



CHRISTMAS BELLS

ORGAN MUSIC FROM
BELFAST CATHEDRAL

MATTHEW OWENS

Christmas Bells

Organ Music from Belfast Cathedral

Matthew Owens *organ*

About Matthew Owens:

'His articulation and ornamentation are always stylistically appropriate and he has the knack of choosing tempi which feel exactly right.'
Gramophone

'Owens also proves to be a very assured performer [...] with a thoughtful approach to touch, articulation, registration and interpretation.'
Early Music Review

J.S. Bach (1685–1750) Canonic Variations on 'Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her', BWV 769a		15. Partita VI [1:24]
1. Variation I [1:50]		16. Partita VII [1:16]
2. Variation II [1:33]		17. Partita VIII [0:56]
3. Variation III [3:02]		
4. Variation IV [2:57]		Flor Peeters (1903–1986)
5. Variation V [3:27]		18. 30 Chorale Preludes, Op. 70, No. 3: Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her (From heaven above to earth I come) [2:16]
		Philip Moore
Alexandre Guilmant (1937–1911)		19. Prelude on Irby * [3:20]
6. Livre de Noël, Op. 60, No. 2: Introduction et Variations sur un Ancien Noël Polonais [4:16]		Philip Wilby (b.1949)
		20. Ding Dong! Merrily on High * [2:02]
Philip Moore (b.1943)		Gary Davison (b.1961)
7. A Fugal Flourish on Personent Hodie * [3:52]		Seven Versets on Divinum Mysterium *
		21. Verset I [0:55]
Louis-Claude Daquin (1694–1772)		22. Verset II [1:19]
8. Nouveau Livre de Noël: XII. Noël Suisse [4:50]		23. Verset III [2:34]
		24. Verset IV [1:32]
Matthew Owens (b.1971)		25. Verset V [0:51]
9. Prelude on 'Yorkshire' * [3:58]		26. Verset VI [3:56]
		27. Verset VII [2:23]
J. G. Walther (1684–1748)		Alexandre Guilmant
Partita 'Lobt Gott, ihr Christen, allzugleich'		28. Livre de Noël, Op. 60, No. 1: Noël Écossais [4:24]
10. Partita I [0:51]		
11. Partita II [1:07]		Franz Liszt (1811–1886)
12. Partita III [1:02]		29. Weihnachtsbaum, S.186: III. Die Hirten an der Krippe (In dulci jubilo) [3:48]
13. Partita IV [0:50]		
14. Partita V [0:55]		

Flor Peeters	
30. Ten Chorale Preludes, Op. 68, No. 7: Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern (How brightly beams the morning star)	[3:39]
Howard Skempton (b.1947)	
31. Christmas Bells *	[2:13]
Garth Edmundson (1892–1971)	
32. Christus Advenit (Second Christmas Suite): IV. Toccata on Vom Himmel hoch	[4:53]
Total playing time	[78:29]

* *World premiere recording*

Christmas Bells: Organ Music from Belfast Cathedral

Traditional tunes, whether Lutheran chorales, plainchant, French noëls, or medieval carols, have provided the inspiration for much Christmas organ music. Most of this programme is made up of pieces based on such tunes, starting with what is arguably the greatest set of variations ever written on a chorale melody. The **Canonic Variations on Von Himmel hoch BWV 769a** (Tracks 1–5) were composed by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) in the 1740s, and they were published by the firm of Balthasar Schmid in Nuremberg in 1747. However, the version recorded here is Bach's slightly later revision (made after publication) in which he modified the order of the variations and made some other small changes. These variations are a spectacular demonstration of Bach's contrapuntal writing: not only does he show abundant skill and learning, but there is also a joyous, vital feeling to the music. Christoph Wolff has written that 'the Christmas tune offered the possibility of composing an elaborate set of chorale variations' and described the result as 'dazzling and masterful.' It's no surprise that Stravinsky was beguiled by this work, and made a stunningly inventive

reworking of it for choir and orchestra in 1955–6, adding some new canonic lines of his own (and noting, amusingly, that he had done so 'with the master's permission'). The variations as presented in BWV 769a are 1. Canon at the octave; 2. Canon at the fifth; 3. Canon with inversions (originally var. 5); 4. Canon at the seventh (originally var. 3); and 5. Augmentation canon (originally var. 4). The dry-sounding titles are deceptive: from start to finish, this is some of Bach's most inspired organ writing.

Johann Gottfried Walther (1684–1748) was not only an important musical lexicographer and composer, but also Bach's cousin. His **Partita: Lobt Gott, ihr Christen, allzugleich** (Tracks 10–17) is a set of seven chorale variations which treats the melody with considerable ingenuity: an initial presentation in the right hand, decorated by rapid figuration (var. 1), in imitation (var. 2), in the pedals (var. 3), in the right hand, against running left-hand semiquavers (var. 4), punctuated by dotted rhythms (var. 5), intercut with brief interjections derived from a diminution of the theme (var. 6), and finally the chorale in a splendid imitative dialogue, decorated by faster notes, to bring the variations to an impressive close (var. 7).

While German organists were mining chorale tunes, their French contemporaries drew on

Noëls – vernacular Christmas songs – for sets of variations. Louis-Claude Daquin (1694–1772) played for Louis XIV at the age of six, and became organist at the Sainte-Chapelle aged twelve. In 1739 he was appointed Court organist to Louis XV and he was made titulaire at Notre-Dame de Paris in 1755. Daquin’s Noëls, probably composed in the 1740s, are described on the title page of the first edition (issued by the composer himself) as ‘for the organ and harpsichord, most of which can be played on violins, flutes, oboes, &c. [sic]’ This was more of a marketing ploy than a serious suggestion about the instrumentation: in most of the pieces, the organ is clearly what Daquin had in mind, and he usually gives detailed indications of registration. The twelfth and last of the set, the **Noël Suisse** (Track 8), is a grandly-conceived piece, requiring the use of a ‘pédale de trompette’ at key moments. The essential material is a dotted Noël theme repeated and then varied (in triplets), over harmonies that remain largely unchanged, but in spite of the simple construction, the results are undeniably impressive: Daquin would have agreed with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who declared that ‘Noëls should have a rustic and pastoral character’. The ‘Swiss’ tune was later used again by Claude Balbastre for one of his Noëls in about 1770. It is usually associated with the text ‘Il est un

p’tit l’ange’ (‘He’s a little angel’), which tells of a Swiss boy visited by an angel who urges him to visit the Christ-Child.

The revival of interest in French Baroque organ music was a lifelong campaign for Alexandre Guilmant (1837–1911), who co-edited an edition of Daquin’s Noëls with André Pirro in 1901. One of the founders of the Schola Cantorum in Paris, and the first organist at the Church of La Trinité (a post held a century later by Olivier Messiaen), Guilmant also composed Noëls of his own. Guilmant drew not only on French tunes but also from further afield, and the first book of his Op. 60 Noëls includes a meditative **Noël Écossais** (Track 28) (intended for use at Communion) based on the old Scottish carol, ‘What strangers are these?’ To open the second book, Guilmant wrote an Introduction and Variations on an old Polish carol, **Noël Polonais** (Track 6) – the tune known in English-speaking lands as ‘Infant holy, infant lowly’. After a grandiose introduction, the melody is presented, then followed by three variations: the first with the carol in the bass, the second with more chromatic harmonies, and the third rounding off the piece with an affirmative fortissimo restatement.

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) started

Weihnachtsbaum (‘The Christmas Tree’) in 1873 and, after some revisions, this suite of Christmas pieces was published in 1882 with a dedication to his granddaughter Daniela von Bülow (1860–1940). Most of these twelve pieces are intended for solo piano, but the first four have the option of ‘piano or harmonium’, including **Die Hirten an der Krippe** (In dulci júbilo) (Track 29), which works very well on either instrument. A bucolic meditation depicting the Shepherds at the Manger, it opens with a lilting dotted rhythm to accompany *In dulci júbilo*, the old German carol tune initially made famous by Michael Praetorius, and subsequently by J.S. Bach. Liszt treats the tune in an unashamedly nineteenth-century style, and the result is both delicate and delightful.

Chorale tunes continued to lure composers in the twentieth century. The Belgian organist and composer Flor Peeters (1903–1986) wrote several sets of chorale preludes, combining Bach-like techniques with agreeably spiced twentieth-century harmonies. **How brightly beams the morning star** (Track 30) is No. 7 from his Ten Chorale Preludes, Op. 68 (first published in 1950) and it presents the tune surrounded by a lively musical dialogue. **From heaven above to earth I come** (Track 18) is No. 3 of Op. 70

(also issued in 1950) in which the chorale tune is heard in the pedals, while gently undulating countermelodies unfold on the manuals.

Garth Edmundson (1892–1981) was an American composer active as an organist in Pennsylvania. His **Toccata on Vom Himmel hoch** (Track 32) was published in 1937 as the fourth movement of *Christus advenit* (Christmas Suite No. 2) but it has subsequently acquired a life of its own as a showpiece. It starts with brilliant carillon-like swirling on the manuals before the melody enters on the pedals. Though there are quieter episodes, the momentum of this toccata never lets up until the triumphant final statement of the chorale.

The American composer Gary Davison (b.1961) composed his **Seven Versets on Divinum Mysterium** (Tracks 21–27) for Matthew Owens, specifically for this recording. A set of variations on the eleventh-century plainchant, the composer himself has written as follows:

Each brief variation within this set is akin to a visual sketch of sorts, exploring the varying colours of the organ through the expressive possibilities of the melody. The first

verset is a straight-forward rendering of the tune. In the second, we hear the tune quietly presented in compound metre (as adapted in *Piae Cantiones*). The third ventures in to a new key area with the chant stated on the pedal in rhythmic augmentation. The fourth variation returns to the harmonic structure of the first, but in a new key area and with the tune ornaments. Verset five is a pedal solo back in the home key. The sixth variation moves to the relative minor, with the slow-moving melody in the top line in counterpoint to the inverted pedal line, with inner voices woven between the two. The set concludes with a lively 'sortie'.

The other piece composed especially for this disc is **Christmas Bells** (Track 31) by Howard Skempton (b.1947), and it, too, is dedicated to Matthew Owens. Skempton is a master of artful simplicity, combining this with a wonderful aural imagination. Here is music in which all non-essential musical elements are stripped away and in *Christmas Bells* (composed in June 2021) Skempton uses slowly shifting combinations of notes to create an illusion of multiple bells being rung, their sounds overlapping, their sounds mingling with each other.

A **Fugal Flourish on 'Personent hodie'** (Track 7) by Philip Moore (b.1943) was composed in 2013. It opens with a nod to the introductory descending scales devised by Gustav Holst for his arrangement of the carol. The tune (one of many carols printed in *Piae cantiones*) is then heard in fugal imitation, the last entry coming on the pedals, before everything comes back together for the refrain, with some exciting decorations and a powerful finish. Moore's **Prelude on 'Irby'** (Track 19) was published a year later, in 2014. The original tune is by Henry Gauntlett (1805–1876) and it was published in a small collection of Christmas Carols in 1849 where it accompanies the words by which it is much better known: 'Once in Royal David's City'. Moore's prelude weaves the famous tune into a fluid texture, with quavers in the manuals and steadier crotchets in the pedals. **Ding Dong, Merrily on High!** (Track 20) by Philip Wilby (b.1949) is marked 'Festivo', and it is a caprice based on the famous French carol tune, harmonised with a wit and aplomb that has something of Percy Grainger about it.

The 'Portico Preludes' are the result of a recent initiative in Northern Ireland. The Portico of Ards is an arts centre in Portaferry. With funding from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the Portico commissioned ten composers to write

'Portico Preludes', new organ pieces based on hymn tunes, inspired by Bach's *Little Organ Book*. The whole collection is dedicated to the memory of David McElderry (1956–2021) who restored the Portico's pipe organ. One of the 'Portico Preludes' is included: the **Prelude on 'Yorkshire'** (Track 9) by Matthew Owens (b.1971), in which the tune – 'Christians awake, salute the happy morn' – is heard against a quiet, swaying motif which animates the whole piece and is marked to be played *con gioia* – with joy.

© 2021 Nigel Simeone

This recording is dedicated to the memory of Northern Irish organ builder David McElderry (1956–2021), who looked after the organ of Belfast Cathedral for a number of years.

Matthew Owens (organ)

Matthew Owens became Director of Music at Belfast Cathedral in September 2019 where he leads the fully professional, all adult choir of Northern Ireland's national cathedral. He is the head of the cathedral's music department and responsible for all aspects of the cathedral's music. Later in 2019 he founded the Ulster Consort, a new professional vocal and instrumental ensemble for Northern Ireland for which he is both artistic director and conductor. Previously, he had been Organist and Master of the Music at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, Edinburgh (1999–2004), and Organist and Master of the Choristers at Wells Cathedral (2005–2019). Under his leadership, Wells Cathedral Choir was named by an international jury for *Gramophone* as the best choir in the world with children, and the sixth greatest overall. Matthew served as President of the Cathedral Organists' Association (2010–13); he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Guild of Church Musicians in November 2012; and in October 2017 he was made a Prebendary (Canon) of Wells Cathedral 'for outstanding service' to the Diocese and the Cathedral. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in October 2020.

Matthew was educated at Chetham's School of Music, Manchester; The Queen's College, Oxford; the Royal Northern College of Music; and the Amsterdam Conservatorium. Studying with Gordon Stewart, Margaret Phillips and Jacques van Oortmerssen, he won all the major prizes in the diplomas of the Royal College of Organists and the Silver Medal of the Worshipful Company of Musicians. As an organist, Matthew has given recitals in Australia, France, Ireland, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland, the USA, and throughout the UK.

He has guest conducted, among others, the London Mozart Players, English Symphony Orchestra, Southern Sinfonia, Scottish Ensemble, Nash Ensemble, Brook Street Band, and the Hungarian National Philharmonic Orchestra. As a conductor he has made over 30 recordings with major labels, and now records exclusively for the award-winning label, Resonus Classics.

As an educator, Matthew has directed choral workshops and summer schools throughout the UK and abroad – including Australia, China, Germany, Hong Kong, Luxembourg, New Zealand, and the USA; he was Tutor in Organ Studies at the Royal Northern College of Music (1995–2001); and has contributed academic papers and publications on choristers and on



contemporary sacred music (OUP; Journal of Voice; Open Book Publishers).

He has championed new music, particularly of British composers, conducting over 200 world premieres, including works by leading composers ranging from Jools Holland to Sir James MacMillan, and John Rutter to Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. He is Director of the Cranmer Anthem Book (launched in October 2017); a project that will set all

88 Collects from the *Book of Common Prayer* to music, with some of the world's finest composers. As a composer himself, Matthew is published by Oxford University Press, Novello, and the Royal School of Church Music.

**The Harrison & Harrison Organ of
Belfast Cathedral (1907, 1975)**

GREAT

Contra Geigen	16
Double Claribel Flute	16
Open Diapason No. 1	8
Open Diapason No. 2	8
Geigen	8
Rohr Flöte	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Octave	4
Wald Flöte	4
Twelfth	2 2/3
Fifteenth	2
Forniture 19.22.26.29	IV
Cornet 1.8.12.15.17	V

Solo to Great
Swell to Great
Choir to Great

CHOIR

Diapason	8
Gedeckt	8
Principal	8
Nazard	2 2/3
Wald Flöte	2
Tierce	1 3/5
Larigot	1 1/5
Cimbel 29.33.36	III
Cornet 1.8.12.15.17 (Gt)	V
Tromba	8
Octave Tromba	4

Solo to Choir
Swell to Choir
Trombas Sub Octave
Trombas on Great

SWELL

Lieblich Bourdon	16
Open Diapason	8
Lieblich Gedeckt	8
Echo Gamba	8
Vox Angelica	8
Principal	4
Lieblich Flöte	4
Fifteenth	2
Mixture 12.19.22	III
Sharp Mixture 26.29.33.36	IV
Oboe	8
Vox Humana	8
Double Trumpet	16
Trumpet	8
Clarion	4
Tremulant	

Solo to Swell
Octave
Sub Octave
Unison Off

SOLO

Quintatön	16
Flute d'Amour	8
Viole d'Orchestre	8
Flute Celeste	8
Gemshorn	4
Flauto Traverso	4
Harmonic Piccolo	2
Cromorne	8
Orchestral Oboe	8
Tuba (unenclosed)	8
Tremulant	

Octave
Sub Octave
Unison Off

PEDAL

Double Open Wood	32
Sub Bass	32
Open Wood	16
Open Diapason	16
Violone	16
Bourdon	16
Principal	8
Octave Wood	8
Flute	8
Fifteenth	4
Flute	4
Twenty Second	2
Mixture 15.19.22	III
Bombardon	32
Ophicleide	16
Posaune	8
Schalmei	4

Solo to Pedal
Swell to Pedal
Great to Pedal
Choir to Pedal

ACCESSORIES

8 Pistons to Solo, Swell, Great, and Choir
8 General Pistons
Expression Pedals to Solo and Swell
16 Levels of Divisional Memory
96 Levels of General Memory
Stepper System
Gt & Ped Combinations Coupled
Generals on Swell Toes



More titles from Resonus Classics



Johann Pachelbel: Organ Works, Volume 1
Matthew Owens (organ)
The Frobenius Organ of The Queen's College, Oxford
RES10285

'[...] Owens hits the mark every time'
BBC Music Magazine



A Belfast Christmas
Belfast Cathedral Choir
Gráinne Meyer (harp)
Jack Wilson (organ)
Matthew Owens (conductor & solo organ)
RES10292

© 2021 Resonus Limited
© 2021 Resonus Limited
Recorded in Belfast Cathedral on 24–25 June 2021,
by kind permission of the Dean and Board of Belfast Cathedral
Producer, engineer & editor: Adam Binks
Recorded at 24-bit/96kHz resolution
Cover image: Christmas Bells by Morgan Studio (shutterstock.com)

RESONUS LIMITED – UK

info@resonusclassics.com
www.resonusclassics.com

