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 APOLLO'S FIRE: SACRUM MYSTERIUM
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; 5 December
Tel: 800-314-2535
Web: www.apollosfire.org
Cleveland Baroque orchestra Apollo's Fire weaves elements of a Scottish medieval Vespers service with Celtic folk tunes and carols. The pan-Celtic party also features Montreal ensemble La Nef and the Apollo's Singers, all brought together by conductor Jeanette Sorrell. As well as this New York visit, they will be on Ohio home ground, with concerts at venues around Cleveland on 3-7 December.

2 PHILHARMONIA BAROQUE ORCHESTRA
Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley, CA, 3-7 December
Tel: 510-642-9988
Web: www.calperfs.berkeley.edu
For many early music groups, Christmas promises familiar repertory and little risk. The Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra takes the opposite approach, presenting several lesser-known seasonal gems including Vivaldi's Dixit Dominus - a piece discovered with some fanfare in 2005 - along with Zelenka's Missa Nativitatis Domini and Haydn's tender Ave Regina Coelorum.

3 ALL IS CALM: THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE OF 1914
Pantages Theatre, Minneapolis, 17-21 December
Tel: 612-339-3003
Web: www.theaterlatteda.com
Male chamber choir Cantus (above) uses letters, diaries and documents to tell the story of Christmas 1914, when Allied and German soldiers declared a truce. The group sings carols and patriotic songs arranged by Erick Lichte and Tim Takach, both formerly with Cantus. This will be the show's final year, but not before it travels to several other US cities.

4 HOUSTON GRAND OPERA: A CHRISTMAS CAROL
Wortham Theater Center, Houston, Texas, 5-21 December
Tel: 800-626-7372
Web: www.houstongrandopera.org
Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol has been turned into a ballet, a Broadway show and even a BBC mime version starring Marcel Marceau. Now the beloved story gets an operatic adaptation, with music by the young British composer Iain Bell. Simon Callow directs and tenors Anthony Dean Griffey and Kevin Ray alternate as the narrator.

5 LOS ANGELES CHAMBER ORCHESTRA
Zipper Concert Hall, LA, 11 December;
Valley Performing Arts Center, Northridge, CA, 13 December
Tel: 213-622-7001; 818-677-8800
Web: www.laco.org
Led by Jeffrey Kahane, this festive programme that travels to two venues should offer plenty to savour for Baroque-starved Californians. It opens with Vivaldi's flamboyant Concerto for Four Violins in B minor and ends with JS Bach's adaptation of the same composition, the Concerto for Four Harpsichords in A minor, BWV 1066. Between are Corelli's Christmas Concerto and Albinoni's Oboe Concerto in D minor.

6 A FESTIVAL OF LESSONS AND CAROLS
Venues around Seattle, 12-23 December
Tel: 206-524-3234
Web: www.nwchoirs.org
Northwest Boychoir presents its 36th annual Festival of Lessons and Carols, modelled, of
course, on the Christmas Eve service held in the Chapel of King's College, Cambridge. These concerts largely follow the pattern of readings and carols as established in Cambridge, but with a few tweaks: the main thing being that the customary biblical readings are replaced with Christmas stories and poetry. ‘Once in Royal David’s City’ starts things off.

7 MONTREAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Maison symphonique de Montréal, Canada, 16-18 December
Tel: 1-888-842-9951
Web: www.osm.ca/en
Tenor Vittorio Grigolo, nicknamed ‘Il Pavarottino’ takes a break from performances this season at London’s Royal Opera House and New York’s Metropolitan Opera for a pair of Christmas concerts with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. Big, lush carol arrangements will be conducted by Kent Nagano and will also feature Quebec-born organist Luc Beauséjour.

8 WASHINGTON CHORUS: A CANDLELIGHT CHRISTMAS
Kennedy Center, Washington DC, 14, 20 & 22 December
Tel: 202-342-6221
Web: www.thewashingtonchorus.org
The 200-voice Washington Chorus, led by Julian Wachner, presents its popular annual programme of traditional holiday fare. Brass, organ and percussion forces join the Grammy Award-winning ensemble; the concert begins with a candlelight procession to get you in the holiday spirit. Repeated at the Music Center at Strathmore in North Bethesda, Maryland on 23 December.

9 TAFELMUSIK: MESSIAH
Koerner Hall, Toronto, Canada, 17-20 December
Tel: 416-408-0208
Web: www.tafelmusik.org
Torontonians who like their Messiah big and brawny should look no further than the Toronto Symphony’s five performances at Roy Thompson Hall (16, 17, 19, 20 & 21 December).

For those with a taste for period style – brisk tempos and intimacy of approach – nearly simultaneous concerts by Tafelmusik have the advantage. The Toronto Star called Tafelmusik’s 2013 performance ‘spectacularly precise yet expressive’.

10 ATTACCA QUARTET
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 17 December
Tel: 212-570-3949
Web: www.metmuseum.org
It’s not very often that one encounters Poulenc’s Christmas Motets, let alone in string quartet arrangements. The exciting young Attacca Quartet unveils its own versions of...
these short, joyful pieces, along with two thoroughly secular works: Dvořák’s *American* Quartet and Mozart’s String Quartet in G, K387, a work composed in honour of Haydn.

11 **BRITTEN’S CEREMONY OF CAROLS**  
St Thomas Church, New York,  
18 December  
Tel: 212-664-9360  
Web: www.saintthomaschurch.org  
With the Benjamin Britten centenary behind us, performances of his *A Ceremony of Carols* are relatively sparse this year. But the 24-voice boys choir of New York’s St Thomas Church comes through with its annual rendition of this bold and enchanting work, conducted by John Scott. John Rutter’s *Dancing Day*, a cycle of traditional Christmas carols, rounds out the programme.

12 **SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY: MESSIAH**  
Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco,  
18-20 December  
Tel: 415-864-6000  
Web: www.sfsymphony.org  
The early music specialist Jane Glover earned high marks when she made her San Francisco Symphony debut with Handel’s *Messiah* a decade ago. She returns to lead Handel’s great oratorio with a fresh quartet of soloists: soprano Yulia Van Doren, mezzo-soprano Leah Wool, tenor Nicholas Phan and baritone Troy Cook.

13 **MUSIC OF THE BAROQUE**  
Locations around Chicago,  
18-21 December  
Tel: 312-551-1414  
Web: www.baroque.org  
Music of the Baroque’s Holiday Brass and Choral Concerts are a nearly 45-year-old Chicago tradition and it’s a sign of audience loyalty that the organisation often explores the vast troves of esoteric Christmas music without a dip in attendance. William Jon Gray conducts this early-music salute to the season at several venues.

14 **HUMPERDINCK’S HANSEL AND GRETEL**  
Metropolitan Opera House, New York, 18-30 December  
Tel: 212-362-6000  
Web: www.metopera.org  
Director Richard Jones tells Humperdinck’s *Hansel and Gretel* from a rather dark point of view, emphasising the title character’s sordid home life, including abusive parents. But this remains a fairy-tale opera, with some delectable tunes and a happy ending. Mezzo Christine Rice is Hansel, soprano Aleksandra Kurzak is Gretel and tenor Robert Brubaker plays the witch (taking over the usual mezzo role). Sir Andrew Davis conducts.

15 **CHRISTMAS IN 15TH-CENTURY FRANCE & BURGUNDY**  
First Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 18-20 December  
Tel: 617-960-7956  
Web: www.blueheronchoir.org  
Boston’s Blue Heron (above) vocal ensemble offers a sampling of music for the season from 15th-century Franco-Flemish masters. A mysterious quality fills many of these pieces, including *Factor orbis*, an Advent motet by Jacob Obrecht. Scott Metcalfe also conducts music by Desprez, Du Fay and Brumel.

16 **A BACH CHRISTMAS**  
NEC’s Jordan Hall, Boston,  
18 & 21 December  
Tel: 617-266-3605  
Web: www.handelandhaydn.org  
Boston-based conductor Scott Allen Jarrett joins the Handel & Haydn Society for seasonal music from the 18th-century German tradition, including JS Bach’s Cantata No. 4 from his *Christmas Oratorio* and the joyous Cantata No. 40. Works by Schütz, Sweelinck and Corelli round out the festivities.

17 **PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA**  
Kimmel Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 18-20 December  
Tel: 215-893-1999  
Web: www.philorch.org  
Philadelphia has long laid claim to the orchestral holiday sound, dating back to the 1962 recording *The Glorious Sound of Christmas* under Eugene Ormandy. ‘The Glorious Sound’ remains a yearly offering and this year’s instalment, blending traditional carols and other treats, will be conducted by Bramwell Tovey, with Philadelphia’s Mendelssohn Club Chorus making spirits even brighter.

18 **BOSTON CAMERATA**  
Locations throughout Boston,  
19-21 December  
Tel: 617-262-2092  
Web: www.bostoncamerata.org  
The Boston Camerata gives three performances of its ‘American Christmas’ programme, assembled out of carols, hymns, anthems and songs from the late 18th and 19th centuries. Offering the aural equivalent to a New England postcard, many of the songs are from the early years of the American republic and contain stark, open harmonies and simple forms.

19 **A SCANDINAVIAN CHRISTMAS**  
Orchestra Hall, Minnesota, Minneapolis,  
20-21 December  
Tel: 612-371-5656  
Web: www.minnesotaochestra.org  
The Minnesota Orchestra’s annual Scandinavian concerts return after a two-year hiatus. Wintry scene setting from Sibelius and Grieg take centre stage, as well as single-act carols from the lands of wool sweaters and caribou. A Santa Lucia procession caps the proceedings and Sarah Hicks conducts.

20 **HANDEL’S MESSIAH**  
Carnegie Hall, New York,  
23 December  
Tel: 212-400-7255  
Web: www.oratoriumsocietyofny.org  
The Oratorio Society of New York has presented Handel’s *Messiah* every year since 1874, making it an ideal version for tradition-minded listeners. Kent Tritle conducts a nearly 200-member choir plus soloists in a style that melds elements of period style with the grandeur and solidity of the Victorian era. Carnegie Hall’s acoustics should help seal the deal.