

CHRISTMAS WITH SEPTURA

J. S. Bach • Handel
Rachmaninov • Warlock



Christmas with Septura

Heinrich SCHÜTZ (1585–1672)		Giovanni Pierluigi da PALESTRINA (c. 1525–1594)	
1 Das Wort ward Fleisch		14 Canite tuba	
(arr. Simon Cox)	3:12	(arr. Simon Cox)	2:12
Johann Sebastian BACH (1685–1750)		Robert PARSONS (c. 1535–1571/2)	
Christmas Suite		15 Ave Maria	
(arr. Matthew Knight)	9:54	(arr. Matthew Knight)	4:37
2 I. Ach mein herzliebes Jesulein (from Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248)	1:08	Sergey RACHMANINOV (1873–1943)	
3 II. Ich freue mich in dir (from Cantata, BWV 133)	4:10	Vespers (All-Night Vigil), Op. 37	
4 III. Wie soll ich dich empfangen (from BWV 248)	1:27	(arr. Matthew Knight)	5:09
5 IV. Nun seid ihr wohl gerochen (from BWV 248)*	3:08	16 I (VI). Bogoroditse Devo (Rejoice, O Virgin)	2:49
Harold DARKE (1888–1976)		17 II (VII). Slava v vishnikh Bogu (Glory to God in the Highest)	2:18
6 In the bleak midwinter		Peter CORNELIUS (1824–1874)	
(arr. Matthew Knight)	5:02	18 The Three Kings**	
Michael PRAETORIUS (1571–1621)		(arr. Matthew Knight)	2:33
7 Es ist ein Ros entsprungen		George Frideric HANDEL (1685–1759)	
(arr. Simon Cox)	2:33	Messiah, HWV 56	
Johannes BRAHMS (1833–1897)		(arr. Simon Cox)	11:00
8 Es ist ein Ros entsprungen		19 I. The Trumpet Shall Sound***	4:04
(arr. Simon Cox)	2:13	20 II. Worthy is the Lamb	3:30
Piotr Il'yich TCHAIKOVSKY (1840–1893)		21 III. Amen Chorus	3:24
9 The Crown of Roses		Franz GRUBER (1787–1863)	
(arr. Simon Cox)	2:32	22 Stille Nacht	
Mykola LEONTOVYCH (1877–1921)		(arr. Matthew Knight)	3:08
10 Carol of the Bells		Soloists:	
(arr. Simon Cox)	1:17	* Alan Thomas, Trumpet	
Peter WARLOCK (1894–1930)		** Matthew Knight, Euphonium	
Christmas Medley		*** Daniel West, Bass Trombone & Huw Morgan, Trumpet	
(arr. Matthew Knight)	7:48		
11 I. Lullaby my Jesus	2:38		
12 II. Benedicamus Domino	1:15		
13 III. Bethlehem Down	3:52		

Septura

Alan Thomas, Trumpet 1 in B flat • Simon Cox, Trumpet 2 in B flat • Huw Morgan, Trumpet in E flat
Matthew Gee, Trombone 1 • Matthew Knight, Trombone 2 • Dan West, Bass Trombone • Sasha Koushk-Jalali, Tuba
Simon Cox, Founder and Artistic Director • Matthew Knight, Artistic Director

Brass instruments are almost a Christmas cliché: perhaps nothing evokes the Dickensian ideal of Yuletide quite like the sentimental sound of a Salvation Army brass band. But this is just a thin veil of Victoriana – a triumph of style, all substance long forgotten. By contrast, the true meaning of Christmas – the spirit of renewal, God made flesh, mankind’s saviour born of a virgin – has been the inspiration for great masterpieces through the centuries. And so once again as brass players we’re left feeling a little jealous, asking ourselves, “what if the great Christmas music had been written for brass?” And here’s the answer, in a departure from our normal focus on a particular period, genre and group of composers, an exploration of the diverse music written for this great seasonal festival: our counterfactual Christmas.

Heinrich Schütz’s *Das Wort ward Fleisch* (The Word was made flesh) seems an appropriate place to start. One of 29 motets from his 1648 *Geistliche Chor-Music*, it is a setting of the iconic Advent text in which St John unveils the wonder of the Incarnation. It is not a stretch of the imagination for this to be played on brass instruments – these motets were written in the model of Schütz’s teacher, the great Giovanni Gabrieli, who presided over the golden age of brass in Venice. As in Gabrieli’s choral works, the vocal lines would have been doubled by instruments, and in fact Schütz noted that these motets were “to be used both vocally and instrumentally”. An imperious D minor opening gives way to dancing celebratory figures, and the setting is largely declamatory, with constantly-shifting groupings of voices. It builds to a forceful climax with the whole ensemble, cathartically resolving to a triumphant D major.

It would be inconceivable to record a disc of the great music inspired by Christmas without making reference to Johann Sebastian Bach. We have created a little suite of two pieces, bound together (as Bach himself did in oratorios and cantatas) by two chorales. The chorales are from Part 1 of the *Christmas Oratorio* – for performance on Christmas Day – and the first is *Ach mein herzliebes Jesulein* (Ah, my heart’s beloved little Jesus), in which the loving phrases of the chorale alternate with jubilant trumpet and drum figures. We then have the opening chorus of the Christmas cantata *Ich freue mich in dir* (I rejoice in You). Composed in Leipzig ten years before the *Christmas Oratorio*, this is an exuberant celebration of the birth of Jesus – a bustling *moto perpetuo*

movement, with the phrases of a chorale providing joyful interjections. Our next chorale is the first of the *Christmas Oratorio*, the tender *Wie soll ich dich empfangen* (How shall I embrace You), a favourite of Bach’s (he used it five times in the *St Matthew Passion*), and played here by the trombones and tuba alone. The cyclical structure of the *Christmas Oratorio* is reinforced by the fact that this same chorale appears in the final chorus of Part 6, *Nun seid ihr wohl gerochen* (Now you are well avenged). And so it seems fitting for us to play that chorus, especially because in its original form it is a trumpet solo. This is the triumphant climax of the final part, and the virtuosic solo is played on a piccolo trumpet, as the chorus celebrate the failure of Herod’s plan.

Many of the English choral pieces that we have re-imagined have been made famous by the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, broadcast worldwide on Christmas Eve from King’s College, Cambridge. Harold Darke’s nostalgic *In the bleak midwinter* has been a mainstay of that service since 1941, when he became the war-time Director of Music at King’s. He followed in the footsteps of Holst in setting the text by Christina Rossetti, but unlike Holst’s version, Darke’s isn’t strictly strophic. Instead, it alternates verses for solo voice and organ with ones for the full choir. In our transcription cup-muted instruments provide the organ accompaniment as the first verse (normally sung by a treble) is played by a solo trumpet, and the third (normally a baritone) employs the unique sound of a solo euphonium. In the second and fourth verses a quartet of instruments play the rôle of the choir.

We feature two versions of the German Marian Hymn *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen* (A rose has sprung up). First is the familiar harmonisation by Michael Praetorius, written in 1609. We perform the simple homophonic first and last verses with a quartet of two trumpets and trombones; for the middle verse, however, we use a round – a canon, in which all the instruments play the melody, starting one after another. This cascades down through the entire group, starting with the E-flat trumpet and ending with the tuba.

This same melody also provides the basis for Johannes Brahms’s chorale prelude for organ, although it is quite artfully disguised. It is in the top voice, but is concealed by an array of passing notes, with the melody notes sometimes appearing on syncopated beats. The prelude has a gentle devotional air, and organists usually shift between manuals

for different phrases of the chorale, creating a variety of soft sonorities. We do the same, but use different mutes to make the contrasts; the harmony is four-part, and so we never use more than four instruments, but we progressively change from straight mutes, to harmon, cup, and finally bucket mutes.

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky's *The Crown of Roses* is the first of several of our Christmas pieces that use the image of the Christ-child to presage the grim reality of Jesus's fate. It is popular as a carol despite its stark subject – the other children made Jesus a crown of thorns “and with rough fingers pressed it down, till on his forehead fair and young, red drops of blood like roses sprang”. The text, by Richard Henry Stoddard, was translated into Russian and originally set by Tchaikovsky for voice and piano in his *Sixteen Children's Songs* (1884). He later reworked this for a *cappella* choir, and this is the version that we have transcribed. Three verses and a coda in the sombre key of E minor contrast childlike innocence – for which we use the homogenous warmth of the brass section – with violence and pain – for which we unleash our full power.

Another popular minor-key carol is Mykola Leontovych's *Carol of the Bells*, which we have arranged for trumpet quartet (actually three trumpets and valve trombone). Written in 1916 as a Ukrainian New Year's carol called *Shchedryk*, the piece is underpinned by a four-note ostinato – a repeating figure based on a traditional folk chant. In the original lyrics a swallow sings of the wealth that spring will bring; however, in 1936 the work was adapted as a Christmas carol by an American, Peter Wilhousky, with the simple message of bells pealing to announce the advent of Christmas.

Peter Warlock's Christmas credentials come from an unlikely source: his sublime *Bethlehem Down* funded an “immortal carouse” when it won the *Daily Telegraph's* annual Christmas carol competition in 1927. That it won – and has been incredibly popular ever since – is no surprise, because it is a masterpiece. At first glance it seems like a simple setting of his friend Bruce Blunt's text, in four homophonic verses. But the melancholic minor key, and Warlock's unique harmony – with its dissonant chromatic inflections derived from a love of English folk-song and Elizabethan music – give the piece a timeless air. Blunt's text contrasts the peace and innocence of the stable with

Jesus's darker destiny: the third verse begins “When He is King they will clothe Him in gravesheets”. Warlock's harmony reflects this bitter twist, and we match the shifting moods with varied instrumental sonorities.

Before *Bethlehem Down* we have two other pieces by Warlock. This first is *Pieds-en-l'air*, the fifth movement from one of Warlock's few instrumental pieces, the *Capriol Suite* (1926). All of the movements of the suite were based on dance tunes from a sixteenth-century French treatise. The gently-lilting *Pieds-en-l'air* is the most liberal adaptation, and was itself set as a simple cradle song for choir by Andrew Carter, re-named *Lullaby my Jesus*. The peaceful quality of the piece requires a special sound from the septet, and so we perform it with all of the instruments cup-muted throughout.

In the middle of these two we have a rousing contrast with *Benedicamus Domino* (1918). The medieval Latin text – the only Latin that Warlock set – is a joyful celebration of the Virgin birth, and Warlock's music is in a straightforwardly jubilant C major. From unison incantations, it builds to an epic climax, and the brass septet at full pelt lends the ending an appropriately brazen colour.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's 1572 motet *Canite tuba* is in a similar celebratory vein, and is an obvious choice for brass transcription (in this case for three trumpets and two trombones). “Sound the trumpet in Sion, for the day of the Lord is nigh” are the opening lines; no stranger to word-painting, Palestrina sets these with heraldic trumpets clearly in mind, and this declamatory style remains for almost the entire piece, giving way to flowing counterpoint for the plethora of final Alleluias.

Much more tranquil is Robert Parsons's extraordinarily beautiful setting of the *Ave Maria*, by far his best known work. Parsons became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1563, and wrote much music for that choir. That he should reserve his best music for this Latin Marian hymn – a mainstay of the Catholic tradition – perhaps suggests where his sympathies lay in the Protestant regime of Elizabeth I. The *Ave Maria* is rooted in the Christmas story – it is based on the greeting of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, as told in Luke I. Parsons's response is a work of serene counterpoint that reaches its pinnacle in a rapturous Amen, before coming to rest in the reassuring warmth of F major – a perfect key for brass instruments.

Moving to a completely different Christian tradition – that of the Russian Orthodox Church – and a very contrasting musical landscape, we play another setting of the *Ave Maria: Bogoroditse Devo* from Sergey Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil*. The Russian Orthodox Church had a huge influence on Rachmaninov's musical language, but the Vigil is one of only two liturgical pieces he wrote, and he had stopped attending church by the time he composed it, in just two weeks in 1915. Perhaps the Church's strict guidelines for liturgical music put him off – no instruments were allowed, and clear intelligibility of the text was required. As a result the Vigil is for a *cappella* choir, and much of the writing is homophonic. *Bogoroditse Devo* begins simply, with quiet awe. At the words “blessed art thou among women” the music becomes more expansive, adding a counter-melody (played here by muted trumpet and trombone), and reaching an heroic climax (“thou hast brought forth the Saviour”), before returning to the calm of the opening. The Vigil is often known as the Vespers, but in fact *Bogoroditse Devo* marks the end of the Vespers section. Matins follows, announced by *Slava v vishnikh Bogu*, the Short Gloria – a text based on the words that the Angels sang to the shepherds. Again the movement starts very simply, repeating a straightforward melody; but it is notable for Rachmaninov's characteristic use of bell-tolls, set to the word *Slava* (Glory). These become increasingly insistent, eventually taking over and reaching an epic ringing climax, before the movement ends with a hymn-like prayer.

Peter Cornelius's *The Three Kings* is such a familiar feature in the world of English choral music, but he was in fact a German composer. *Die Könige* is the third song of a cycle for voice and piano, *Weihnachtstlieder* (Christmas carols), and, as the title suggests, describes the visit of the three kings to Jesus. Cornelius was friends with Liszt, who suggested that he add the Lutheran chorale *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* (How brightly shines the morning star) as the accompaniment to the melody. The result is a ravishing polyphonic setting that grows from a tender beginning to a poignant emotional climax. In the English choral version the solo is sung by a baritone, with the choir singing the chorale, and we have made reference to this tradition: the solo is played by a euphonium, with the remaining instruments of the septet cup-muted for the accompanying chorale.

A British Christmas seems almost unthinkable without the music of our most celebrated adopted-English composer, George Frideric Handel, and his much-loved oratorio *Messiah*. Born in Germany in 1685, Handel came to London in 1710 to establish himself as the foremost composer of Italian opera. But following the success of *Zadok the Priest* – his anthem for George II's coronation in 1727 (the year in which Handel became a British citizen) – he gravitated towards composing oratorios, still full of dramatic impulse, in English. *Messiah* was written in just 24 days in 1741 to a libretto compiled of scripture from the King James Bible, and we have recorded three of the most popular numbers: *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, and the final chorus, *Worthy is the Lamb*, with its ensuing *Amen*. These remain firm Christmas favourites, despite the fact that they are taken from Part 3 of the oratorio, which deals with the resurrection of the dead – perhaps a topic more suited to Easter. A bass aria, *The Trumpet Shall Sound* also features the only instrumental solo in the entire oratorio. The movement is an energetic and joyful welcoming of the Last Judgement, anticipating immortality. The original is in *da capo* form – meaning it follows an ABA structure – but it is a pretty substantial movement, and so we have only recorded the A portion. The trumpet solo is performed by the E-flat trumpet, and the bass trombone plays the powerful solo bass voice. With the remaining instruments we have used a varied combination of different mutes to try to convey the essence and vitality of Handel's colourful baroque orchestra. The final chorus, *Worthy is the Lamb*, presents a further challenge, because as well as the instruments of Handel's orchestra, we have a four-part choir to fit in – no mean feat with only seven instruments available. Much of the time Handel's instruments double the vocal lines, but reducing these doublings to a single part would lose a lot of the original's colour; our solution instead is to use unmuted instruments for the vocal parts, and muted ones for the orchestra. After an introduction that alternates stately *Largo* with lively *Andante* sections, Handel introduces an energetic fugue (*Blessing and honour, glory and pow'r be unto him*). He uses three trumpets for brassy fanfare-like figures in this movement, and amazingly the effect is undimmed even in this solely brass context. The movement culminates in a regal dominant chord, preparing the final D major *Amen* chorus – another magnificent fugue.

A contemporary (anonymous) critic disapproved: "The fugue too, on Amen, is entirely absurd, and without reason: at most, Amen is only a devout fiat, and ought never, therefore, to have been frittered, as it is, by endless divisions on A— and afterwards men." Regardless, it builds to an ecstatic climax, with a dramatic (dare I say operatic?) pause before the final triumphant and resolute cadence.

After Handel's epic culmination, we round our Christmas collection off with something a little more sedate: Franz Xaver Gruber's ubiquitous *Stille Nacht*. Gruber was a church organist, and he composed the piece in 1818, to a text by Joseph Mohr, the assistant pastor; it was first

performed on Christmas Eve that year (apparently, and probably apocryphally, because the organ had broken down). We have recorded three verses, exploring different sonorities of the brass septet: the first features the trombones and tuba alone; the second features muted trumpets, and a single trombone; and in the final verse the full septet comes together, with the trombones playing the tune, and the trumpets floating on top with a delicate counter-melody.

Matthew Knight

Septura

Septura brings together London's leading players to redefine brass chamber music through the uniquely expressive sound of the brass septet. By creating a canon of transcriptions, arrangements and new commissions for this brand new classical configuration, Septura aims to re-cast the brass ensemble as a serious artistic medium. Currently Ensemble in Residence at the Royal Academy of Music, London, the group is recording a series of discs for Naxos Records, each focused on a particular period, genre and set of composers, creating a 'counter-factual history' of brass chamber music. Weaving this ever-increasing repertoire into captivating live events, Septura is gaining a reputation for engaging audiences with innovative and imaginative programming, built around strong concepts and themes. Septura's members are the leading players of the new generation of British brass musicians, holding principal positions in the London Symphony, Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, City of Birmingham Symphony, Basel Symphony and Aurora orchestras. Septura is represented worldwide by Percius Artist and Project Management – www.percius.co.uk. This recording was made possible thanks to the generosity of Septura's Friends and Supporters.

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Photo: Bethany Clarke



Photo: Bethany Clarke

Brass instruments are almost a Christmas cliché: synonymous with the celebration, but perhaps not with the wealth of great music that it has inspired. Septura sets out to rectify this, re-imagining for brass septet the Christmas offerings of the greatest composers of the past 450 years. Pushing the combinations and colours of the septet to the limits, the result is a virtuosic and varied selection of festive favourites.

CHRISTMAS WITH SEPTURA

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|--------------|--|--------------|
| 1 | Heinrich SCHÜTZ (1585–1672): Das Wort ward Fleisch | 3:12 |
| 2–5 | Johann Sebastian BACH (1685–1750): Christmas Suite | 9:54 |
| 6 | Harold DARKE (1888–1976): In the bleak midwinter | 5:02 |
| 7 | Michael PRAETORIUS (1571–1621): Es ist ein Ros entsprungen | 2:33 |
| 8 | Johannes BRAHMS (1833–1897): Es ist ein Ros entsprungen | 2:13 |
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| 10 | Mykola LEONTOVYCH (1877–1921): Carol of the Bells | 1:17 |
| 11–13 | Peter WARLOCK (1894–1930): Christmas Medley | 7:48 |
| 14 | Giovanni Pierluigi da PALESTRINA (c.1525–1594): Canite tuba | 2:12 |
| 15 | Robert PARSONS (c.1535–1571/2): Ave Maria | 4:37 |
| 16–17 | Sergey RACHMANINOV (1873–1943): Vespers (All-Night Vigil), Op. 37, Nos. 6–7 | 5:09 |
| 18 | Peter CORNELIUS (1824–1874): The Three Kings | 2:33 |
| 19–21 | George Frideric HANDEL (1685–1759): Messiah – Excerpts | 11:00 |
| 22 | Franz GRUBER (1787–1863): Stille Nacht | 3:08 |

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Septura

Alan Thomas and Simon Cox, Trumpets in B flat

Huw Morgan, Trumpet in E flat • Sasha Koushk-Jalali, Tuba

Matthew Gee and Matthew Knight, Trombones • Daniel West, Bass Trombone

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