20 LIVE EVENTS FOR CHRISTMAS IN THE US

Brian Wise brings you the BBC Music Magazine guide to the very best concerts and opera around the States and Canada

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1 A CELTIC CHRISTMAS
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Akron, 5 December
Tel: 800-314-2535
Web: www.apollosfire.org
Cleveland Baroque orchestra Apollo's Fire joins forces with La Nef, a Montréal-based ensemble, for a programme of ancient Celtic music rooted both in church and countryside. The concert includes excerpts from a 13th-century service surrounded by hymns, carols and folk tunes. Expect a mix of bagpipes, fiddles, flutes and voices, which should build to a rambunctious, rollicking finale.

2 ST LOUIS SYMPHONY PLAYS HANDEL
Powell Hall, St Louis, 7-9 December
Tel: 314-534-1700
Web: www.stlouisphsymphony.org
Millions of Americans heard Christopher Warren-Green conduct for the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in April 2011. The English maestro comes to St Louis for another regal occasion: three performances of Handel's Messiah. Joining him are four top-notch soloists: soprano Tamara Wilson, countertenor Christopher Ainslie, tenor Daniel Montenegro and bass Matthew Treviño.

3 SCHOLA ANTQUIA OF CHICAGO
Sacred Heart Parish, Winnetka, 7 December
Tel: 585-733-0471
Tel: www.chicagochant.org
Schola Antiqua of Chicago, a vocal ensemble dedicated to music before 1600, digs up a true rarity for the season: Pierre de la Rue's Missa Conceptio tua. Billed as a mass for five 'extremely low voices,' the work has not seen the light of day in modern performances or recordings. Also on the programme are several medieval English carols, and other diverse songs for Advent.

4 PHILHARMONIA BAROQUE ORCHESTRA PLAYS HANDEL
First Congregational Church, Berkeley, 8 December
Tel: 510-642-9988
Web: calperfs.berkeley.edu
For one night only, Masaaki Suzuki, the globetrotting director of Bach Collegium Japan, conducts the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and Chorale, plus soloists from Yale University's Institute of Sacred Music, in a period-performance of Handel's Messiah.

5 CHORUS'S A COLORADO CHRISTMAS
Boettcher Concert Hall, 7-9 December
Tel: 877-292-7979
Web: www.coloradosymphony.org
There are holiday traditions and then there's 'A Colorado Christmas,' which has been going strong since 1984, having expanded from two concerts in its early days to five this year. This Yuletide celebration features some 300 musicians including the Colorado Symphony, its Chorus and Colorado Children's Chorale.

6 TRINITY CHOIR AND BAROQUE ORCHESTRA
Trinity Church, New York, 9 December
Tel: 212-721-6500
Web: www.trinitywallstreet.org
The music programme at Trinity Wall Street went through a bumpy patch this year as the church's vestry was reassessing its costs. But
it has returned with a bang this fall. Julian Wachner conducts the Trinity Choir and Baroque Orchestra in Handel’s Messiah, first in the church where it reportedly got its US premiere in 1770, and then at Lincoln Center.

7 A CHANTICLEER CHRISTMAS
Walt Disney Hall, LA, 12 December
Tel: 800-745-3000
Web: www.laphil.com
These a cappella road warriors have plenty of experience with Christmas music. The veteran ensemble spends the final month of every year touring the US with their mix of carols, hymns and popular tunes. Their Walt Disney Hall concert will draw from A Chanticleer Christmas, one of their eight festive albums.

8 HANDEL & HAYDN SOCIETY
Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, 13, 16 December
Tel: 617 266 3605
Web: www.handelandhaydn.org
The Handel & Haydn Society adheres to the four-voices-per-part approach to Bach cantatas, making for a sound that one Boston critic described as more tweed than plush velvet. Regardless of whether that meets your taste, the ensemble’s readings of the Cantatas I, II, and VI from the Christmas Oratorio should provide plenty to savour, including some celebratory orchestral music and dramatic vocal solos.

9 HOLIDAY ORGAN SPECTACULAR
Walt Disney Hall, LA, 14 December
Tel: 800-745-3000
Web: www.laphil.com
Christmas music on an organ may seem out of place in sunny LA, but David Higgs hopes to paint a wintry scene on the Disney Hall instrument. Designed by Frank Gehry and known for its ‘forest of pipes’ appearance, the organ has been praised as a masterpiece. Higgs, the chair of the organ department at the Eastman School of Music, will present traditional carols and festive songs.
10 ANONYMOUS 4
Church of the Holy Trinity,
Philadelphia, 14 December
Tel: 215-569-8080
Web: www.pcmconcerts.org
This veteran vocal quartet presents a sampler of medieval music celebrating Mary’s role in the Christmas story. Featured will be carols and songs from England, France and Spain, plus some earthy selections from the Cantigas de Santa Maria. The singers round off the evening with some Anglo-American ballads and songs, including The Cherry Tree Carol and A Virgin Unspotted.

11 GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Guggenheim Museum, New York,
16-17 December
Tel: 212-423-3587
Web: www.guggenheim.org
The Guggenheim Museum’s Frank Lloyd Wright-designed rotunda provides a striking backdrop for just about any kind of musical performance. But this programme of choral Christmas favourites should be especially awe-inspiring. George Steel takes a break from running New York City Opera to conduct the Vox Vocal Ensemble.

12 NATIONAL CATHEDRAL
CHRISTMAS CONCERTS
National Cathedral, Washington, DC,
15-16 December
Tel: 202-537-2228
Web: www.cathedralschoolsociety.org
This sing-along concert includes traditional favorites such as Joy to the World and O Come, all ye Faithful, as well as the premiere of a new carol by British composer Ben Parry. J Reilly Lewis conducts the 160-voice chorus, with the Washington Symphonic Brass and the Langley High School Madrigals.

13 MARSALIS IN
CINCINNATI
Music Hall, Cincinnati, 1 December
Tel: 513-381-330
Web: cincinnatisymphony.org
Saxophonist Branford Marsalis joins the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra for a performance of Jacob Ter Veldhuis’s Tallahatchie Concerto, a work which received its premiere in 2002. Also in the programme is Prokofiev’s Lieutenant Kije Suite and two works by Barber: his Night Flight and the First Symphony. Jacques Lacombe conducts.

14 HOUSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA PLAYS
HANDEL'S MESSIAH
Sugar Land Baptist Church, 20 December
Tel: 713-224-7575
Web: www.houstonsymphony.org
Matthew Halls, an English conductor who comes out of the early music movement, recently became artistic director of the Oregon Bach Festival. Like Emmanuelle Haim he’ll be charged with conducting a big orchestra and chorus, and in two cavernous spaces: Houston’s Jones Hall and the suburban Sugar Land Baptist Church.

15 PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA
Verizon Hall, Philadelphia,
20-22 December
Tel: 215-893-1999
Web: www.philorch.org
Record collectors may remember The Glorious Sound of Christmas, a glossy packaged holiday album from Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1962, which sold more than a million copies in its first year alone. With its lush arrangements of songs and carols, one New York Times critic deemed it ‘an elaborately overorchestrated hodgepodge.’ But the brand stuck, and audiences wistful for the Mad Men-era of the 1960s should find much to enjoy here.

16 THE NASHVILLE SYMPHONY PLAYS
HANDEL’S MESSIAH
Schermerhorn Symphony Center,
Nashville, 20-22 December
Tel: 615-687-6400
Web: www.nashvillesymphony.org
The Nashville Symphony has earned high marks under its dynamic music director, the Costa Rican conductor Giancarlo Guerrero, who was recently rewarded with an eight-year contract extension. He caps a busy season with the orchestra (which included a visit to Carnegie Hall) with Handel’s festive choral masterpiece.
BACKSTAGE WITH... Branford Marsalis

TALLAHATCHIE TREASURE: 'It's a piece I really enjoy both playing and listening to.'

The saxophonist on tackling a tricky concerto in Cincinnati

You're performing the Tallahatchie Concerto by Jacob Ter Veldhuis with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra on 1 December. Can you describe it?

That's quite hard to do. Jacob is a Dutch composer, who named the work after a bridge in Mississippi, though I'm not sure why. It has a very beautiful Adagio first movement, while the second movement is essentially based on two chord structures — though you also hear smatterings of pop saxophone references there, plus some really tricky compound time signature moments. It's a piece I really enjoy both playing and listening to.

Is it a technically difficult work to play?

In a way it is. There's some very unorthodox fingering in there. I think Jacob is a piano player by trade, and it's always interesting when you get someone who's writing for an instrument that is not their own, as they don't know what's difficult and what's not. But then, being forced to play things that aren't natural is, in a way, what helps extend the technical pedagogy of the instrument.

Is it frustrating that there are not more saxophone concertos around?

No. It's just one of those things that you have to deal with. And the ones that are there are hard enough, so I have plenty to work on!

As someone who is known as both a jazz and classical saxophonist, how do you divide your time between the two?

I don't tend to think of it in terms of percentages, but I definitely do more jazz than symphonic performances. At most I'll do about ten symphonic performances a year. That said, I spend a lot of time practising symphonic music as it is so hard to play.

Is it difficult switching between the worlds of jazz and classical?

Not really. The most amazing thing about Western music is that, if you go right back to Monteverdi up to, say, the raper Drake from the present day, you have the same 12 notes for everything — it's not like I'm trying to play Arabic music, where I would have to learn quarter-tones and other things. We're talking about dialect, and I understand what the dialects are. There was a time, however, when I first started playing symphonic music and I definitely did not sound like a classical saxophone player, as I was still trying to learn the dialect.

Finally, will you have a busy Christmas?

This year, I'm basically home from 9 December right until the middle of January, so that's going to be really great!

See Choice No. 13

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