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**BRINGING CHRISTMAS CHEER:
CAROLS TO NURTURE AND WITNESS THE FAITH**

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ABSTRACT

Western European cultures may vary in their adherence to any form of Christianity, but the feast of Christmas has a special place in society in keeping an open ear, mind and heart. Concerts and carolling are common to Orthodox and non-Orthodox cultures alike, providing an annual opportunity to engage audiences in the Mystery of the Incarnation in a paraliturgical context. This paper will explore the benefits to singers and audiences, and the way that both may be nurtured through Christmas music. The Mosaic Choir, in London, UK, provides a central case study, a choir of Orthodox singers from many different backgrounds. Audiences, clergy and choir members, past and present, provide additional insights into one of the most rewarding musical times of year.

KEYWORDS

Carol, Christmas, choir, Orthodoxy

This paper explores some of the benefits of sharing music at the season of the Nativity of our Lord to singers and audiences, and the ways that both may be nurtured through Christmas music. This is primarily from the perspective of the Mosaic Choir in London, which I lead—a choir of Orthodox singers from many different backgrounds.

Western European cultures vary in their adherence to any form of Christianity, but the feast of Christmas has a special place in society. People are open to social gatherings related to Christmas, to notions of giving and love for the other. Perhaps this is due to the cold weather and darkening days, or to gathering round in families and communities to share songs and stories. Perhaps it is due to the engagement of all the senses in Christmas traditions: the taste of warming spices like cloves and cinnamon, the smell of mulled wine and oranges, the glitter of decorations in the home and the street, and the sound of seasonal music, secular and sacred. And of course, for some people there is still a spiritual element to the season, even if they do not have a formal belief system.

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Whatever the case, this is an almost unique opportunity to share our faith with others, when they are keeping an open ear, mind and heart. Concerts and carolling are common to Orthodox and non-Orthodox cultures alike, providing an annual opportunity to engage audiences in the mystery of the incarnation in a paraliturgical context.

Mosaic Choir started life as a youth choir, springing forth from the annual Youth Festival held under the umbrella of the Orthodox Fellowship of St John the Baptist. The Fellowship and the Youth Festival both encourage participation from all Orthodox communities in the UK, coming together in prayer and fellowship and spending time learning and attending services. Many people at the Youth Festival in the early years had attended youth camps together, and were now joined by young adults studying and working in the UK. Social singing, as well as chanting at the services, remains a key part of the festival.

Mosaic Choir, so-called because it is made up of people from many different backgrounds who come together to form a beautiful whole, maintains this ethos. The music reflects our many backgrounds. It is an amateur choir, with no audition process, and a variety of experience and skill sets. Our first director was Rebecca Vučetić, who then handed the baton to me—a metaphorical baton because we both direct from within the choir, for the most part. Our repertoire includes folk songs, liturgical music, and classical pieces. We have a YouTube channel, but as yet have not managed to record our music, despite the best intentions.

We have sung in towns and cities in the UK and on tour in Montenegro. We have conducted workshops for parishes, including one in Amsterdam, and we have sung at various parish festivals and events over the years. We sing at the Bath Orthodox Arts Festival held every two years, and we were delighted with a favourable review by the actor David Suchet in 2022. We sing at services when invited, although members of Mosaic are connected with many different parishes with varying roles in choirs and chanting.

A constant for the choir's performance year is the Christmas concert, which has been held in various locations, but we have found a particularly welcoming home at the Roman Catholic Church of Corpus Christi in Covent Garden, central London. We have held this event successfully at Orthodox churches as well, but we have chosen to return to Corpus Christi many times for our Christmas concert. It is centrally located, close to the famous Covent Garden market, and provides easy access for people coming even from some distance. We hold the concert on a weeknight so that we can encourage attendees to come after work, and those who wish can easily go somewhere to socialise afterwards. It is also a very beautifully restored church with a good acoustic. Entrance is free with a collection for charity.

The concert comprises carols from various traditions in their own languages, and incorporates Western carols as well. The nature of Christmas carols varies widely within traditions, incorporating expanded Christmas narratives or parallel stories, lullabies, pastorals, and some texts which are

entirely uncategorisable. Some carols are more strictly for St Nicholas, St Lucy, the New Year, St Basil or even Theophany, but we often include them. We include at least one audience carol, and usually some poems in English or a story. We do not usually include scriptural readings, which is more traditional in Western ceremonies of the Nine Lessons and Carols. However, we love to include English language and other western European carols.

At the 2022 Christmas concert, the programme included:

- Three liturgical pieces in English in Byzantine style: From the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord: the Idiomelon from the Ninth Hour of the Royal Hours; ‘God is With Us’ from Great Compline; and the Exapostilarion from Matins
- Four Romanian carols: “Iată vin Colindători;” “Legănelul lui Isus;” “La Vifleem Colo-n Jos;” and “Domnuleț și Domn din Cer”
- Four Greek carols: “Anarhos Theos;” a carol from Pontus; “Hristos Genniete;” and a carol from Ikaria
- Two Georgian pieces: “Christmas Alilo” and “Kiria Lesa”
- Three English language carols: “Let All that are to Mirth Inclined;” the Wexford Carol arranged by our former director Rebecca Vučetić; and “O Nations Let Us Now Prepare” by Richard Toensing
- Two Serbian carols: “Rodjenje Bogorodice;” and “Slava Vo Višnjih Bogu” arranged by Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac
- One Ukrainian carol: “Shchedryk” by Mykola Leontovych
- One audience carol: “Silent Night”
- Two poems: “The Christmas Rose” by Cecil Day-Lewis and “Christmas Carol” by Paul Laurence Dunbar
- One mediaeval Latin carol as an encore: “Gaudete”

The feedback from the audience was great and we recruited a new member of the choir. For many people, this was their first proper Christmas celebration since the Covid-19 pandemic, giving it additional poignance.

One of the carols we performed was “Legănelul lui Isus.” This Romanian carol is in the lullaby category and refers to the green cradle made from sycamore wood where the baby lies swaddled, rocking gently as the angels sing to the world that Christ has been sent to us. The verses have a simple melody and bass line, reminiscent of Byzantine chant, with a swaying, harmonised refrain. It is one of the Romanian carols that we have learned more recently and fitted well after a reflective poem and before the Serbian carol “Rodjenje Bogorodice” about the Mother of God.

I turn to the impact of our Christmas concerts. Our aim is to bring the teachings of the Church to people outside of a service setting. This can apply to the singers as well as the audience, of course. Reports received from musical colleagues in preparation for this presentation bear this out. Christmas concerts are seen as a low-key, informal and accessible way for people to encounter the Church. A particular parish may focus on carols

from 'its' tradition, whereas Mosaic deliberately chooses to cover many traditions.

We have many people who are regular attendees and invite their friends and families as an annual event. These will often be mixed groups. We also aim to make the content intelligible by introducing the carols during the concert and having a simple programme for people to follow. Some of our content eventually makes it onto our YouTube channel, too, when we are able to film it. We often have positive comments about the diversity of our programme, how we switch languages and styles so seemingly effortlessly, how people enjoy hearing carols from the different traditions and merely appreciating the fact that the same feast is celebrated in a similar way, almost no matter where.

As for the singers of Mosaic, they are often surprised by the carols we sing from their own cultures, as they may be regional or considered quite niche or old-fashioned. Choral singing is well known for its ability to unite a disparate group of people, whether physically, spiritually or emotionally. Many singers encourage their family, friends and colleagues to attend, fulfilling the Gospel invitation to "Come and see" (John 1:39, 46).

Stories were shared with me of more and less successful performances, where people had limited access to music and had to rely on memory which differed amongst the group, but every challenge was remembered fondly. This certainly struck a chord with me, reminding me of the time when the basses just kept getting faster and faster with the stress of a vaguely challenging line, or when I launched into the wrong carol and everyone followed me until someone else worked out how to correct it, or when I was horrified when someone took the dress code of a red accessory at face value and put on a Santa hat just before the performance so I could not do anything about it. But these are just a few blips in the context of a much wider occasion which can be transformative. Indeed, some singers have told me that they have been brought into (or closer to) the Church by singing in informal or organised Christmas singing.

The high we experience at the end of a successful performance often leads to impromptu further performances of Christmas music on the street, public transport or in restaurants. To prolong the feeling, but also for charitable purposes, Mosaic also goes carolling around the time of Christmas. This may be for fundraising in public places, or giving something back to the community by singing in hospital. We have carolled in train stations and shopping centres to raise money. When we sang in hospital, we wondered whether our diverse repertoire would be as successful as at the concert. We aimed to balance it with our more traditional English content but were pleased that the multicultural nature of both patients and staff loved to hear carols from a variety of places, and we could even tailor our content when we came across a Cypriot patient, for example.

I always want to include carols by Orthodox composers, when possible. Previously, we have included compositions by Fr Sergei Glagolev

and Richard Barrett, amongst others. I think there is a real desire to hear content which actually connects with the Feast of the Nativity, rather than winter pop songs, and audiences appreciate carols that come from a place of conviction and belief. I hope that more composers take up the challenge to compose content that is within the range of amateur choirs, as well as professionals.

As a side note and in conclusion, it becomes increasingly difficult to choose the running list for the Mosaic Choir Christmas Concert each year, as so many of the carols become favourites amongst the choir and our regular audience. Very few are only sung for one Christmas. We always try to learn some new content to expand our own horizons. For Christmas 2023, I intend to introduce at least two new carols: my arrangement of the Ukrainian carol “V Temnuyu Nichku” and the German carol “Maria durch ein Dornwald ging” arranged by Philip Lawson. I am a magpie collecting carols from elsewhere and would welcome further ideas in correspondence.