

Timeless Christmas

With its many customs and traditions, Christmas is celebrated throughout the world in numerous ways. Icelanders mark the holiday with *Jólabókaflóð* – the giving of books; Poles and Slovaks share unleavened bread – *oplatek* – to break the Advent fast; Lebanese children solicit gifts from strangers (à la Halloween) shouting “*editi aleik!*” (you have a gift for me!); and Japanese flock to *KFC* to feast on Colonel Sanders’ fried chicken. Schubert Artistic Director Philip Pletcher adds, “No matter the culture or traditions of people who celebrate Christmas, love represents the common denominator that makes Christmas timeless. Whether it’s the giving of gifts or the celebration of the birth of Christ, Christmas is rooted in love.”

Don Huls Recognized

The Schubert Male Chorus recognizes the accomplishments and impact of Director Emeritus Don Huls, who led the Chorus for 25 years from 1995 to 2020. A vocal music instructor and director of choirs in schools, churches, and colleges, Don retired from the GR Public Schools in 2004. His theater experience includes *Opera Grand Rapids*, *Circle Theater*, and *Calvin Alumni Players*. Don conducted hundreds of performances and thousands of rehearsals with the Chorus, patiently correcting countless hard “r” vocalizations. As Covid prevented the Chorus from recognizing Don’s retirement in May 2020, we do so belatedly this season. Don, thank you for all you have done for the Chorus; we will ~~never~~ “nevah” forget you!

MCKENZIE SWORN IN AS PRESIDENT

In July, second tenor Neil McKenzie became the 123rd president of the Schubert Male Chorus for the 2023-24 season, succeeding baritone Doug Hanline, who served as president from 2021 to 2023. Neil, who has been singing with the Chorus since 2011, works for Hekman Furniture and hails from Columbus, Ohio. He holds degrees from Indiana University and Ohio Wesleyan University. Greetings, Neil, and thank you for your leadership, Doug!

Spring Concert Date Set

The Schubert Male Chorus will perform its spring concert at the *Calvin University Fine Arts Center Recital Hall* on May 18, 2024 at 7:30 p.m. [Tickets](#) are on sale now.



“Timeless Christmas”

Program Notes



Ring Those Christmas Bells

Marvin Fisher and Gus Levene, arr. Ryan Murphy

Saint Patrick is believed to have started the [Christian bell tradition](#), which harkens to earlier origins in ancient pagan *Yule* festivals held during the [winter solstice](#). Since then, the traditional ringing bells at Christmas has continued to announce Christ’s birth. Several well-known carols feature bells, including *Carol of the Bells*, *Silver Bells*, *Jingle Bells*, *Ding Dong Merrily on High*, and *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*. In 1953 *Peggy Lee* debuted *Marvin Fisher’s* and *Gus Levene’s* Christmas bell frolic accompanied by *Jud Conlin’s Rhythmaires*. *Ryan Murphy’s* arrangement calls for four-hands piano and as many bells as the Chorus can muster. Maureen’s and Phil’s technical chops are on full display to complement the easy-going, catchy pop melody.



Christmas Time is Here

Vince Guaraldi and Lee Mendelson, arr. Robert Sterling

Charles Schultz published 17,897 *Peanuts* cartoon strips from 1950 through 2000, including the successful and critically acclaimed 30-minute animated film *A Charlie Brown Christmas* in 1965. The film’s executive producer, *Lee Mendelson*, charted new animation territory by not using a [laugh track](#) – an expectation at the time – and by incorporating jazz into a Christmas feature. *Vince Guaraldi* had already been recording and gigging in Northern California since the early 1950s, though his [tracks](#) for *A Charlie Brown Christmas* immediately elevated his stardom and introduced millions to jazz with his signature “detuned” piano. *Robert Sterling’s* arrangement of the [opening piece](#) to the film faithfully captures the [chromatic](#), densely packed harmonies typical of cool, relaxed [West Coast jazz](#).



Carol of the Bells

Mykola Leontovich and Peter Wilhousky, arr. Peter Wilhousky

Based on a traditional Ukrainian pagan folk song, “*Shchedryk*” – loosely translated as “bountifulness” – describes a swallow flying into a house in late winter to sing of the wealth that will arrive with the spring planting (the original Ukrainian New Year). With the introduction of Christianity to Ukraine in 988, the New Year celebration moved to January and the song became associated with the [Feast of the Epiphany](#). Ukrainian composer *Mykola Leontovich* set the lyrics to music in 1914 based on an ancient four-bar [ostinato](#) in the melody that opens the carol. After hearing a [performance](#) of “*Shchedryk*” in 1922 at Carnegie Hall, *Peter Wilhousky* of NBC adapted the lyrics in 1936 with the bell theme and English lyrics that we sing today.



Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming

Traditional, arr. Russell Robinson

Hailing from the late [German Renaissance](#), the melody of “*Es ist ein Rose entsprungen*” was later harmonized by German composer and organist *Michael Praetorius* in 1609. Though the original German version equated the rose with the Virgin Mary, *Theodore Baker’s* English lyrics from 1894 transferred the metaphorical meaning of the rose to Jesus’ birth as prophesied in *Isaiah 11:1*. *Russell Robinson’s* arrangement adheres faithfully to Praetorius’ harmonization but with added splashes of modern pop folded into the piano accompaniment and flute [obligato](#). Praetorius signals that we can take heart even “amid the cold of winter” when he modulates from a dreary minor chord in the first syllable of “winter” into an optimistic major chord on the second syllable – a blooming rose heralding hope and promise!



The Little Drummer Boy

Katherine Davis, arr. Mark Hayes

This popular Noël tells of a poor boy giving Baby Jesus the gift of music by playing a small drum. In keeping with the drummer boy's simple gift, the musical structure is straightforward with no complexities beyond the triplets that mimic the rattle of a snare drum. The [Trapp Family](#) of *The Sound of Music* fame first recorded the song in 1951 – originally titled “Carol of the Drum” – that [Katherine Davis](#) wrote in 1941. The [Jack Halloran Singers](#) followed with a recording in 1957 with a new arrangement (slower, with more chordal variation in the accompaniment) that is most commonly used today. The [Harry Simeone Chorale](#) re-released it as a single in 1958 with only slight changes (adding finger cymbals) but with the new title of “The Little Drummer Boy.”



The Twelve Days after Christmas

Frederick Silver

The “twelve days of Christmas” refers to the period in the calendar starting on or near December 25 and ending with the [Epiphany](#) in early January when the [Magi](#) visited the Infant Jesus. Stemming from this tradition, the English carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas” depicts a series of gifts – a partridge in a pear tree, two turtle doves, three French hens, etc. – given by the lyricist’s “true love.” [Frederick Silver's](#) 1968 satirical homage, “The Twelve Days after Christmas,” paints a considerably more chaotic, less idyllic holiday tableau. The tonal tomfoolery in the opening bars flitting absurdly from B minor to E-flat major to C major soon calms down, though the lyrics immediately embark on a madcap, rollicking romp for the remainder of the Christmastime calamity.

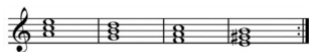


Mary, Did You Know?

Mark Lowry, Buddy Greene, arr. Jack Schrader

A relative newcomer (1991) to the Christmas musical catalog, “Mary, Did You Know?” – with music by [Mark Lowry](#) and lyrics from [Buddy Greene](#) – is built upon a traditional [Andalusian cadence](#) found in many classical and pop works, including “Happy Together” and “Hit the Road, Jack.”

ANDALUSIAN CADENCE



The lyrics pose a series of rhetorical questions about whether Mary grasps the profound impact of her Son's life. Numerous artists have covered the easygoing tune, including [Pentatonix](#), [Carrie Underwood](#), [Clay Aiken](#), [Dolly Parton](#), and [Mary J. Blige](#).



This Christmastide

Donald Fraser and Jane McCulloch

The word “Christmastide” in the English language originates in 1556 with “tide” meaning “time” or “a season” (as in “yuletide”). Composer [Donald Fraser](#) and lyricist [Jane McCulloch](#) wrote this delightful Noël for operatic diva and University of Michigan alumna [Jessye Norman](#) in 1984. McCulloch herself blogs about the importance of the song's repeated words “truth, peace, hope, and love” – universal human needs throughout the entire year. Fraser patterns the carol's seven verses after the classic “theme and variations” structure. The most striking variation in verse six (“trumpets sound”) suddenly pauses the piano arpeggiation to “clear a path” for the first tenor descant that soars above all other voices, piano, and pipe organ.



The Sleigh (À la Russe)

Richard Kountz and Ivor Tchervanow, arr. Ralph Baldwin

Climb aboard the Schubert [troika](#) (sleigh) and zip through the Eurasian [steppe](#) toward a toasty [izba](#) (country home) brimming with [zakuski](#) (hors d'œuvres) and a bubbling [samovar](#) (tea urn). Written in 1926 and featured in [Woody Woodpecker's](#) cartoon short “Ski for Two” in 1944, “Sleigh” begins with the lower voices mimicking horses' hooves accompanying the melody in the first tenors. A very short bridge that slows the pace in the vocals from eighth notes to half notes emulates a [bayan](#) (Russian button accordion) with sixteenth-note partial [chromatic scales](#) in the piano capturing the wheezing of the bayan's air intake. Throughout you can hear the Chorus imitating [Cossacks](#) as they spur on their steeds whooping “ya-ha.”



I'll Be Home for Christmas

Walter Kent and Kim Gannon, arr. Mark Hayes

This enduring classic from 1943 captures the zeitgeist of America in WWII (composer [Walter Kent](#) also wrote the wartime hit “The White Cliffs of Dover”). [Bing Crosby](#) first recorded this Christmas standard – the same year the crooner recorded “White Christmas” – to honor the many soldiers and support staff mustered for action overseas in the European and Pacific theaters of operation. Though “I'll Be Home” became one of the most requested songs in USO Christmas performances, the [BBC banned the song](#) fearing that its sentimental lyrics – penned by [James “Kim” Gannon](#) – would lower British troop morale. [Mark Hayes' lush, introspective arrangement](#) would feel perfectly at home in the [Great American Songbook](#) of timeless jazz standards.



O Love

Elaine Hagenberg, George Matheson

Scottish minister [George Matheson](#) penned the lyrics to “O Love” in 1882 after learning that his fiancée had called off their wedding upon the onset of Matheson's blindness. Matheson's sister Jane stepped in to tend to his care as his blindness progressed. Years later, on the eve of Jane's wedding, facing the prospect of living alone without his sister's support, Matheson began reflecting on his personal loss and grief, which became the inspiration for the lyrics of “O Love.” [Elaine Hagenberg](#) set the lyrics to music in 2016, capturing Matheson's emotion with an impassioned melody accompanied by a plaintive cello [obligato](#). The lyrics hint at a water theme – symbolic for Matheson's tears – citing “ocean depths” and “tracing the rainbow through the rain.”



Christmas is Coming

Traditional, arr. Andy Beck

After [Edith Nesbit Bland](#) set this well-known nursery rhyme to music in the nineteenth century, [The Kingston Trio](#) popularized the tune in their 1960 album, “The Last Month of the Year.” [John Denver](#) and the [Muppets](#) recorded a calypso version in 1979 – perhaps inspired by [Harry Belafonte's](#) not-so-calypso version from 1958. [Andy Beck's](#) arrangement preserves the traditional [round](#) structure (“Row, Row, Row Your Boat” typifies the classic round), with the Chorus starting the same melody at different times. You will hear three primary sections: the melody in unison, a two-part round, and the concluding three-part round. The simplistic lyrics focus on seasonal abundance (“the goose is getting fat”) and charity (“please put a penny in the old man's hat”).