

impressive arrangement of *Mad, the Small Angels Sing* concludes this most entertaining and enlightening CD of genuine quality (**Newald HRPCD08**, 1 hour 14 minutes).



Probably the most surprisingly packaged and presented release in our collection is *The Wexford Carols*, a project which has far more than temporal interest. The material comes from *A Small Garland of Peace and Golly Songs* which Luke Wadlings, Bishop of Ferns, County Wexford, published in *Ghost* in 1684 – some eight months before J. S. Bach's birth. Composed originally as a solace for people like him, dishevelled Irish Catholic gentry (as Caitríona O'Leary's fascinating booklet notes tell us), Wadlings's poems were set to popular tunes of the day, both Irish and English. There is, therefore, much 'folk-like' atmosphere in the settings, and more than attempt to re-create late seventeenth-century instrumental fashion and performance practice (such as can be deduced from material which does not at all fall into the 'classical music' category), we have new arrangements and transcriptions which are given with much style and musical feeling – at all times respectful of the emanation of the material. Apart from O'Leary herself, we have carols here performed by Sir Tom Jones, Rosanne Cash and Rikmanus Gidlova, with a suitably varied small instrumental band. I found the result compelling, haunting in its timeless beauty, and even the newly composed settings fit admirably within the overall concept, proving the constancy of this rich and significant strand of European religious belief. A compelling disc, finely recorded – please try to sample this CD (**Strong Records 016**, 1 hour).

*Deck the Halls* from Stone Records is also a Christmas CD with a difference: the arrangements in this lyrical collection are aimed at a broader mainstream audience than one which devoutly sits in church at Midnight on Christmas Eve. Not that there is anything unsuitable in these transcriptions, which are mostly for soprano solo (Susanna Andersson) and instrumental group (The Little Venice Ensemble). But Gene Autry's *How Come Santa Claus* (perhaps better known from His

Preley's 1967 version, not to be confused with Santa Claus is Back in Town) – does not sit too well alongside choral preludes for organ by J. S. Bach and Brahms; neither is the occasional attempted pop/jazz style wholly successful. Not for all tastes, perhaps, and I should have liked Andersson's gentle soprano to have been balanced slightly more forward (**Stone Records 30070270004**, 1 hour 5 minutes).

*Süße Nacht*, a new compilation from Analein and taken from RIAS Berlin recordings made between 1972-86, is well worth investigating. The 34 tracks form a dramaturgical entity, a cycle beginning with Adrian Willaert's magnificent setting of *Motete mysticum delectabile beds*. The succeeding selection has been cleverly done, individual pieces following one another quite naturally. The selection ranges from the mysterious nocturnal eve which saw the birth of Christ, before returning to the evening of His birthday, bringing the cycle full circle. The music ranges from the early sixteenth century (Willaert and Ludwig Senfl) to the present day, but whereas it might be thought to cause too great a stylistic clash, each piece flows well in context. The recordings were all made by the RIAS Chamber Choir under Hans Gronostay and have been so clearly remastered that one would never guess the original dates. I found this a perfect Christmas record, of so little musical interest; the concluding *Süße Nacht* is most affecting (**Audio 07.771**, 1 hour 14 minutes).

It is undoubtedly the case that the greatest gift the Lutheran Church made to music – as the note on our next CD claims – was to charge Bach with providing a cantata for every week of the year, for it meant that he left us no fewer than three (one composed at Weimar, two at Leipzig) for the first Sunday in Advent, and their inclusion on a CD from Harmonia Mundi under the admirable Philippe Herreweghe makes a magnificent single disc. Herreweghe's *Collegium Vocale* is joined by soloists

of subject and the utilization of Luther's original chorale in all these works – varied in their treatment. The recording quality is state-of-the-art, and the performances throughout are so infused with such a combination of musical understanding, devotion and overall dramatic unity and purpose that it is difficult to imagine anything finer than this. Prigodinen's account of 'Die Liebe zieht mit sanften Schritten' in BWV6 (Schönung *freely such songs*) is simply superb. Strongly recommended (**Harmonia Mundi musique d'abord HMA7951625**, 1 hour 2 minutes).



At the time Bach was working in Leipzig, his younger contemporary Josef Antonín Selding (1710-56) was active in Prague, principally as an orchestral violinist and admired composer. Count Morzin, in whose orchestra Selding played, was a major patron of Antonio Vivaldi, and through frequent contact with the Italian master's latest work Selding's own style was largely influenced. With such an Italian-Catholic musical influence rather than the Germano-Lutheran style of Bach, Selding's music looks forward to the late eighteenth century, which he sadly did not see himself. A new Supraphon CD, *Christmas in Prague Cathedral*, in the series 'Music from 18th-Century Prague', has notable musical significance: each of the 12 individual tracks is claimed to be a world premiere recording, revealing this hitherto little-known eighteenth-century master on disc for the first time. Selding's music therefore bears a Vivaldian stamp, as we may hear in the aria 'Qui sidem movet' from the motet for Christ's birth, *Deposito Mater*, brilliantly sung by Hana Bláhová, as is indeed the rest of this work, with its thrilling 'Alleluia' choral ending, the orchestra coloured by haunting-calls from the horns. Selding's orchestral command is excellent – as one expects from an orchestral player – and this CD has musical interest outside of the season for which the pieces were originally composed. The performances, particularly from alto Markéta Calvrová and tenor Václav Čížek (a beautiful voice, most intelligently applied in a fine duet *Vi egnes ac fons* with Bláhová) and the Collegium

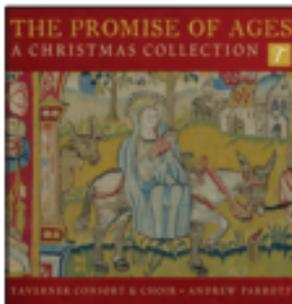


Sibylla Rubens, Sarah Connolly, Christoph Prigodinen and Peter Koop, and the result is outstanding. It was an intelligent concept to couple the three Advent cantatas on the one CD, for they are – despite the similarity

# Christmas releases

Marianum Prague under Jana Semerádová, are little short of revelatory throughout (**Supraphon S11076 2**, 3 hour 32 minutes).

A more traditional Christmas CD comes from Naxos, with the Elora Festival Singers of Ontario under Noel Edison and organist Michael Bross. This is of such a high standard as to give many famous English cathedral choirs serious competition in terms of intonation, internal balance and musicianship. Many of the 18 tracks here are of the most famous carols of all, and no matter how many times one has heard them sung over the years – live and on disc – the quality of these performances brings out the freshness and immortality of this music. Not that every track will have been heard that often – for there are some relatively recent compositions and arrangements, including Chilton's terrific arrangement of *My Dancing Day* and Paul Halliday's version of *What Child is This?*, alongside Britten's *A Boy was Born* from his Op. 3 choral variations. The quality of the choral singing here is quite thrilling at times – particularly in Stuart Thompson's setting of *The Holly and the Ivy* (winner of the 2011 Times card competition). This most enjoyable CD is also outstandingly recorded – though Britten died in 1976, not in 1967 – and is a genuine bargain (**Naxos 8.579427**, 3 hour).



*The Promise of Ages* is the title of a new CD from the Taverner Consort and Choir under Andrew Parrott, opening with perhaps the most surprising of all the carols in our survey – *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* – not utilising the familiar Mendelssohn tune but an anonymous one from almost 300 years earlier, an eighteenth-century setting by one 'C.B.', who might well have been Charles Burney. Wherever the composer was, it makes a truly uplifting beginning to a fascinating issue, so well performed and recorded throughout. Another surprise is track 2, with the Welsh card *Dad da Hwl* played on solo harp in an arrangement dating from 1784 by Edward Jones. These tracks set the scene for a fine collection of Christmas music from the British Isles of the last half-millennium, from anonymous Medieval pieces to Peter Maxwell

Davies and Judith Weir among other later composers. The disc is outstandingly sequenced and splendidly performed: the 'promise of ages', indeed, highly recommended (**Audi AV2218**, 3 hour 2 minutes).

*Christmas Carols from Village Green to Church Choir* is the title of a new Signum Release featuring the vocal ensemble Vox Tuturini and organist David Quinn, directed by Andrew Gant. The rather pastoral title encapsulates this collection admirably, which mainly features traditional seasonal carols and songs in both familiar and suitable new arrangements: the set has not been cast too widely, as can happen in 'Christmas releases' we sometimes encounter; the choice is a clever one. My favourite tracks here are the traditional *Fox, Fox Emmanuel* and *O Tommenhus* (which, sung wholly a cappella by the vocal ensemble, is exceptionally well done). Gant's own *What Child is This?* for solo soprano, solo tenor, choir and organ sits well within this collection, being a setting of a nineteenth-century poem originally to 'fit' the Goodenough time. This is another well-planned and splendidly performed CD, exceedingly recommendable (**Signum Classics SSCD182**, 3 hour 8 minutes).

Our next CD, *A Festive Christmas*, takes us away from the British Isles, and away, too, from much vocal music associated with the season. It is a programme of four concertos or sonatas by Vivaldi, Torelli and Pergolesi Porotti, plus vocal music by Vivaldi and Johann Adolph Hasse, in acoustically well-balanced recordings in the St John Evangelical Church in Mikołów, Poland. This music is nicely performed by Arto del Sasonari under Martin Gester, who is the solo organist in Vivaldi's Double Concerto for Flute and Organ, RV774 (originally for violin and organ, reconstructed by Olivier Fouris), Konrad Kopalko in the pachelbel soloist in Vivaldi's Concerto, RV266, and soprano Ruby Hughes is splendid in a rather long Vivaldi aria from his opera *Giorno e notte* and Hasse's remarkable setting of *Alle Reheynovis* (also in Vivaldi's more familiar *Salve Regina* in F (RV617)). This most successful issue, somewhat out of the ordinary for a seasonal offering, is also highly recommended (**RS BRUNSWICK**, 3 hour 15 minutes).

RS takes us (as did Naxos) across the Atlantic to the New World for a brilliantly successful new CD from New York Polyphony, as a cappella ensemble comprising four male voices, with occasional contributions from soprano Sarah Bradley and Elizabeth Baber Weaver. This release features haunting, unusual and profoundly traditional music from across the centuries – from earliest Gregorian chant and polyphony to the present-day (Richard Rodney Bennett's *Five Carols* sequence is a highlight of this



consistently outstanding disc). The music is immaculately yet expressively performed and incomparably well recorded; a magnificent follow-up disc (at some distance) from their deeply impressive debut Christmas recording 'I sing the birth', released in 2007. This new issue is, if anything, even finer (**RS BRUNSWICK**, 3 hour 12 minutes).

*Winter die Tote weilt* ('Winter the gate') is the title of a splendid release of recordings made in 2008 and featuring the Capella Vocale boys' choir (with tenors and basses) and a string quartet under the choir's founder Eckhard Weyand. Much of the music will be largely unknown to British ears, having been composed by relatively unfamiliar German composers from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, but there are tracks by Michael Praetorius and Mendelssohn (and to hear some of the latter's German choral settings), and even if most of the composers will be unfamiliar, the music is certainly worth attention and wide dissemination, particularly the setting of *Mens dicit eis* 'Desmond gang by Hermann Bach (1897-1983), a quietly impressive work, along the lines, one might say, of a German Herbert Howells. The performances are very fine, as is the recording (I assume this is a reissue), but what makes this CD doubly interesting is what one might call 'Part II' – a sequence of no fewer than 14 short Polish carols – all sung in German, but English texts are provided. This is an outstanding part of the recording, doubly so for its unique repertoire and quality of performance. There are no notes on the composers or the individual items, but don't let that deter you from coming into contact with a musically impressive issue (**Brnoer Classic CD88 046**, 55 minutes).

If one ever wondered what might have been heard in Leipzig at Christmastime during the 27 years Bach was Kapellmeister of the Thomaskirche, a compilation – *Baroque Christmas* – from Capriccio gives us little way to answering the question, for this two-CD set mainly features music by the Master and his sons Wilhelm Friedemann, Johann Christoph Friedrich and Carl Philipp Emanuel,