

I hope you have been enjoying my Christmas album over the season's festivities. As promised on the album here are a few more details about the songs, why I've presented them the way I have, and also providing some translations for you.

I. Sans Day Carol (Traditional English)

I have had a great fondness for early music for many years, an interest which probably started when, dressed in medieval garb a friend and I ventured up to the National Trust Theatre in the 1980s to watch the in-the-round performance of the medieval mystery plays at the Cottlesloe Theatre. The music was the most amazing thing I had ever heard, although I have sadly lost my vinyl LP of the soundtrack. The musicians were a notable bunch of folk, and early music artists, including Maddy Prior (Steeleye Span). This was my first and most formative experience of early and folk music.

Then later on in the 1990s when I was working in the Scripture Union Bookshop in Harrow, we ordered some Christmas CDs from Hesperion, a label specialising in early music. Amongst this batch of wonderful CDs, from artists such as Synphonie, and Sequentia, was an offering from Maddy Prior and the Carnival Band. I have found this collection of traditional carols with crumhorns, shawms, and various other period instruments to be very inspiring.

This was one of the carols they performed on that album, and I wanted to present it with the exuberant energy displayed in performances such as 'Mystery' at the National Theatre, rather than the restrained and polished choral versions we are so used to hearing. This is my nod of thanks to the inspiration of these fabulous musicians.

3. Edi Beo Thu (13th Century English)

This is an old English carol in praise of the Virgin that I found on one of the other medieval CDs we took delivery of all those years ago in Scripture Union. Unfortunately the passage of that time has wiped my memory, and the CD has disappeared from my CD shelves so I can't name, or thank, the ensemble concerned.

I first performed this song in a recital I gave in the mid 1990s, where my mum played keyboard with the Harp sound selected, and this is the arrangement I gave her to play on that occasion. Many years later and now able to play the harp myself I have been able to re-visit this arrangement. After that performance I chatted with an ancient language specialist who happened to be at the concert, and she suggested that my pronunciation was a bit harsh and germanic, and that I should soften it a little. This I have tried to do here, offering a near colloquial sounding of words that are almost the same as those we use today, although almost every other version of this song I have heard chooses a more distinct sound. I do apologise to purists who may think I am being incorrect. For alternative, and undoubtedly more accurate voicings please refer to the wonderful recordings of this song by The Dufay Collective, and Anonymous 4. I have elected here to omit verses 3, 6, 7 & 8.

There is an interesting story with regard to the bells you can hear throughout this track. In order to do the percussion on this album I raided my husband's kit (he's a percussionist, amongst other things!) to locate something that could create a pretty bell sound, but there was nothing. So I wandered around the house looking for random objects that might make the appropriate sound. Sat on a window ledge was a set of six brass goblets that a friend had bought me as a present a few years ago. At the time I had thought of them as a somewhat odd piece of brick-a-brac, but thanked my friend very politely. It is, after all, the thought that counts. On my hunt for a delicate bell sound I picked up one of these goblets and was amazed at the beautiful tone. Taking them with me into the studio I discovered that one of the six rang with the correct note for this piece exactly!

2. Veni, Veni Immanuel (c. 13th Century)

This is one of my favourite carols of all time. It's one of the oldest carols around, and also one of the most well-known, it's haunting tune proving very popular throughout the six centuries since it's first appearance in the advent repertoire of European churches. Here I have sought to bring out that haunting and ageless quality. It is sung here in latin, so below I have provided the more familiar English words:

O come, o come Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
until the son of God appear.
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, thou rod of Jesse,
free thine own from Satan's tyranny,
From depths of hell thy people save
and give them victory over the grave.
Rejoice...

O come, thou dayspring,
come and cheer our spirits by thine advent here,
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice...

O come, thou key of David,
come and open wide our heavenly home,
Make safe the way that leads on high
and close the path to misery.
Rejoice...

O come, o come, thou Lord of might
who to thy tribes on Sinai's height,
In ancient times didst give the law
in cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice...

What was a bizarre gift from someone whose husband was in the auctions trade, has turned into something beautiful and much appreciated – I'm sure there's a life lesson there somewhere. I voiced my thanks and apologies to my friend immediately, and I'm sure she heard me, as, despite her passing in September 2010, I could sense her exasperated, 'Oh, Ali!'

Here is a translation:

Edi beo thu hevene quene,
Folkes frouvre and engels blis.
Moder unwemmed and maiden clene,
Swich in world non other nis.
On hit is weleth sene
Of alle wimmen thu havest thet pris.
Mi swete levedi her mi bene
And reu of me yif thi wil is.

Thu atsey ye so the the daiy rewe
The deleth from the deorke nycht,
Of the sprong an leome newe
That al this world haveth ilyt.
Nis non maide of thine heove
Swo fair, so sscheene, so rudi, swo
bright.
Mi swete levedi of me thu reowe
And have merci of thin knicht.

Thu art eorthe to goode seede
On thee lichte the heovne dew,
On the sprong theo edi bleede
Th'oli gost hire on thee sew.
Thu bring us ut of kare of dreede
That Eve bitterlich us brew.
Thu shalt us into hevone leede
Wel sweete is that ilke dew.

Moder ful of thewes heende,
Maide dreigh and well itaught,
Ich em in thine luvve bende
Ande to thee is al mi draught
Thu me schild ye from the feend
Ase thu art free and wilt and maught,
And help me to mi lives eend
And make with thi sune saught.

Blessed be thou, heaven's queen
People's comfort and angel's bliss.
Mother unblemished, and maiden pure,
In all the world there is none such
as thee.
In thee it is clear to see that
Of all women thou hast the prize
My sweet lady, hear my prayer,
and have pity on me if thy will is.

Thou ascends like dawn
that separates from the dark night
Of thee came a new light
That has lit all the world.
There is no maid of thy complexion,
So fair, so beautiful, so ruddy, so bright.
My sweet lady on me show pity
and have mercy on thy knight.

Thou art the soil to good seed,
On thee alighted heaven's dew
From thee sprang the blessed fruit
That the Holy Ghost within thee sowed.
You bring us out of the fearful dread
That Eve bitterly brewed for us.
Thou shalt lead us into heaven
Well sweet is that same dew.

Mother, full of noble virtues
Maiden patient and well taught
I am bound in thy love,
And to thee is all my desire,
Shield thou me, yea, from the fiend
As thou art generous, willing and able.
And help to my life's end
And reconcile me with thy son.

4. Cherry Tree Carol (Traditional English)

This was a new find for me as I researched material for this album. I had seen a version of it in the ubiquitous 100 Carols for Choirs that is the staple fodder for church choirs and their nine lessons and carols services every Christmas, but that tune, although also an old English folk tune, is very different to that I discovered in other books. On a web search I discovered recordings by Shirley Collins, The Poor Clares, and even Sting has done a version of this song. I've included the final verse from the 100 Carols for Choirs version as it provides a more satisfying end to the song.

5. A Virgin Most Pure (Traditional English)

Another nod to Maddy Prior and the Carnival Band, I decided to take this much, much faster than usual and gave it a skippy feel with dotted quavers and semi quavers. I was working so deeply with this quick skippy version that when I heard a choral rendition on Classic FM whilst driving to Mum's to do some Christmas shopping (and getting stuck in a 3 hour traffic jam on the M40!) I couldn't believe how painfully slow they were singing it! Getting all the words and the triplets in at this tempo is quite a challenge!

Usually, all the percussion on my albums is done by my wonderful hubby, the Revd Paul Cudby, but for this album, he was too busy with getting ready for Christmas at St Mary Magdalene, Tanworth, so I've done all the percussion. Lest he feel unappreciated, he did take all the wonderful snowy photos on a late November afternoon, which have helped to make this album look just right.

6. Noel Nouvelet (Traditional French)

This is a tune I have always loved since I was a teenager, and first started with this Christianity thing. Most church-goers will be familiar with this tune as an Easter hymn, 'When The Green Blade Riseth', and it is first of three tunes on this album that I have known and loved as non-Christmas hymns. My aim with these tunes was to trace down their original forms as much as was possible. This song was the easiest to track down as these words are frequently sung by choirs in their Christmas concerts and carol services.

I recently took my singing recital diploma, performing several French songs as part of my programme, and I had some excellent help with pronunciation from my teacher, Sarah Wright-Owens, as well as my friend An-nabel Thé. I would like to thank them both, as their guidance has helped me in performing the French songs on this album. I must qualify that by saying that any mistakes and inaccuracies in pronunciation are entirely my own! The words I have for the third verse seem to be slightly different to many other versions of this song. Here is a translation:

A new carol, sing we for Christmas,
Devout folk, shout your thanks to God.
Sing a carol for the new-born king.
A new carol, sing we for Christmas,

A little bird sang to the shepherds,
saying: "Go from here,
In Bethlehem you will find the new-born lamb."
A new carol, sing we for Christmas,

In Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph see
the donkey and the ox,
The baby lying amongst them,
In a manger instead of a cradle.
A new carol, sing we for Christmas,

7. It Came Upon A Midnight Clear (English Traditional Melody, Words: E.H. Sears)

Another of my favourite carols, which I decided to use because of its references to ‘Harps of Gold’, with another appearance of that same bell from ‘Edi Beo Thu’. Here I have used inclusive language but in a gentle, hopefully non-intrusive way.

8. Lulay, Lulay: On Yoolis Night (14th Century English Carol, source: New Oxford Book Of Carols)

This is a song I discovered during my research for this album, and I decided to sing just ten out of a possible thirty-seven verses! I have adapted the structure to create a more contemporary folk song feel to the piece. Two verses are sung together before returning to the refrain which is also repeated each time, with the final note being resolved to D, rather than being suspended on C as the original manuscript alludes to. This simply provides a more familiar mode of musical conclusion for modern listeners – makes it easier for 21st century singers to sing-a-long with. Here is the Old English text with a translation to the right:

9. This Rush Of Wings (Traditional French Carol)

Another chance find during my hunt for unusual Christmas songs, this is a charming little story about birds visiting the new-born Jesus at Bethlehem, a hint of which we have already seen in Noel Nouvelet, where birds seem to take the place of angels in summoning the shepherd with their song. Here again the birds are giving witness to the Christmas story.

10. Away In A Manger (Traditional Carol)

I wanted to make sure that this album had a broad selection of well-known as well as lesser-known carols, and this is probably one of the most sung songs on the planet requiring no introduction. I have tried, however, to approach it slightly differently, and it is the rhythm of the song that I have played with. For the instrumental verse I have incorporated the tune more familiar to singers from across the Atlantic in the US, which makes an interesting counterpoint to the tune familiar to British singers.

Listen very carefully and you will hear the bird who lives in the tree outside my studio window singing with joy at the very slight rise in temperature amidst an otherwise snowy and freezing December.

Refrain:
Lullay, my deere moder, sing lullay

Verses 1 & 2:
Als I lay on Yoolis Night,
Alone in my longing,
Me thought I saw a well fair sight,
A may hir child rokking:
The maiden wold withouten song
Hir child o sleep to bring: The child
Him thought sche ded him wrong
And bad his moder sing,
Lullay...

Verses 6 & 7:
‘Sweete sune’, saide sche,
‘Weroffe schuld I sing’
Ne wist Inere yet more fo thee
But Gabriel’s greeting,
He grett me goodli on his knee,
And said ee “Hail Marie!
Hail full of grace! God is with thee;
Thou bearen schalt Messie.
Lullay

Verses 8 & 9:
‘I wondered michli in my thought,
For man wold I right none:
“Marie”, he saide, “dred thee nought:
Let God fo heven alone!
The Holi Gost schal doon al this”,
He said, withouten wun,
That I schuld bearen mannis blis,
And Godis owne Sun.
Lullay...

Verses 12 & 13:
‘I answered blethely,
For that his word me paid,
“Lo, Godis servant heer am I:
Be et as thou me said.”
Ther als he saide, I thee bare
On midwenter night,
In maidenhede withouten kare,
Be grace of God almight.
Lullay...

Verses 15 & 16:
‘Sweete sune, sikirly,
No more kan I say;
And if I koude, fawn wold I
To doo al at thi pay’:
Serteynly this sight I say,
This song I herde sing
Als I me lay this Yoolis Day,
Alone in my longing,
Lullay...

Refrain:
Lullaby, my dear Mother, sing lullaby

Verses 1 & 2:
As I lay on Christmas night,
Alone in my desire,
Me thought I saw a well fair sight,
A maid rocking her child,
The maiden, without song,
Tried to get her baby to sleep
The child, he thought she wronged him,
And asked his mother to sing,
Lullaby...

Verses 6 & 7:
‘Sweet son’, said she,
‘Of what should I sing?
I know no more of thee,
But Gabriel’s greeting!
He greeted me courteously,
Kneeling, and said: “Hail Mary!
Hail, full of grace! God is with thee,
Thou shalt bear the Messiah.”
Lullaby...

Verses 8 & 9:
‘I wondered greatly in my mind,
For I did not want a husband:
“Mary”, he said, “fear ye nothing,
This is the work God in heaven alone.
The Holy Ghost shall do all this”,
He said, without delay,
That I should bear humanity’s blessing,
And God’s own Son.
Lullaby...

Verses 12 & 13:
‘I answered gladly,
For his words cheered me:
“Lo, God’s servant, here am I,
Be it as thou has told me.”
There, as he said, I gave thee birth
On midwinter’s night,
Still a virgin, yet without pain,
By the grace of God Almighty.
Lullaby...

Verses 15 & 16:
‘Sweet son, surely
No more can I say,
And if I could, gladly would I,
To do as thou wishes!’
Certainly this sight I saw,
And this song I heard sung,
As I lay this Christmas Day,
Alone in my desire
Lullaby...

11. Pat-a-Pan (Traditional French Carol)

I had great fun with this carol. You can even hear my old school recorder on this track! This is the piece that demonstrates my interest in not losing our older traditions of celebrating midwinter’s day and the winter solstice, but remembering our roots. I got the idea to shift the words around from the singer, Damnh the Bard, but in this version I include both a pagan and a Christian version of the song. This kind of clash is one I find very exciting, and I’m thinking of it here as a horizontal and vertical interpretation, with the low voice taking the part of the pagan, or horizontal perspective, and the higher voice as the Christian, or vertical perspective. I’m not trying to make any judgement one between the other but simply colliding them together in the way that culture and history does anyway. I like the idea of becoming one both with the earth and with God.

12. Or Nous Dites Maries (Medieval French Carol)

This is the second of those incredibly beautiful hymn tunes that I sought to find in as close to their original state as possible. It is known to some church goers as the hymn tune “Chartres”, a name selected by John L Bell when he wrote the hymn “The Hand of Heaven” to this tune.

I have wondered where it came from and have managed to track it down to this beautiful French carol. The tune is made famous by renaissance composer Charpentier, who selected it as one of the tunes for his ‘Noels Sur Les Instruments’ (H.534, No.4). This tune has also been used for the French Carol “Celebrons la Naissance”. I am grateful to Annabel Thé for attempting a translation of the medieval French. We’re particularly unsure of the last verse as a recording is our only source for this, so I have been ‘creative’ with the translation. Here is what we have come up with together:

Or nous dites, Marie
Où êtes-vous alors
Quand Gabriel l’arch’ange
Vous fit un tel record
- J’étois en Galilée
Plaisante région
En ma chambre enfermée
En contemplation

Or nous dites, Marie,
Les neuf mois accomplis,
Naquit le fruit de vie,
Comme l’Ange avoit dit?
—Oui, sans nulle peine
Et sans oppression,
Naquit de tout le monde
La vraie rédemption.

Or nous dites, Marie,
Du lieu impérial,
Fut-ce en chambre parée,
Ou en Palais royal?
—En une pauvre étable
Ouverte à l’environ
Ou n’avait feu, ni flambe
Ni latte, ni chevron.

Or nous dites, Marie,
Des pauvres pastoureaux
Qui gardaient ès montagnes
Leurs brebis & aigneaux.
—Ceux-là m’ont visitée
Par grande affection;
Moult me fut agreeable
Leur visitation.

Nous vous prions Marie
‘un cœur très humblement
Que nous soyons amie
Vervent très cher enfant.
- Afin que jour venu
Que tout sujet seront
Pussions être pourvus
La su avec les bons.

Now tells us Mary,
Where were you then,
When the Archangel Gabriel
Made you such a visit?
I was in Galilee
A pleasant region
Enclosed in my chamber
In meditation

Now tell us Mary,
The nine months accomplished
Was the fruit of life born
As the angel had said?
Yes, without difficulty
And without oppression
Was born from the whole world,
The true redemption

Now tell us, Mary,
Of the imperial place,
Was it in a decorated room
Or a royal palace?
In a poor stable
Open to the outdoors
Where there was neither fire,
Nor board, nor rafter.

Now tell us, Mary,
Of the poor shepherds
Who, in the mountains,
Looked after their ewes and lambs?
These ones have visited me
Out of great affection,
Much agreeable to me
Has been their visit.

We pray to you Mary,
From very humble hearts,
That we may be friends
Of this very dear child
So that, on the day fore-told,
All will be well for us,
We can be cared for,
In heaven with the saints

13. En Belen Tocan a Fuego (Traditional Castillian Carol)

I fell in love with this spanish song as soon as I heard it, and decided to include it on this album. With the words of this piece we bring back in the birds singing a joyful greeting to Mary, here, as she is washing the baby’s swaddling clothes by the river.

En Belen tocan a fuego,
Del portal salen las llamas,
Porque dicen que ha nacido,
El redentor delas almas.

*Brinca y bailan, los peces en el rio,
Brinca y bailan, de ver a Dios nacido.
Brinca y bailan, los peces en el agua,
Brinca y bailan, de ver nacid’el allba.*

En el portal de Belen,
Naci’ un clavel encarnado,
Que por redimir el mundo,
S’ha vuelto lirio morado.
Brinca y bailan...

La Virgen lava panales
Y los tiend’en el romero,
Los pajarillos cantaban
Y el agua s’iba riendo.
Brinca y bailan...

In Bethlehem they touch a fire
A mighty flame from heaven,
Because they say here is born
The saviour of our souls

*They jump and they dance, the fishes in the river,
They jump and they dance, to see God born among us
They jump and they dance, the fishes in the water,
They jump and they dance, to see the dawn born to us*

In a doorway in Bethlehem,
Is born an incarnate Carnation,
That by redeeming the world,
Returns as a purple lily.
They jump and they dance...

The Virgin washes swaddling-bands,
And spreads them in the rosemary
The sparrows are singing to her,
And the water goes by laughing.
They jump and they dance...

14. Hush My Child (Traditional French Melody: “Jesus Christ s’habille en pauvre”); Words: Isaac Watts)

This is the third and final hymn tune that I was eager to trace back to its original roots as a French carol, and is more familiar to church-goers as the advent hymn ‘Let all mortal flesh keep silent’. I traced the tune back to this moral tale of Jesus dressed as a pauper and asking for alms from a house where he is denied by the husband and welcomed by the wife. There is another French carol using this tune, “Celebrons la Naissance” but I decided to use the words by Isaac Watts set to this tune as they are simply lovely, and are sourced here from 100 Carols for Choirs.

15. To Drive The Cold Winter Away (Anon. 16th Century English)

One of the other Christmas albums that has greatly influenced me has been Loreena McKennit’s album of which this song is the title track. Just her and her harp in a big echo-filled church singing Christmas songs; Wonderful! I have sought to maintain a similar simplicity with this album and I hope you have enjoyed listening to it as much as I enjoyed recording it.