North American Live Choice

20 Live Events for Christmas in North America

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

1. HANDEL'S MESSIAH... REFRESHED!
Avery Fisher Hall, NY, 1 December
Tel: 212-721-6500
Web: www.dciny.org
In an age of light and fleet versions of Handel's Messiah, the Distinguished Concerts International New York (DCINY) producing organisation is going retro. Artistic director Jonathan Griffith conducts the piece in a seldom-encountered version: a 1959 re-orchestration jointly credited to the conductors Thomas Beecham and Eugene Goossens. It features a massive orchestra and choir that give Handel's music the ravishing colours and heft of Berlioz or even Verdi, more than the Baroque era.

2. BACH CHRISTMAS ORATORIO
Powell Hall, St Louis, 6-7 December
Tel: 314-534-1700
Web: www.stlsymphony.org
Several big orchestras have reclaimed JS Bach from the period-instrument crowd in recent years. Among them is the St Louis Symphony Orchestra, which offers Bach's Cantatas Nos 1-3 from the Christmas Oratorio. David Robertson conducts an impressive quartet of soprano Dominique Labelle, mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey, tenor Nicholas Phan and baritone Stephen Powell, plus the St Louis Symphony Chorus.

3. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Guggenheim Museum, NY, 15-16 December
Tel: 212-423-3587
Web: www.guggenheim.org
The Guggenheim Museum's Frank Lloyd Wright-designed rotunda provides a striking backdrop for this programme of choral Christmas favourites. The Vox Vocal Ensemble and Graham Ashton Brass Ensemble join forces under the baton of George Steel.

A Cleveland Christmas:
Jeanette Sorrell leads Apollo's Fire (Choice 9)

4. SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY
Davies Symphony Hall, CA, 22-24 December
Tel: 415-864-6000
Web: www.sfsymphony.org
The San Francisco Symphony dresses up Davies Symphony Hall for the holidays and serves up an old-school programme of holiday carols and songs featuring the orchestra's brass section, its resident chorus and organist Robert Huw Morgan. Ragnar Bohlin conducts the programme, which includes some sing-along standards for the audience.

5. LOS ANGELES MASTER CHORALE
Walt Disney Concert Hall, CA, 7-8 December
Tel: 323-850-2000
Web: www.laphil.com
The Los Angeles Master Chorale will offer a tribute to Stephen Paulus, the composer who is recovering from a stroke he suffered earlier this year, with a concert featuring his 2008 Christmas Dances. The piece highlights an intriguing programme also featuring Britten's A Ceremony of Carols and Respighi's cantata Laud to the Nativity.

6. TAFELMUSIK: MESSIAH
Koerner Hall, Toronto, 18-21 December
Tel: 416-964-6337
Web: www.tafelmusik.org
Torontoans who like their Messiah big and brawny should look no further than the
Toronto Symphony's five performances at Roy Thomson Hall (17-22 December). For those with a taste for period style – brisk tempos and intimacy of approach – nearly simultaneous concerts by Tafelmusik have the advantage. Tafelmusik's 2012 Messiah recording had much to admire on all levels.

**7 A FESTIVAL OF LESSONS & CAROLS**

St Mark's Cathedral and other locations,
Seattle, 7-23 December
Tel: 206-524-3234
Web: www.nwchoirs.org

Now in its 35th year, the Northwest Boychoir presents its own version of the annual Festival of Lessons and Carols held every Christmas Eve in the chapel of King's College, Cambridge. These concerts in various venues around Seattle largely follow the pattern of readings and carols as established in Cambridge, but with a few tweaks: the customary biblical readings are replaced with Christmas stories and poetry. *Once in Royal David's City* leads things off.

**8 THE NUTCRACKER**

Walt Disney Concert Hall, LA,
12-15 December
Tel: 323-850-2000
Web: www.laphil.com

Gustavo Dudamel has long been drawn to Tchaikovsky, though Angelinos have yet to hear his take on The Nutcracker. It's a testament to both the score and the performers that the Philharmonic is presenting the complete work, without dancers, for four concerts. The Los Angeles Children's Chorus joins in the festivities.

**9 PRAETORIUS CHRISTMAS VESPERS**

Locations throughout the Cleveland area,
13-16 December
Tel: 800-314-2535
Web: www.apollosfire.org

Apollo's Fire can always be counted on for fresh and unusual programming as this performance of Michael Praetorius's Christmas Vespers should demonstrate. Jeannette Sorrell (above) leads the Cleveland-based period ensemble in this virtuosic and sophisticated intermingling of trumpets, sackbuts, cornettos, antiphonal choirs, lutes, strings and recorders.

**10 TALLIS SCHOLARS**

13 December, Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Kansas City;
14 December, St Paul Church, MA
Tel: 816-561-9999; 617-661-1812
Web: www.chambermusic.org

The Tallis Scholars' 40th anniversary tour heads statewide with a programme of sacred works written to honour the Virgin Mary, both as saint and mother. The programme includes...
Victoria’s rapt and mystical Missa Gaudentamus, and intimate seasonal settings of the Ave Maria by Bruckner, Guerrero and Verdelot.

11 PHILHARMONIA BAROQUE ORCHESTRA
Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley, CA, 14 December
Tel: 510-642-9988
Web: www.calperfs.berkeley.edu
Always leave your audiences wanting more: that seems to be the philosophy of conductor Nicholas McGegan and his Bay Area period-instrumental ensemble. They present Handel’s Messiah in just two concerts this December – unlike many orchestras, which will offer as many as five. Expect plenty of McGegan hallmarks such as brisk tempos and a smoothly blended sound. See interview, p122

12 PRAETORIUS: IN DULCI JUBILO
Park Avenue Christian Church, NY, 14 December
Tel: 646-470-5809
Web: www.tenetnyc.com
Forming a kind of early-music super group, New York’s TENET vocal ensemble teams up with the Bach Collegium San Diego and Dark Horse Consort from San Francisco to perform works by Michael Praetorius and his contemporaries. The programme includes Praetorius’s In dulci jubilo, Vom himmel hoch and Puer natus in Bethlehem, among other pieces. After debuting in New York, the collective heads west to California, to La Jolla on 20 December and then to Los Angeles on 21 December.

13 NATIONAL CATHEDRAL CHRISTMAS CONCERTS
National Cathedral, Washington, 14-15 December
Tel: 202-537-2228
Web: www.cathedralchoralsociety.org
The Washington Post has called the Cathedral Choral Society’s ‘Joy of Christmas’ programmes ‘the smartest, least-hackneyed and most musically satisfying of the plentiful choral events on offer in the Washington area each December’. The choral concert features the Washington Symphonic Brass, organ and carillon, set in the atmospheric Washington National Cathedral.

14 WELCOME YULE!
Symphony Center, Chicago, 14-15, 20-23 December
Tel: 312-294-3000
Web: www.cso.org
The 19th edition of this family-oriented holiday show includes selections from Handel’s Messiah and Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker, plus popular carols, novelty numbers and appearances by Christmas characters. Duain Wolfe conducts members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the 145-voice Chicago Symphony Chorus.

15 CALMUS ENSEMBLE LEIPZIG
Met Museum of Art, NY, 7 December
Tel: 212-570-3949
Web: www.metmuseum.org
The Met Museum always embraces the festive bustle of the holiday season, with its Baroque-themed Christmas tree and assortment of musical treats. This year it welcomes the versatile vocal quintet Calmus Ensemble Leipzig for its museum debut, featuring a holiday programme that has Bach at its core.

16 A FRENCH CHRISTMAS
Boston locations, 19-21 December
Tel: 617-262-2092
Web: www.bostoncamerata.org
This veteran early-music ensemble presents its French-influenced Christmas programme, with Parisian dances, Provençal carols, liturgies from the Burgundian court, and plenty more. The concerts feature the debut of the Boston Camerata Wind Band.

17 A BACH CHRISTMAS
NEC’s Jordan Hall, Boston, 19, 22 December
Tel: 617-266-3605
Web: www.handelandhaydn.org
Boston-based conductor Scott Metcalfe joins the Handel and Haydn Society for seasonal music from the 18th-century German tradition, including Bach’s Cantata No. 62 and his Suite No. 2 in G. Works by Samuel Scheidt, Michael Praetorius and Martin Luther round off the festivities.

18 WHAT MAKES IT GREAT?
Walter Reade Theater, NY, 9 December
Tel: 212-721-6500
Web: www.lcgreatperformers.org
The commentator Rob Kapilow and the much-admired Brooklyn Youth Chorus
We talk to the conductor about the joys of Handel's Messiah

This Christmas, Handel's Messiah will be performed by thousands of professional and amateur groups around the world. Why do you think it has become so popular?

Aside from the terrific quality of the music, Messiah is Christianity without the tricky bits. There are none of the things which people disagree on – it's the basic guide to Christianity set to glorious music. But it's funny in a way that it's become such a popular Christmas piece because Handel designed it for Easter, for the Passion week. In London at the time, theatres were closed during Lent, so he couldn't do opera but he could do sacred oratorio. But, in the United States especially, it has been moved to Christmas somehow.

And do you think the work has settled into the Christmas period?

I think it's an awkward fit – so often people insist on cutting the non-festive bits: the crucifixion and the resurrection. And that, I think, alters the balance of the piece so you get the appetiser and not the main course. The second part of Messiah has a marvellous flow, and once you start cutting it to shreds you lose what a great piece it is. So at the Philharmonia we perform Messiah complete.

You have performed – and recorded – this work so many times. How do you bring something fresh to the music?

I've always got a different cast of soloists so they bring their experience to it. A conductor doesn't dictate how the performance will go, especially with something like Messiah. Every performance has its own atmosphere, even when you're doing it with an orchestra and chorus who have been playing it since the '90s. I don't just stick it in the microwave every year.

The Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra is a period performance group. What does that bring to your interpretations of Handel's Messiah?

A great deal of experience playing Handel! His music is our meat and potatoes; it's the stuff we play almost more than any other composer, largely because he wrote a lot of oratorios in English which are great to perform in English-speaking countries.

Can you remember the first time you conducted Messiah?

Yes, it was in 1986 with the St Louis Symphony. The reason I remember is because the soprano had never performed Messiah either, and that soprano was none other than Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, who later recorded Messiah with me. Her voice, of course, eventually settled to be a mezzo.

Which other festive works do you look forward to hearing at this time of year?

Definitely Bach's Christmas Oratorio - all of it. Very often people just do the pre-Christmas bits, but I think the fourth and fifth Cantatas have some glorious music. And actually I really just love Christmas Carols.