

[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)

A Feast of Carols

Performed December 12, 2009

Program Notes

Sounds American is Mendelssohn Club's season-long celebration of American choral music, and this holiday concert *A Feast of Carols* explores the rich tradition of American Christmas songs and carols. The music spans some three and a half centuries, featuring such diverse works as the very first carol written in North America, Donald St. Pierre's arrangements of Christmas hymns by the 18th century master William Billings and Daniel Pinkham's 1957 *Christmas Cantata*. The music includes two of the most popular secular Christmas songs, *The Little Drummer Boy* and *White Christmas*, and also features the world premiere of Mendelssohn Club composer-in-residence Donald St. Pierre's *A Visit From St. Nicholas*.

Julian Wachner

The concert opens with the brilliant fanfares of Julian Wachner's arrangement of *Joy to the World* for chorus, brass, timpani and organ. A multi-talented composer, conductor and organist, Wachner currently serves on the faculty of Schulich School of Music at McGill University in Montreal, where he is principal conductor of Opera McGill, and was recently named Music Director of The Washington Chorus. He holds a doctorate in musical arts from Boston University, where he studied conducting with David Hoose and composition with Lukas Foss, Charles Fussell and Marjorie Merryman.



This opening set features several settings and arrangements of *Joy to the World*. The text, a paraphrase of Psalm 98, was written by the poet, writer and prodigious hymnist Isaac Watts (1674-1748). In the English-speaking world of the 18th century, the only texts deemed suitable for liturgical music were the Psalms and other scriptural passages, set in verse translations. These often were poorly suited to singing and sometimes were rather obscure in meaning. Watts' beautifully poetic and lyrical paraphrases revolutionized the art of hymn writing and quickly achieved a lasting popularity. His hymns were introduced to America here in Philadelphia with the reprinting of *Psalms of David* by Benjamin Franklin in 1729 and *Hymns* in 1741. The best known melody for *Joy to the World* is an adaptation of a traditional English psalm tune, written in 1836 by Lowell Mason, one of the most influential American musicians. A strong proponent of music education, he was largely responsible for the inclusion of music in the public school curriculum, and in 1833 founded the Boston Academy of Music, the first institution

dedicated to the training of music teachers. As music director of New York's influential Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, he became an equally strong proponent of congregational singing instead of relying on a church choir.

Mendelssohn Club composer-in-residence Donald St. Pierre's *Billings with Brass* was commissioned and premiered in 2003. St. Pierre has been on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music since 1990. He previously served as principal keyboard player for the Milwaukee Symphony and was music director of Milwaukee's Skylight Music Theater from 1978-1990, where he directed more than 50 productions and composed three chamber operas. He is a contributor to the *AIDS Quilt Songbook* and has served as head coach of the voice department at the Chautauqua Institution and the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival. He is also a much sought after recital accompanist and has appeared at New York's Lincoln Center, London's Wigmore Hall and Almeida Theatre, Paris' Theatre du Chalet, and at the Tanglewood, Santa Fe Chamber Music, Bowdoin, Bard and Grand Teton Music Festivals. St. Pierre has written eleven works for Mendelssohn Club.

William Billings

William Billings (1746-1800) was one of the most influential composers of his day, widely respected by contemporary musicians and known even in England. His 1770 *New England Psalm Singer* (which was engraved by Paul Revere) was the first collection of original music written by an American. Largely self-taught as a musician (he was a tanner by profession), Billings' collections of hymns and psalm tunes contained extensive instruction on the theory and practice of church music. He developed a unique musical form called a fusing tune, in which voices enter sequentially in an imitative fashion, somewhat like a fugue. He had a wonderful gift for melody, and his hymns have a simple, straightforward, unaffected style which is quite engaging. St. Pierre has selected five Billings hymns which he has linked together by variations on a common introductory theme. His sensitive and elegant settings match Billings' music perfectly, underscoring the beautiful melodic lines. The second hymn, *Bethlehem*, is set as a fusing tune. The final hymn, *Jamaica*, is a setting of the *Joy to the World* text. St. Pierre provides a countermelody based on Mason's hymn tune.

Eric Whitacre (b. 1970) relates that he was drawn to a career in music through his experiences singing in chorus as an undergraduate at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. He went on to receive his M. M. in composition from Juilliard, where he studied with John Corigliano and David Diamond. *Cloudburst*, written in 1992 while he was still an undergraduate, received first prize in the 1993 American Choral Directors' Association *Composers of the Future* competition and a 2007 Grammy nomination for best choral recording. *Lux Aurumque*, one of his most frequently performed works, was written in 2001. Whitacre was attracted to what he calls "the genuine, elegant simplicity" of the short poem by Edward Esch. Interestingly, he had it translated from English into Latin, and set the Latin text. It is a soft lullaby, with phrases which repeatedly move from consonance to gentle dissonance, like the rocking of a cradle.

Daniel Pinkham

Daniel Pinkham (1923-2006) had a long and distinguished career as a performer, composer and teacher. He studied composition with Walter Piston, Aaron Copland, Arthur Honegger and Samuel Barber, organ with E. Power Biggs, and harpsichord with Wanda Landowska. His eclectic musical interests ranged from early music to electronic music. As a harpsichordist, he specialized in performance of early music long before it became fashionable, but he also commissioned new pieces by Henry Cowell and Alan Hovhaness. He served as organist and choir director of Boston's historic King's Chapel for 42 years. In 1959 he joined the faculty of the New England Conservatory of Music, where he later created the Department of Early Music Performance.



His 1957 *Christmas Cantata* remains one of his most popular works and is one in which his synthesis of early music and contemporary styles is clearly evident. The Latin texts are taken from the traditional responses from the Christmas masses and are set for three equal ensembles: chorus, brass choir and organ. The first movement opens with a rather declamatory statement (“Shepherds, what have you seen? Tell us!”) before moving into a dance-like section of ever shifting meters and syncopated rhythms. The second movement features an arched melody which is passed antiphonally between the two instrumental choirs, over which is spun a long, dreamy choral line set mostly for women’s voices. The final movement is an extended crescendo of continually shifting tonalities, with verses taken from Psalm 100 alternating with the chorus the angels sang to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good will.”

Jesous Ahatonhia (Jesus, he is born) is the very first North American carol, written around 1641 by Jean de Brébeuf, a French Jesuit missionary who spent nearly twenty years with the Huron peoples in Canada. He learned their customs and compiled the first Huron-French dictionary and used his experience to create a carol in the native Huron language which presented the Christmas story in a more understandable idiom. It is a mark of his success that *Jesous Ahatonhia* survived Brébeuf’s untimely death and the dispersal of the Huron nation at the hands of the rival Iroquois, and was passed down in oral tradition among the remnants of the Hurons for more than a century until it was collected by another missionary and translated back into French. The picturesque English version was created in 1926 by Canadian writer and amateur musician J. Edgar Middleton.

Katherine K. Davis

Katherine K. Davis (1892-1981) was a prolific composer of choral and vocal music. She studied at Wellesley, where she won the William Billings Prize for Composition, at the New England Conservatory of Music, and in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. She taught at Wellesley, the Concord Academy, and Philadelphia’s Shady Hill School for Girls. Davis wrote *The Carol of the Drum* in 1941, ostensibly using a loose translation of a traditional

Czech carol attributed to one C. R. W. Robertson, which turned out to be a pseudonym for herself. The song was recorded in 1955 by the Von Trapp Family Singers, but achieved its lasting popularity when an arrangement made by Hollywood composer and arranger Jack Halloran was recorded by the Harry Simeone Chorale in 1958 and released as *The Little Drummer Boy*.

Irving Berlin

Irving Berlin (1888-1989) was born in Russia and emigrated to New York with his family at the age of five. He was forced to leave school at eight to help support the family after the death of his father. He sang as he sold newspapers on the street corners, eventually becoming a busker and then a singing waiter, where his ability to improvise risqué lyrics to popular songs landed him a staff job with a music publisher. His 1911 *Alexander's Ragtime Band* became an international hit and started his meteoric rise as a song writer. Over his lifetime he scored 19 Broadway shows and 18 feature films and wrote more than 1500 songs, but none more popular than *White Christmas*. Introduced in the show biz film *Holiday Inn* in 1942, it won an Academy Award for best song. Bing Crosby's 1942 recording is still the best selling single of all time and the song even spawned its own movie, the eponymous 1954 *White Christmas*. Only 8 lines long, the song perfectly evokes the sense of innocence and nostalgia associated with Christmas, and Berlin himself called it "the best song that anyone's ever written."



Donald St. Pierre

A Visit from St. Nicholas, better known by its first line 'Twas the Night Before Christmas, was first published anonymously in a Troy, New York newspaper in 1823. It was instantly popular and was disseminated widely, forming the basis of what has now become our traditional image of Santa Claus, with a sleigh full of toys drawn by reindeer, flying through the sky on Christmas Eve to fill children's stockings with presents. In 1837 the poem was finally attributed to Clement Moore, a distinguished professor of Hebrew and Greek at Columbia College and New York's General Theological Seminary, and Moore himself included it in an 1844 anthology of his poetry. There is some scholarly controversy over the authorship; certainly Moore's other children's poetry is of a distinctly stern and edifying nature. Regardless of authorship, this wonderfully whimsical poem has enthralled children and adults alike for generations. Composer Donald St. Pierre relates that "the music for *A Visit from St. Nicholas* was inspired in part by *Jolly Old St. Nicholas*, the Pachelbel canon of carols." He is alluding to the observation that the harmonic pattern for *Jolly Old St. Nicholas* is identical to that of Pachelbel's famous *Canon in D*, both of



which make their appearance in St. Pierre's delightful setting, which captures both the beautiful descriptive elements, the drama, and most of all, the whimsy of the original poem.

Charles Ives (1874-1954) may be more associated with dissonant, polytonal music, but he had a wonderful gift for melody which is nowhere better displayed than in this lovely unison carol, simply titled *A Christmas Carol. Silent Night* is probably the most beloved of all Christmas carols. It was written by Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber, assistant pastor and choir director, respectively, of the aptly named St. Nicholas Church in the little town of Oberndorf, in the Austrian Alps. First performed on Christmas Eve in 1818, it is in the form of a *ländler*, a traditional folk dance. Although the music was not published, the carol soon entered the repertoire of several touring folk groups, and it quickly achieved wide popularity throughout Europe as a traditional Tyrolean folk carol, much to the dismay of Gruber, who never received proper credit during his lifetime. The English translation was provided in 1859 by an American Episcopal priest, John Freeman Young.
– Michael Moore

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