



Ensemble Altera present 'Feminine Voices at Christmas', featuring music by eight female composers as well as the original version of Britten's A Ceremony of Carols

JOY to the WORLD

Edward Breen listens to music for the festive season, ranging from baroque liturgy to newly composed carols, a Dickens-themed programme and a Cuban Christmas

Christmas albums have a quick turnover in our house but occasionally one joins the list of hardy perennials. By any measure 2025 is laden with distractingly good releases, so I suspect my Christmas will be more than usually tuneful.

Starting with early music, baroque powerhouse Il Pomo d'Oro under Giuseppe Maletto present **Natale veneziano**, a programme of 16th- and 17th-century liturgical music. The choir are surprisingly warm-toned, the opening of Monteverdi's *Dixit Dominus I* being a notable case in point. There are moments, however, when I'd like more grit, such as 'Judicabit in nationibus: implebit ruinas' ('He will judge between the nations, filling them with corpses'), although Andrea Gabrieli's *Angelus ad pastores ait*, the earliest work here, is utterly sublime.

Responsorios de Navidad from La Grande Chapelle explores music by Madrid-based José de Nebra. This Baroque composer's work even travelled to Mexico, and his style is tunelessly reminiscent of Caldara. *Quem vidistis, pastores?* suits

this perky ensemble well and they're also touching in the contemplative *O magnum mysterium*. Nebra's Polychoral Mass in G features on **¡Feliz Navidad! - Mexican Baroque Music for Christmas**, but before that the responsory *Quae est ista quae ascendit* from Matins for the Virgin of Guadalupe by Ignacio Jerusalem has a quasi-Handelian presence with a delightfully extrovert bass solo sung by Thomas Bonni.

Christmas celebrations are a big part of our British choral scene, with many albums released this year. **All the Stars Looked Down** celebrates both the music of John Rutter as he turns 80 and the memory of Stephen Cleobury. The Choir of King's College, Cambridge, and Britten Sinfonia open with a stunning brass fanfare for *Hark! the herald angels sing*, and close with *O come, all ye faithful* in David Willcocks's arrangement. Along the way Philip Ledger's touching setting of *A spotless rose* showcases the boy choristers' classic tone. The choir are ever-exquisite – even if I differ with them over their pronunciation of 'angel' (they emphasise the second syllable) – but more than

that, the partnership with Britten Sinfonia seems to bring out the best in all. Don't miss the title-track: Rutter the melodist is at his strongest here.

O Holy Night from the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge, is a glorious mixture of impassioned performances. Poulenc's *Quatre Motets pour le temps de Noël* and Howells's carol-anthems sit alongside Sally Beamish's arresting *In the Stillness* and Errollyn Wallen's sparkling snow-globe textures in *Peace on Earth*. There's a treble solo in *O holy night* that will conjure the essence of Christmas for many.

This is also a good year for new carols, and on The Sixteen's **The Wise Men and the Star**, as we expect from one of Britain's premier vocal ensembles, the performances are assured, compelling and emotional. Start with Alec Roth's *Lullaby Carol* to hear some beguiling portamento, then Eric Whitacre's *Lux aurumque* for the way his chords tease apart from each other in this well-paced and spacious performance – spine-tingling stuff. Reena Ismail's trilogy of carols *A Winter Breviary* captured my attention, following the canonical hours as they take a fantastic turn from cold harmonies to joyful rhythmic outpourings at daybreak. This suits The Sixteen perfectly, as does Kim Porter's lovely, swirling *Benediction*, which is also set to become a seasonal favourite.

An album of readings and music for Advent, **Nowel: Advent & Beyond**, features one my favourite choirs, Ensemble Pro Victoria, alongside the comforting voice of Rowan Williams. Carols envelop two longer cycles by Hugo Distler (*Seven*

Earworm of 2025 goes to Sarah Quartel's sea shanty-esque This Endris Night, with rich low notes, tight ensemble and compelling rhythmic drive

Chorale Variations from Die Weihnachtsgeschichte, Op 10) and Piers Connor Kennedy, who sets Williams's poetry in *Nowel el el* for lower voices and harpist Cecily Beer – a partner piece for Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*. This is indeed a Christmas for harpists and for bright, clear tenor solos: try the listless textures of 'This flour is fayre and fresche of heue' to see what I mean. David McGregor's *O Oriens* caught my attention for its mesmeric, slithering opening, which resounds wonderfully in the generous acoustic. It is also a year for lullabies: Byrd's *Lulla*, *lullaby* flows briskly into the exquisite *Lully, lulla, lullay* by Philip Stopford, an outstandingly intimate and lilting performance.

If you want your Christmas bigger and brassier, look no further than **On Christmas Night** from the London Choral Sinfonia. Malakai Bayoh sings Howard Blake's *Walking in the air* with more intensity than Aled Jones's famous ethereal tone. There is also a premiere recording of Holst's *Christmas Day*, a medley orchestrated by Owain Park, who features in several guises throughout this list: Martha McLorinan's opening solo is honey-perfect for the season and the Holstian harmonies bring seasonal flavour to the choral passages. A new arrangement of *Away in a manger* by Bob Chilcott will make you misty-eyed with its smooth string-playing and endlessly unhurried choral



Renaissance motets and timeless carols from Chanticleer

phrasing, and Max Pappenheim's arrangement of *O holy night* might finally rival that old Sutherland favourite with its classic Hollywood glow and powerful solo from soprano Emma Bell.

A crisp and classy sound characterises contemporary choral music in **A Babe is Born** from St Martin's Voices, where established composers Cecilia McDowall and Gabriel Jackson mingle with newer generations. Becky McGlade's *O come, O come, Emmanuel* is an early tuneful favourite with easy gliding harmonies

in a traditional framework with fresh, tender and delightfully clear singing, while McDowall's *Tota pulchra es* has rich and exotic modally inflected harmonies that completely transform the tone of this ensemble to one more mystical and ceremonial.

Considering Polyphony's track record with living composers – Gabriel Jackson, Morten Lauridsen, Eric Whitacre – Clive Osgood's **Christmas Collection** should be on everyone's radar. Frankly, it's joyful! On this short album we hear new settings of familiar texts and arrangements of carols from *Piae cantiones*, each with urgent, tingling, rhythmic word-settings. The singing is exquisite, warm and precise, and Polyphony are joined by the radiant Britten Sinfonia in *Up! Good Christen Folk* for a hint of Disneyesque sparkle.

My alma mater, King's College London, present **A Christmas Offering** by Kristina Arakelyan – an alumna whose composing career, I suspect and hope, will soon shoot to prominence. This is a breathtakingly good selection in which we hear the influence of modal chants and Armenian church traditions fused with an English choral blend: think Górecki, Pärt and Tavener in terms of mesmeric spirituality. *Christmas Offering*, influenced by Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*, is characterised by deft harp-playing with a resonant bloom. Listen especially for 'There is no rose': a touching mix of innocence, remembrance and fondness.

The pristine Ensemble Altera offer a delight: **Feminine Voices at Christmas**. From Imogen Holst's sprightly *Welcome joy and welcome sorrow* to Cecilia McDowall's *Ave Maria*, they bring calm clarity to frosty, wintry textures. Joined by harpist Lishan Tan, their intonation and diction sparkle throughout Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* – I particularly loved the urgency and precision of 'This little babe'. It's a great programme, with new works enlivening the flow of well-seasoned favourites. Kerensa Briggs's *Coventry Carol* is a reflective moment that will stay with me for a long time.

A Meridian Christmas is a solid programme of favourite carols in attractive arrangements. Meridian often make quite complicated choral textures sound easy and flowing. It's a fun and comforting collection: Erling Pedersen's dripping harmonies to *A great and mighty wonder* is where I'll point you for a taste of this wonderful indulgence.

Among the numerous recordings of Cornelius's *The Three Kings*, do listen out for *Die Könige*, Clytus Gottwald's arrangement sung by the Jervaulx Singers on **In the Stillness – Christmas Reflections**. It's a rich texture with intriguing intertwining solo lines.

If you are searching for a classic Christmas album with a full cathedral-choir sound then do consider Norwich Cathedral Choir's **Lord of the Dance** with Onyx Brass, both for their

approach to traditional carols and for their joyful rendition of *Jingle bells*. For even more Christmas fanfare and ceremony, The Band of the Royal Marines Collingwood sound fabulous with Portsmouth Cathedral's choristers on **The First Nowell**, especially in *Once in royal David's city*. A spectacular opening to a very atmospheric album.

For something completely different try **A Christmas Carol**, an abridged version of Dickens's classic with choral music by Benedict Sheehan, somewhere between an audiobook and a Broadway musical. Combining compelling, immersive narration by Christine Baranski with punchy, high-energy singing from the Skylark Vocal Ensemble, Sheehan's choral movie score invokes a chilling vision of Dickensian London.

Die Nacht ist vorgedrungen from Richard Resch's Ensemble La Silla is my favourite concept-programme this year, offering a multilingual blend of traditional, sacred and seasonal night-time themes. Take the opening two tracks: a spine-chilling Advent hymn by Jochen Klepper written in 1937, *The night is advanced*, which then contrasts with *Maria durch ein Dornwald ging* ('Mary walked through a thorn forest') arranged by Silvan Loher, representing death, a folk-song setting reminiscent of Warlock's 'Sleep'. Resch is strongest in understated, mournful songs but reveals a joyful side in Franz Tunder's *Wachet auf*, complete with camp festive chimes and exuberant string-playing.

My favourite album cover is **Hearth** by the Miró Quartet, which matches many of the uncomplicated, naive sounds conjured in their wintry carol arrangements. I really love the variety of textures throughout, especially the sense of swirling snow-flurries in the Appalachian folk song *I wonder as I wander*, arranged by Reena Esmail.























Have you ever wanted to spend a year away from chestnuts and open fires? **Cuban Christmas** offers a mix of the traditional, moving and upbeat, underpinned by complex rhythmic pulses and outstanding musicianship. From the melting horn solo of *Silent night* to the toe-tapping complexity of *We wish you a merry Christmas*, this will make a memorable addition to a playlist looking to steer away from an exclusively religious selection. The *Cuban Nutcracker Suite* is not to be missed: 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy' is a touch of percussive genius.

I love brass bands, and on **Let it Swing** the slick ensemble Salaputia Brass excel in creating a nostalgic, warm sound. Their arrangements are all new, with hints of classic Hollywood detailing and plenty of inventive moments. Start with *White Christmas* to see how they meld a jazzy sense of swing without distracting from this classic tune – and just wait for that dazzling trumpet! Stephan Stadtfeld's variations on Handel's 'Lascia ch'io pianga' are heart-wrenching on the penultimate track.

Finally to my top choice – **Joy to the World** from Chanticleer. Readers who know the respect I hold for old polyphony might be surprised to know that I shed an awkward tear in the queue at Gail's bakery at the title-track – a tight close-harmony arrangement by Adam Brett Ward with more added chords than I've had sourdough loaves. The bright, easy sheen of the falsettists leading into the blazing final cadence was too much. Imagine a carol crossed with the woollens section of a menswear catalogue and you'll see what I mean. The earworm of 2025 goes to Sarah Quartel's sea shanty-esque *This Endris Night*, with rich low notes, tight ensemble and compelling rhythmic drive. Throughout I was struck how the individual voices, each so full of personality, yield such a homogeneous vocal meld when required. They are perhaps less memorable in the Renaissance works, but Joanna Marsh's *Winter's Garland* is not to be missed. **G**

THE CHRISTMAS LIST

Your guide to the festive season's recordings

	Natale veneziano Il Pomo d'Oro Arcana A584		Feminine Voices at Christmas Ens Altera Alpha ALPHA1182
	José de Nebra Responsorios de Navidad La Grande Chapelle Lauda LAU026		A Meridian Christmas Meridian Signum SIGCD967
	¡Feliz Navidad! Kölner Akademie CPO CPO555 742-2		In the Stillness Jervaulx Singers Convivium CVM113
	All the Stars Looked Down Ch of King's College, Cambridge King's College KGS0075		Lord of the Dance Norwich Cath Ch Deux-Elles DXL1220
	O Holy Night Ch of St John's College, Cambridge Signum SIGCD913		The First Nowell Portsmouth Cath Ch Signum SIGCD943
	The Wise Men and the Star The Sixteen Coro COR16215		Benedict Sheehan A Christmas Carol Skylark Vocal Ens Arlos ARR0001
	Nowel: Advent & Beyond Ens Pro Victoria Delphian DCD34315		Die Nacht ist vorgedrungen Richard Resch Carpe Diem CD16339
	On Christmas Night London Choral Sinf Orchid ORC100402		Hearth Miró Qt Pentatone PTC5187 495
	A Babe is Born St Martin's Voices Resonus RES10371		Cuban Christmas The Sarahbanda DG 486 7594
	Clive Osgood Christmas Collection Polyphony Convivium CV1106		Let it Swing Salaputia Brass Berlin Classics 0304143BC
	Kristina Arakelyan A Christmas Offering Choir of King's College London Signum SIGCD953		Joy to the World Chanticleer Delos DE3623