

Christmas at the Movies

2022 December 4th

Orchestra Toronto

Programme Notes

by Trevor Rines

We've just been invited to board a magical train bound for the North Pole. It's Christmas Eve & *The Polar Express* has already started moving, faster & faster, when we finally decide to jump aboard. So begins this film, & also our journey through a wealth of Christmas music, as featured in nearly a century's worth of movies.

As we move from film to film, & from Christmas to Christmas through the years, take a moment to consider just what makes music sound Christmassy? Is it the orchestration? You'll certainly hear many a tip of the hat towards Tchaikovsky & his *Nutcracker*. Many would say the it's the bells, & you'll certainly be hearing a lot of them, but not through every piece. (Keep an eye on the percussionists. Always good advice, but they'll be kept quite busy, & with much more than just sleigh bells.) The choir's words will remind us of Christmases just like the ones they used to know. The high woodwinds & strings will add to the cold & crystalline quality of the pieces. But there's more to it than just tinkling bells, warm & fuzzy lyrics, sparkling woodwinds, & soaring & shimmering strings. It could be an overwhelming sense of nostalgia which permeates this music & reminds us of Christmases long ago. Listen closely, & perhaps you'll hear the sense of wonder scintillating among the notes.

Chris van Allsburg's imaginative book won him the 1985 Caldecott Medal, for *The Polar Express*. Nearly 20 years later, director Robert Zemeckis built upon van Allsburg's words & illustrations & turned that bestselling book into a film, using groundbreaking CGI animation & live action motion capture. He'd already had Alan Silvestri compose the music for 10 of his previous films, including the *Back to the Future* trilogy & *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, & they'd go on to collaborate on 3 more films.

The Polar Express Concert Suite steams through four pieces from the film. The first is *Believe*, which won a Grammy Award & had many other award nominations. This is the only song in the film which isn't sung by any of the characters in it, as it begins when the end credits start rolling. You can then hear the train blowing its whistle & the clacking of the tracks, as we're gradually gaining speed. *The Polar Express* is next, until its headlong sense of adventure is interrupted by a quiet flute, playing the gentle tune of *When Christmas Comes to Town*. A few at a time, other instruments join in & slowly accelerate to *Spirit of the Season*, which continues to grow. It crescendos & accelerates until it's interrupted by a reminder to *Believe*, as we finish our voyage on this train of dreams.

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On to two familiar Christmas carols, performed in inventive arrangements by young Canadian composer Kevin Lau ([www.kevinlaumusic.com](http://www.kevinlaumusic.com)).

*Jingle Bells* has several origin stories, none of which have anything to do with Christmas, as you'll see is often the case with carols. It was either intended for a Sunday school choir to sing at

Thanksgiving, or it's quite simply the first of several drinking songs on the programme. Keep in mind that it *was* while drinking, in a Medford, Massachusetts tavern, in 1857, that James Lord Pierpont (financier J.P. Morgan's uncle) wrote both music & lyrics for *One Horse Open Sleigh*. (It was renamed two years later.) And the lyrics *are* about the 1800s equivalent of street drag racing: drunken horse drawn sleigh races. The rhythm of the tune suggests the sound of bells on a trotting horse's harness. There was a practical reason for those bells. It wasn't intended to be festive. Sleighs make very little noise, so the bells act as a way to help avoid collisions.

By the time this song was recorded on Edison cylinder, 22 years later, it had become firmly associated with Christmas, making this lost recording the first Christmas record ever made. Jumping ahead to December of 1965, Gemini VI astronauts had smuggled aboard six little bells & a tiny harmonica. They unexpectedly radioed that they'd just seen Santa's sleigh in a polar orbit, then launched into a quick musical performance. And that's how *Jingle Bells* also became the first song broadcast from space to Earth.

*It Came Upon the Midnight Clear* began life as a poem, written in Wayland, Massachusetts, just eight years earlier & only 22 km West of *Jingle Bells*' birthplace. The Unitarian pastor, Edmund Sears, asked composer Richard Storrs Willis to set his poem to music. Willis studied under Felix Mendelssohn, from whom we'll be hearing at the very end of our concert. If you know a different melody for this carol, then you likely know Arthur Sullivan's musical setting of the same lyrics, which is the version more often heard in England.

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Our second film music of the evening is a *Suite from It's a Wonderful Life*. This classic 1946 film was the sixth movie on which director Frank Capra had brought composer Dimitri Tiomkin onboard, to write the music. This Suite begins with the same three pieces which open this classic film. Oddly, the first is decidedly *not* a Christmas tune. *Buffalo Gals* is actually another drinking song, this one originally sung by Erie Canal bargemen. It keeps popping up, throughout the film, as a quirky love theme. Tiomkin's original love theme was cut from the film, but you can still hear it. Lyrics were added & it was released as a pop song called, not surprisingly, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

When the opening credits end, the choir joins in for *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, heard over the rising voices of prayers, followed by the film's *Main Theme*. The Suite ends with a well known song of farewell, *Auld Lang Syne*. The song is a setting of Robert Burns' 1788 poem, but is based on a much older traditional Scottish song. We most often hear it now when midnight arrives, on New Year's Eve, but here it ends the film, as the *Christmas Eve Finale*.

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John Williams has been prolifically writing film music for 68 years & said, about composing the music for *Home Alone*, "What I liked most about it is that it would give me the opportunity to write Christmas music, which I had never written in my whole career." You likely know his spooky music for the first two *Harry Potter* films, directed by Chris Columbus, with whom he also worked on the first two *Home Alone* movies. *Three Holiday Songs from Home Alone* doesn't include any of his wonderful incidental music for the movies' slapstick comedy mayhem. Instead, it's a triptych of three charming songs, from the 1990 film & its 1992 sequel, *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*. The lyrics for all three songs are by Leslie Bricusse, who just

happens to have also written the words for another of Williams' memorable movie songs: *Can You Read My Mind?* from *Superman*.

*Somewhere in My Memory* begins this suite, but it doesn't appear in the first film until the very end. At least, not in its entirety. Williams cleverly hints at this theme throughout the film, giving us glimpses of parts of the tune. He teases us with it, until we're primed & more than ready, when he reveals the full song, as mother & son are finally reunited. *Star of Bethlehem* is a charming & ethereal original carol. In the first film, it keeps popping up instrumentally during intense scenes & chases, but is also quietly sung by a church choir. And, lastly, we're emphatically wished a *Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas* by the choir, in this song from the sequel, which brings the first half of our concert to a close.

~~~~~ INTERMISSION ~~~~~

Our concert's second half begins in Russia. Sergei Prokofiev, while in Paris, was invited to compose music for a 1934 Soviet film called *Lieutenant Kijé* ("KEY-jay"). He later turned his film score into a five movement suite. It's the third & fourth movements, which we're hearing.

Lieutenant Kijé doesn't really exist, even to the film's other characters. Created by a slip of the pen, this fictional soldier's name is added to an official military document. The pompous Tsar Paul notices the name & takes a personal interest, so more & more elaborate lies must be created, to flesh out the details of Kijé's life.

Listen for the tenor saxophone. This instrument doesn't often make an appearance in traditional orchestras, but Prokofiev uses it throughout. You'll hear it playing Kijé's theme, during the third movement, *Kijé's Wedding*. And the brass' rustic oompah accompaniment suggests that this wedding might just be taking place in a tavern.

The fourth movement begins with a brief, rather drunken sounding introduction, as Kijé has fallen into disfavour. Then we're off, speeding across Siberia in a *Troika* ("TROY-keh"), which is a traditional Russian three-horse sleigh. And of course, where there's a sleigh, there are bells. This movement has even been teasingly called "a concerto for sleigh bells."

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In *A Christmas Scherzo*, Don Sebesky cleverly weaves together six carols in under four minutes, to create a sparkling medley. He played with many Jazz greats, in the 1950s, including Tommy Dorsey & Stan Kenton. In 1960, he transitioned into conducting & arranging, & has since worked with many prominent orchestras, including the London Symphony & the Boston Pops.

He uses the 17<sup>th</sup> century French carol, *Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella*, as the throughline, bookending the piece with it, & even employing it as a countermelody to *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. Also listen for *The Holly & the Ivy*, *I Saw Three Ships*, & *Here We Come A-Wassailing*. A slower & grander *O Tannenbaum* leads into a jaunty restatement of *Jeanette, Isabella*, Ending the piece as it began.

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We first heard *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* when Judy Garland sang it so beautifully, in the 1944 film *Meet Me in St. Louis*; however, the original lyrics were so sad that Garland simply refused to sing it. So, songwriters Hugh Martin & Ralph Blaine, who also wrote many other songs for Broadway musicals & MGM, went away to reluctantly rewrite the lyrics.

And that's how we ended up with upbeat lyrics to this sad sounding song. Because Judy Garland asked for them & the film's producers agreed.

Four years later, the lyrics were slightly altered, once again. This time, for Frank Sinatra, who was making the first recording of the song. It's his performance's version which has become the standard, since covered by many, including Ella Fitzgerald, Bing Crosby, & even Twisted Sister.

Speaking of sisters, in the film, Garland sings it to her sister, who's upset about the Family moving to New York City. Singing this lovely song, while smiling through her tears, quite cleverly makes it seem even sadder than it was with the original sad lyrics.

John Whitney's orchestral arrangement deftly moves through many variations, nicely capturing the melancholy nature of the song, while even adding a playful little waltz version, in $\frac{3}{4}$ time.

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Robert Zemeckis once again teamed up with Alan Silvestri, five years after *The Polar Express*, on a similarly CGI-animated film. Which film version of Charles Dickens' story is ***A Christmas Carol (Main Title)*** from? There have been a few. This is the opening theme from the 2009 Disney film starring a motion-captured Jim Carrey as Ebenezer Scrooge, as well as the three Ghosts. Basically an overture, intertwining carols known & new, the music underscores the lengthy opening credits & a flight through bustling streets & smoky rooftops, as Victorian London prepares for Christmas. The "new" carol at the start, & repeated in the middle, may seem vaguely familiar. That's because it's a variation on *Good King Wenceslas*. Listen for *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen*, as well as a very brief mention of *Joy to the World*, segueing into *Deck the Halls*.

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While there are many familiar Christmas melodies in this 2003 film, composer John Debney has chosen to include only his original music in the ***Elf Suite from the Motion Picture***. The choir adds a wordless melody, & even some whistling, which paints a picture of Santa's Elves, merrily building toys in their workshop. Debney's most recent film is *Hocus Pocus 2* & he has composed music for several films with *Elf* director Jon Favreau, including *Iron Man 2*, *Zathura*, & *The Jungle Book*. While both nominee & winner of many major awards, his most amusing award is for another Christmas film, *Christmas with the Kranks*, for which he won The Stinkers Bad Movie Award for Most Intrusive Musical Score.

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***The First Nowell*** may well be the oldest music performed in our concert. It took 600 years for the tune to become a Christmas carol. The music originated in 13<sup>th</sup> century France, then quickly leapt across the English Channel, as the troubadours brought their music North. It wasn't until the 1800s that the English added new & simple lyrics to the old & simple tune, & the carol as we know it today was born. This familiar version is by Sir David Willcocks, who arranged both this & the last work in our concert.

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We end with a tune which the composer described as "too soldierlike & buxom" for sacred music. ***Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*** began life in 1739, as a poem by Englishman Charles Wesley. 101 years later, German composer Felix Mendelssohn independently wrote the music, but without either this poem or Christmas in mind. It was intended for, & first performed at, an outdoor celebration of the 400th anniversary of Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the moveable-

type printing press. He never heard his music with these words. It was another 15 years (8 years after Mendelssohn passed away), & back in England, when Wm. H. Cummings had the insight to fit together poem & music.

And so, our concert, which began by boarding a North Pole bound train on Christmas Eve, ends as Christmas morning gloriously dawns, with the choir singing a soaring & fervent wish for Peace on Earth.