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Eleanor McCain — Holiday

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by **Harry Currie**

With a childhood of snowy, family-filled Christmases in Florenceville, New Brunswick, it's not surprising that the Christmas holidays hold many cherished memories for Eleanor McCain. Those were quiet times filled with music and togetherness. Every Christmas Eve Eleanor sang in the choir while her mother played the organ. Years of performing at Christmas concerts added to a passion for listening to and collecting beautiful Christmas music. Those strong family traditions and a passion for the holidays were passed down to Eleanor from her mother, and Eleanor, in turn, has passed these sentiments on to her own daughter, Laura.

But it's not easy for a conservatory-trained soprano to ease off and sing standards. Very few have been able to do it convincingly. One name sticks out above all others – Eileen Farrell. One of the greatest sopranos of the 20th century, Farrell could switch styles with ease, from an operatic aria to a plaintive, no-vibrato Coventry Carol, then belt out a gutsy Birth of the Blues. The marvellous Dutch soprano Elly Ameling managed to pull it off pretty well, depending on the songs.

Eleanor McCain is a conservatory trained soprano, and in her new Christmas album, 'Holiday', she manages what few sopranos can do – sings carols and standards with a purity and control that elevates her

to that rare breed of trained singers who can perform crossover material and do it right.

'Holiday' is a double CD package. Eleanor says that one CD is 'Naughty' and the other is 'Nice.' The Naughty collection is naughty because the arrangements by Brigham Phillips have a swing/jazz feel, even with carols like God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen and What Child Is This. (But I was disappointed that Eartha Kitt's "Santa, Baby" was missing!)

Kicking off the Naughty CD, 'God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen' starts conventionally, then falls into an easy, funky swing, Eleanor riding along with a lovely clear sound, a great bit of soprano scating over an instrumental break, some vocal double-tracking, then an extension leading to a final suspension which resolves into a Tierce de Picardie. (Shades of Harmony 100 at Mount Allison!)

A rarely-heard verse leads into the poignant 'What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?' Eleanor does this tune justice, with a perfect feel for the lyric, and her subtle time bending couldn't be better. The muted trumpet solo by Brigham Phillips is right on, then Eleanor carries it through to the finish. Probably my favourite track on the Naughty CD.

'What Child Is This' is done in a laid back two-beat 6/8 using the traditional tune 'Greensleeves'. Tasteful instrumental interludes separate the verses, Eleanor sings it pretty straight with some more double-tracking, and the chart is driven by rhythmic percussive fills by drummer Mark Kelso.

A gentle approach for 'Let There Be Peace On Earth' brings out the purity of Eleanor's lovely voice, and after a brief instrumental interlude for a moment I thought Eleanor had started singing again – but it wasn't Eleanor, it was her 9-year-old daughter Laura David. Laura certainly has her mother's genes, for her pitch was solid all the way, and her voice has the same quality as that of her mother. Eleanor harmonized in a descant with Laura as they brought the tune to a close. Really delightful.

One of my own personal favourite Christmas songs is 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas', probably because I had the privilege of singing in the vocal group to back Sinatra's version which was used in the film The Victors. Tasteful tenor solo by Bob De Angelis, beautifully sung, and thanks for the memory, Eleanor!

A rather dreamy arrangement of 'The First Noel' is notable because it's a duet with Eleanor's long-time friend Cindy Townsend, going back to their student days together at Mount Allison University's Conservatory of Music.

The Naughty CD completes with a contemporary carol, 'Mary Did You Know?', and two of the most famous Christmas songs, Mel Tormé's 'The Christmas Song' and the perennial Bing Crosby hit 'White Christmas'. Vocals are excellent, multi-instrumentalist Phillips switches to valve trombone for a smooth solo in The Christmas Song, and I'm pretty sure I heard an English horn coupled with a flute in the instrumental break in White Christmas. Naughty? Not really, but very nice.

The Nice CD begins with the carol 'Once in Royal David's City'. This is one track I have a bit of a problem with. Not that it's poorly done, not at all. Here's the problem. Except for the first verse beautifully done by Eleanor alone, the other verses combine Eleanor's voice superimposed on top of the 4-part choral arrangement sung by the Elmer Iseler Singers. It's not a good mix, especially when the melody is switched to the tenors and basses and the upper parts sing a descant. If the arrangement had been for solo soprano with choral accompaniment – John Rutter arranged it in that way – it would have been magnificent.

The carol 'I Wonder as I Wander' has its origins in a song fragment collected in 1933 by folklorist and singer John Jacob Niles. At an evangelical meeting in Appalachian North Carolina, a girl stepped out to the edge of the little platform. She began to sing. Her clothes were unbelievable dirty and ragged, and she, too,

was unwashed. Her ash-blond hair hung down in long skeins, but she was beautiful, and in her untutored way, she could sing. She smiled as she sang, smiled rather sadly, and sang only a single line of a song. Niles left with ‘three lines of verse, a garbled fragment of melodic material—and a magnificent idea.’ He completed the carol that year, and according to academic and theologian Ian Bradley, the ‘clean, haunting melody maintains the open-air atmosphere and sense of wistful wandering conjured up in the first line.’ And that’s how Eleanor performs it.

The Healey Willan arrangement of the traditional French carol ‘What Is this Lovely Fragrance’ combines Eleanor’s voice with the perfection of Erica Goodman’s harp, a discrete synth bass pad line, and later, the tasteful introduction of the Elmer Iseler Singers. Simply superb.

Lovely to hear the Elmer Iseler Singers under conductor Lydia Adams (also a Mount Allison grad) singing ‘Es ist ein Ros entsprungen’ to open the carol ‘Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming’, in the original German. Eleanor enters in English, the Singers back her with humming, and they finish it together. This one works well – beautifully done.

The poem ‘In the Bleak Midwinter’ by Christina Rossetti has been set to various melodies, but the version by Gustav Holst seems to mirror the words better than any other. This is the setting that Eleanor has chosen, and she captures every nuance of words and music.

‘The Huron Carol’ is the earliest known Canadian Christmas carol. It was written in 1643 by Jean de Brébeuf, a Jesuit missionary among the Hurons in Canada. The original lyrics were written in the Huron/Wendat language. Brébeuf based the melody on a traditional French folk song, ‘Une Jeune Pucelle’ (A Young Maid). The original English words used Huron religious concepts instead of those of the traditional European nativity story. Eleanor uses the Huron-based English version in a delightful First Nations setting by Brigham Phillips, with native drum effects by Mark Kelso, and Les Allt playing a native flute.

‘Away in a Manger’ was arranged by the late Elmer Iseler as a gentle hummed backing for a featured soprano soloist. What could be better for Eleanor and the Singers? ‘Silent Night’ and ‘O Holy Night’ complete the carols on the Nice CD, but Eleanor chose to include ‘Amazing Grace’ to end the collection as a tribute to her father, Wallace, who died in May, 2011. Family has always been of supreme importance to the McCains, and Christmas gatherings were high on their list. This is their first Christmas without Wallace.

Holiday was produced and arranged by Brigham Phillips, who also played piano, trumpet, valve trombone, clavinet, Hammond organ and did the Midi tracks. Rob Pilch, guitar; Jason Fowler, guitar; Pat Kilbride, acoustic and electric bass; Mark Kelso, drums and percussion; Bob De Angelis, tenor and bari saxes, clarinet and flute; Les Allt, flute and native flute; Jenny Thompson and Wendy Rose, violins; Claudio Vena, viola; John Marshman, cello; Lesley Young, English horn and oboe; James MacDonald, French horn; Shawn Grenke, organ; Erica Goodman, harp.

The Elmer Iseler Singers are conducted by Lydia Adams.

Soprano Cindy Townsend is a well-respected voice teacher in Toronto.

The beautiful cover photo of Eleanor dressed in white fur caused one English friend of mine to suggest, “If I knew she was coming down my chimney I’d sit on the hot coals to welcome her with open arms!”

There are many Christmas recordings out there, but Eleanor McCain’s variety-filled ‘Holiday’ fills a niche that contains few other residents, if any.

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