in the East: Medieval Hungarian Christmas Music

7. Edward Higginbottom/Choir of New College, Oxford

Christmas at New College

Classic carols, classic choir, wonderfully done.

8. Sir David Willcocks/King's College Choir, Cambridge

Noel: Christmas at King's

Ditto no. 7 above, but a larger collection.

9. Various recordings/Westminster Choir

Our family's Westminster Choir CD is a 1979 recording and exceptionally beautiful, with a simple but wonderful version of "Of the Father's Love Begotten." But other Westminster Christmas recordings have been released over the years, nearly all of them worthwhile.

10. Amici Cantores of Milan

Puer Natus Est: Sacred Polyphony

A collection of Renaissance Christmas music.

11. Robert Shaw Chorale and Orchestra

Handel: The Great Choruses from Messiah

The best of Handel's *Messiah*.

12. Catriona O'Leary

The Wexford Carols

O'Leary's performance of the carol "This is Our Christmas Day," included here and written during the English suppression of Catholic worship in Ireland, is piercingly beautiful. Once heard, it can never be forgotten. The album's liner notes say it all:

This disc makes a pleasant change from the endless reissues of traditional carols that we are all used to at this time of year. These are based upon *A Smale Garland of Pious & Godly Songs* published in Ghent in 1684 by Luke Waddinge, the Catholic Bishop of Ferns, Co. Wexford, Ireland. Waddinge had been banished to the west of Ireland after the confiscation of his lands. The intention was to offer solace to the Irish Catholic gentry like him who had been disinherited following the appalling treatment of the Irish Catholics by Cromwell during his conquest of Ireland. In 1649 Wexford was sacked, many of its citizens were butchered and the city burned; by 1685 its population had dropped from 2,000 to 400. It is small wonder then that these simple songs have had such resonance for its people ever since.

The origin of the word "carol" tracks back through Middle English and Old French to pagan antiquity; in meaning, it's linked to dances of joy and praise. The birth of humanity's savior—the Redeemer of Man;

God's Word made flesh; the Way, the Truth, and the Life—seems pretty clearly to warrant both.

This Christmas, maybe we should listen accordingly.

Francis X. Maier is the 2020-22 senior research associate at Notre Dame's Center for Citizenship and Constitutional Government, and a senior fellow in Catholic studies at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

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