



CHRISTMAS WITH SONORO

Sonoro

Michael Higgins organ

Neil Ferris conductor

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Michael Higgins *organ*
Neil Ferris *conductor*

About Sonoro:

*'A rich, robust texture, abundant
in vibrant colour and undoubted excitement'*
The Guardian

'Classical concerts seldom feel so downright uplifting'
The Scotsman

Malcolm Archer (b. 1952) 1. A little child there is yborn	[2:28]	Fintan O'Carroll (1922–1981) 12. Suantraí ár Slánaitheora	[2:20]
Cecilia McDowall (b. 1951) 2. O Oriens	[4:28]	Michael Higgins 13. Coventry Carol	[3:39]
Paul Spicer (b. 1952) 3. In a Field as I Lay	[2:42]	Peter Warlock (1894–1930) 14. Bethlehem Down	[4:17]
Michael Higgins (b. 1981) 4. The angel Gabriel	[2:56]	John Rutter (b. 1945) 15. Wexford Carol	[4:24]
John Joubert (b. 1927) 5. There is no rose	[2:24]	Will Todd (b. 1970) 16. My Lord has Come	[4:16]
Gareth Treseder (b. 1985) 6. Blessed be that Maid Marie	[1:44]	Michael Higgins 17. Silent night	[3:36]
Herbert Howells (1892–1983) 7. A spotless rose	[3:31]	Stuart Nicholson (b. 1975) 18. Ding dong! merrily on high	[2:48]
Becky McGlade (b. 1974) 8. In the bleak midwinter	[4:31]	Total playing time	[59:08]
Michael Higgins 9. Tomorrow shall be my dancing day	[2:27]		
Betty Roe (b. 1930) 10. The Holly and the Ivy	[4:08]		
Sally Beamish (b. 1956) 11. In the stillness	[2:18]		



Christmas with Sonoro

In putting together the selection of carols for this recording, we have endeavoured to strike an even balance between some new compositions, some re-setting of familiar texts and new arrangements of familiar tunes, all topped off with a few festive favourites.

The composer, conductor and organist Malcolm Archer (b. 1952) set the fifteenth-century text **A little child there is yborn** in 2011. It is a lively and celebratory carol, perfectly crafted and builds to a rousing finale. **O Oriens** is a beautiful setting of one of the Advent Antiphons by Cecilia McDowall (b. 1951); McDowall infuses the score with shards of harmonic light, whilst always reminding us of the shadows from which we emerge.

Paul Spicer (b. 1952) wrote **In a Field as I Lay** whilst a student at the Royal College of Music studying under Herbert Howells. The simplicity of the words and their message is captured beautifully in the setting by the composer with Howells-like warm cadences. The familiar Basque carol **The angel Gabriel** is given an extraordinarily atmospheric arrangement here by Michael Higgins (b. 1981). The arrival of the angel Gabriel is preceded

by four separate soprano parts each singing a fragment of the melody in a loop, providing a quite auspicious background to a lovely arrangement with some original harmonic twists.

The Birmingham-based composer John Joubert (b. 1921) is well-known for his carol *Torches*, but his setting of the carol in praise of Mary **There is no rose** is gentle, beautiful and simple: Joubert's gift for melody and poise shines through. Gareth Treseder (b. 1985) is a regular singer with Sonoro, and he writes superbly well for voices. His setting of the traditional text **Blessed be that Maid Marie** is lively and exploits the change between compound and simple time to give a dance-like lilt to the piece; it is unashamedly celebratory and joyful.

One of the more familiar carols on the disc, **A spotless rose** is one of Herbert Howells' (1892–1983) most enduring works; there is a beautiful juxtaposition of the innocent naivety of the words with a melody that changes times signature almost every bar. A special emphasis is reserved for 'cold, cold winter'; Howells was familiar with biting Gloucestershire winters and wrote this carol on a presumably chilly Gloucester railway station. Becky McGlade (b. 1974) was also inspired by her local environment when writing her setting of

In the **bleak midwinter**, the wonderful poem of Christina Rossetti. The composer was walking down a Cornish lane on a cold November evening when the words of Rossetti came to mind, and she has provided a lovely alternative to some more familiar versions.

Michael Higgins' arrangement of **Tomorrow shall be my dancing day** is playful and joyful and displays all the hallmarks of a good arrangement; both listener and singers are allowed to enjoy the familiarity, but with one or two subtle variations keeping the interest throughout.

Betty Roe (b. 1930) is a prolific composer mainly of songs and musicals and her affinity for these genres translates well into her choral music. **The Holly and the Ivy** sets the contest of the holly and ivy in the battle for supremacy: 'Nay ivy, nay, it shall not be ewis, let holly have the mast'ry as the manner is.' Sally Beamish (b. 1956), like Betty Roe a composition student of Lennox Berkeley, sets the poem of Scottish poet Katrina Shepherd **In the stillness** with an exquisitely crafted warming glow. It has rapidly become a favourite and is a gem of a piece.

Suantraí ár Slánaitheora is a traditional Scottish lullaby of the Virgin Mary to her

new-born son, arranged by the Irish composer Fintan O'Carroll (1922–1981). The voice of Mary is heard as a haunting soprano solo; atmospheric, charming and very moving. Michael Higgins arranged the **Coventry Carol**, the words taken from the medieval *Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors*, for Wimbledon Choral Society in 2014. The mournful 'Lully, lulla' is given to a semi-chorus whilst the voice of the mother is taken by a soprano solo. The dark and threatening verse that depicts Herod in rage is dramatic, culminating in an extraordinary harmonic 'coup de théâtre'.

Peter Warlock (1894-1930) wrote **Bethlehem Down** with his friend the poet Bruce Blunt for *The Daily Telegraph's* carol competition in 1927. The carol offers a sublime moment of repose and an obvious outlet for Warlock's interest in Tudor music with beautiful expressive dissonances. Among the vast array of carols from the master craftsman John Rutter (b. 1945) is a setting of the traditional Irish carol **Wexford Carol**. It dates from the twelfth century, making it one of the oldest extant Christmas carols.

Will Todd (b. 1970) laces **My Lord has Come** with lush harmonies and moments of real intensity. This in contrast with the simplicity of the drone at the beginning and a tentative and fragile melody. Completing

the album we have two arrangements of classic Christmas carols; Michael Higgins offers a deferential setting of **Silent night** and Stuart Nicholson an extrovert and thoroughly festive **Ding dong! merrily on high**.

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Texts

Malcolm Archer (b. 1952)

1. **A little child there is yborn**

A little child there is yborn,
Eia, eia, susanni,
And he sprang out of Jesse's thorn,
Alleluia, alleluia,
To save all us that were forlorn.

Now Jesus is the childes name,
Eia, eia, susanni,
And Mary mild she is the dame,
Alleluia, alleluia,
And so our sorrow is turned to game.

It fell upon the high midnight,
Eia, eia, susanni,
The stars they shone both fair and bright,
Alleluia, alleluia,
The angels sang with all their might.

Three kings there came with their presents,
Eia, eia, susanni,
Of myrrh and gold and frankincense,
Alleluia, alleluia,
As clerkes sing in their sequence.

Now sit we down upon our knee,
Eia, eia, susanni,
And pray we to the Trinity,
Alleluia, alleluia,
Our help, our succour for to be.

Anonymous, fifteenth century

Cecilia McDowall (b. 1951)

2. **O Oriens**

O Oriens,
splendor lucis aeternae, et sol justitiae:
veni, et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis.

*O Morning Star,
splendour of light eternal, and sun of righteousness:
come, and enlighten those who dwell in darkness,
and the shadow of death.*

Advent Antiphon

Paul Spicer (b. 1952)

3. **In a Field as I Lay**

In a field as I lay
methought I heard an angel say
and speak these wordes wild:
'my little son with thee I play and sing;
thus rocked she her child.

Then marvell'd I right sore of this,
A maid to have a child ewis,
to have a child,
my sweetest son and yet my king of bliss;
thus rocked she her child.

Anonymous, fourteenth century

Michael Higgins (b. 1981)

4. **The angel Gabriel**

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame;
'All hail,' said he, 'thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady.' *Gloria!*

'For known a blessed mother thou shalt be,
all generations laud and honour thee,
thy son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold;
most highly favoured lady.' *Gloria!*

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
'To me be as it pleaseth God,' she said,
'My soul shall laud and magnify his holy name':
most highly favoured lady. *Gloria!*

Of her, Emmanuel, the Christ was born
in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas mom,
and Christian folk throughout the world
will ever say

'Most highly favoured lady.' *Gloria!*

Sabine Baring-Gould (1834–1924)

John Joubert (b. 1927)

5. **There is no rose**

There is no rose of such virtue
as is the rose that bare Jesu: *Alleluia.*

For in this rose contained was
heaven and earth in little space: *Res miranda.*

By that rose we may well see
there be one God in persons three: *Pares forma.*

Then leave we all this worldly mirth
and follow we this joyous birth: *Transeamus.*

Anonymous, fifteenth century

Gareth Treseder (b. 1985)

6. **Blessed be that Maid Marie**

Blessed be that Maid Marie;
Born He was of her body;
Very God ere time began,
Born in time the Son of man.

*Eya! Ihesus hodie
Natus est de Virgine.*

In a manger of an ass
Jesus lay and lulled was;
Born to die upon the Tree
Pro peccante homine.

Sweet and blissful was the song
Chanted of the Angel throng,

'Peace on earth,' Alleluya.
In excelsis gloria.

Fare three Kings from far-off land,
Incense, gold and myrrh in hand;
In Bethlehem the Babe they see,
Stelle ducti lumine.

Make we merry on this fest,
In quo Christus natus est;
On this Child I pray you call,
To assoil and save us all.

Traditional, fifteenth century

Herbert Howells (1892–1983)

7. **A spotless rose**

A spotless Rose is blowing,
Sprung from a tender root,
Of ancient seers' foreshowing,
Of Jesse promised fruit;
Its fairest bud unfolds to light
Amid the cold, cold winter,
and in the dark mid-night.

The Rose which I am singing,
Whereof Isaiah said,
Is from its sweet root springing
In Mary, purest Maid;
For through our God's great love and might
The Blessed Babe she bare us
In a cold, cold winter's night.

*Anonymous, fourteenth century,
tr. Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878)*

Becky McGlade (b. 1974)

8. **In the bleak midwinter**

In the bleak midwinter
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone,
Snow had fallen snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter
Long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him,
Nor earth sustain;
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When He comes to reign:
In the bleak midwinter
A stable-place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty
Jesus Christ.

What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part, –
Yet what I can I give Him,
Give my heart.

Christina Rossetti (1830–1894)



Michael Higgins
9. **Tomorrow shall be my dancing day**

Tomorrow shall be my dancing day:
I would my true love did so chance
to see the legend of my play,
to call my true love to my dance:

*Sing, O my love, O my love, my love, my love;
this have I done for my true love.*

Then I was born of a virgin pure,
of her I took fleshly substance;
thus was I knit to man's nature,
to call my true love to my dance:

In a manger laid and wrapped I was,
so very poor this was my chance,
betwixt an ox and a silly poor ass,
to call my true love to my dance:

Then afterwards baptised I was;
the Holy Ghost on me did glance,
my Father's voice heard from above,
to call my true love to my dance:

Traditional English carol

Betty Roe (b. 1930)
10. **The Holly and the Ivy**

Holly stands in the hall, fair to behold:
Ivy stands without the door, she is full sore a-cold.
*Nay, ivy, nay, it shall not be ywis;
Let holly have the mastery, as the manner is.*

Holly and his merry men, they dancen and they sing,
Ivy and her maidens, they weepen and they wring.

Ivy hath berries black as any sloes,
Then comes the owl, and eats them as she goes.

Holly hath birdies a full fair flock,
The nightingale, the popinjay, and the gentle laverock.

Good ivy, what birdies hast thou?
None but the owlet that cries 'how, how!'

Anonymous fifteenth century

Sally Beamish (b. 1956)
11. **In the stillness**

Text by Katrina Shepherd

Fintan O'Carroll (1922–1981)
12. **Suantraí ár Slánaitheora**

Seothó, seothúló.
Mo ghaol, mo ghrá 'gus m'eaduil thú!
Mo stóirín úr is m'fhéirín thú,
Mo mhacán álainn scéimheach thú.
Chan fiú mé féin bheith 'd dháil.

*My kin, my love, my treasure you.
My wondrous gift, my darling new.
My son, who's filled with beauty too,
'Tis I that do belong to you.*

*Traditional Scottish carol,
tr. Seán Óg Ó Tuama*

Michael Higgins
13. **Coventry Carol**

*Lully, lulla, thou little tiny child,
by by, lully lullay.*

O sisters too, how may we do
for to preserve this day
this poor youngling, for whom we do sing
by by, lully lullay?

Herod the king, in his raging,
charged he hath this day
his men of might, in his own sight,
all young children to slay.

That woe is me, poor child for thee!
and ever morn and day,
for thy parting neither say nor sing
by by, lully lullay!

*From the Pageant of the Shearmen and
Tailors, fifteenth century*

Peter Warlock (1894–1930)
14. **Bethlehem Down**

Text by Bruce Blunt (1899–1957)

John Rutter (b. 1945)
15. **Wexford Carol**

Good people all, this Christmas-time,
Consider well and bear in mind
What our good God for us has done,
In sending His beloved Son.

With Mary holy we should pray
To God with love this Christmas Day:
In Bethlehem upon that morn
There was a blessed Messiah born.

The night before that happy tide
The noble Virgin and her guide
Were long time seeking up and down
To find a lodging in the town.
But mark how all things came to pass:
From every door, repelled alas!
As long foretold, their refuge all
Was but an humble oxen stall.

Near Bethlehem did shepherds keep
Their flocks of lambs and feeding sheep;
To whom God's angels did appear,
Which put the shepherds in great fear.
'Prepare and go,' the angels said,
'To Bethlehem, be not afraid;
For there you'll find, this happy morn
A princely babe, sweet Jesus born.'

With thankful heart and joyful mind,
The shepherds went the babe to find,
And as God's angel had foretold,
They did our Saviour Christ behold.
Within a manger he was laid,
And by his side the virgin maid,
Attending on the Lord of life,
Who came on earth to end all strife.

Good people all, this Christmas-time,
Consider well and bear in mind
What our good God for us has done,
In sending His beloved Son.
With Mary holy we should pray
To God with love this Christmas Day:
In Bethlehem upon that morn
There was a blessed Messiah born.

Traditional Irish carol

Will Todd (b. 1970)
16. **My Lord has Come**

Text by Will Todd

Michael Higgins
17. **Silent night**

Silent night, holy night,
All is calm, all is bright;
Round yon virgin mother and child.
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night,
Shepherds first saw the sight:
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heav'nly hosts sing Alleluia:
Christ the Saviour is born.

Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light;
Radiance beams from thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

*Josef Mohr, (1773–1848)
tr. John F. Young (1820–1885)*

Stuart Nicholson (b. 1975)
18. **Ding dong! merrily on high**

Ding dong! merrily on high,
In heav'n the bells are ringing.
Ding, dong! verily the sky
Is riv'n with angels singing.
Gloria, Hosanna in excelsis!

E'en so here below, below'
Let steeple bells be swungen'
And i-o, i-o, i-o,
By priest and people be sungen.

Pray you, dutifully prime
Your matin chime, ye ringers;
May you beautifully rime
Your evetime song, ye singers.

George Ratcliffe Woodward (1848–1934)

Sonoro

Sonoro, one of the UK's most impressive professional chamber choirs was founded in 2016 by Neil Ferris and Michael Higgins, and has attracted attention for its warm tone, rich blend of colours and vibrancy in performance.

Sonoro's distinctive sound has propelled the ensemble to secure repeat engagements at major national and international festivals and venues including the London Chamber Music Series at Kings Place, the Wimbledon International Music Festival, the St Magnus International Festival, Orkney, and in St Gallen, Switzerland.

The choir's unmistakably rich and full sound has been realised by allowing each singer to be free to use the full range of their voice. Flexibility is matched by careful attention to blend and nuance, creating warmth and resonance. 'Sonoro' in Italian means 'sonorous, voices that are rich and full' and Sonoro lives up to that name as a choir with a distinctive and perfectly blended sound.

www.sonoromusic.com

Soprano

Nina Bennet
Eloise Irving (soloist, track 4)
Rebecca Lea (soloist, track 12)
Joanna Tomlinson (soloist, track 13)
Emily Wenman

Alto

Cathy Bell
Lucy Goddard
Ruth Kiang
Martha McLorinan

Tenor

Graham Neal
James Preston
Greg Tassell
Gareth Treseder (soloist, track 15)

Bass

Richard Bannan (soloist, track 7)
James Birchall
Cheyney Kent
Richard Savage



Michael Higgins (organ)

Michael Higgins is a pianist, accompanist, composer and arranger. With a special interest in choral accompaniment, Michael is in demand with some of the leading choirs in the country and works with the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain, London Voices, Wimbledon Choral Society and is Artistic Director of Sonoro. In 2012 Michael spent six months travelling across the USA filming a series for American television with popular choir master Gareth Malone, and also appeared on HM The Queen's Christmas Message accompanying the Military Wives Choir at Buckingham Palace.

Michael has performed throughout the UK at venues including the Royal Festival Hall, London, Symphony Hall, Birmingham and Usher Hall, Edinburgh, as well as across Europe and further afield in Australia and New Zealand. As a rehearsal pianist, he has worked with conductors Daniel Barenboim, Gustavo Dudamel, Jiří Bělohlávek, and Sakari Oramo.

As a composer and arranger he has written for Farnham Youth Choir, the National Children's Choir of Great Britain, corporate films and television commercials including the 2014 Waitrose Christmas advert,

arrangements for the albums *Voices* and *A Great British Christmas* released on the Decca label, as well as the Classic BRIT awards, BBC Children in Need, the Royal Variety Performance and a season of *It Takes a Choir* for American television. Many of his works, including his arrangement of Fauré's *Requiem* for string quintet and organ, are published by the Royal School of Church Music, Novello and Oxford University Press.

Michael studied piano with Margaret Newman at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, and at the Royal Academy of Music, London, with Iain Ledingham and Julius Drake. He was awarded the Joseph Weingarten Memorial Trust Scholarship and continued his studies with Kálmán Dráfi at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music, Budapest.

www.michaelhiggins.com



Neil Ferris (conductor)

Neil Ferris is the co-Artistic Director and conductor of Sonoro, and Music Director of Wimbledon Choral Society, one of London's leading amateur choirs. In 2017 he was appointed the new Chorus Director of the BBC Symphony Chorus and guest conductor of the National Youth Choir of Wales.

In demand as a guest conductor with some of the finest choirs in the UK, Neil has worked with the London Symphony Chorus, the Bach Choir, the Choir of the Age of Enlightenment and the BBC Singers. He has prepared choirs for internationally acclaimed conductors including Valery Gergiev, Sir Simon Rattle, Marin Alsop, Bernard Haitink, Sakari Oramo, Sir Andrew Davis, Carlo Rizzi, Ed Gardner, Donald Runnicles and Martyn Brabbins.

Formerly Director of Choral Studies at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Neil helped establish the international reputation of the choral conducting course and developed the conservatoire's choral ensembles. He is recognised as one of the country's leading teachers of choral conducting and has led masterclasses in the UK, USA, Ireland and Denmark.

Neil has conducted the London Symphony Orchestra, Welsh National Opera, New Queens Hall Orchestra, London Mozart Players, Orchestra of the Swan, Orchestra Vitae and Florilegium. He made his Royal Opera House debut in a production of Will Tuckett's ballet *The Wind in the Willows*.

Recordings include an album of the choral music of Jonathan Dove with Convivium Singers released on the Naxos label and Fauré's *Requiem* on the Convivium Records label. Resonus Classics has recently released Sonoro's debut album *Passion and Polyphony* featuring works by James MacMillan and Frank Martin.

www.neilferris.com

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BBC Music Magazine

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Sonoro Artistic Directors: Neil Ferris & Michael Higgins

Producer, engineer & editor: Adam Binks

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RESONUS LIMITED – UK

info@resonusclassics.com

www.resonusclassics.com

The image features a central logo for 'SONORO' in white, uppercase letters. The letter 'O' is stylized as a series of concentric white circles. The background is a dark purple gradient with a bokeh effect of out-of-focus red and blue light spots. Several thin, white concentric circles are centered behind the text, creating a ripple effect.

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