

CRC Program Notes Holiday Concert 2025

“A Celtic Christmas”

“Christmas in Carrick” arranged by Mark Sirett

“Christmas in Carrick” is a modern Irish carol written by Seamus McGrath and popularized by The Clancy Brothers on their 1969 album *The Clancy Brothers’ Christmas*. The song’s lyrics offer a hearty and joyous invitation to celebrate Christmas with music, food, and revelry, a distinctly communal vision of the holiday that reflects Irish village life.

The word *Carrick* comes from the Irish *carraig*, meaning “rock”, and while the song never specifies which Carrick it refers to, many associate it with Carrick-on-Suir in County Tipperary, a historic town along the River Suir known for its medieval walls and Tudor-era Ormond Castle. The ambiguity only adds to the charm: like so much of Ireland’s carol tradition, this piece blends local color with a broader folk imagination, inviting singers everywhere to join the celebration.

“Wexford Carol” arranged by Elaine Hagenberg

The “Wexford Carol” is among Ireland’s oldest Christmas carols, thought to trace back to the 12th century. It comes from County Wexford in southeastern Ireland, where it was passed down orally for generations before being collected and published in the early 20th century by William Grattan Flood, organist of St. Aidan’s Cathedral in Enniscorthy. The text offers a vivid retelling of the Nativity, pairing folk simplicity with strikingly poetic imagery.

In this arrangement, contemporary American composer Elaine Hagenberg transforms the carol’s folk origins into a radiant tapestry of sound. With her trademark sensitivity to text and an atmospheric, enveloping harmonic palette, Hagenberg creates a gorgeous wall of sound that feels both timeless and new.

“Light of Peace: Celtic Carols for Christmas” by Karen Marroli

Light of Peace: Celtic Carols for Christmas is a collection of five choral anthems by composer Karen Marroli. Familiar hymn and carol tunes from the Irish and Scottish traditions are woven together with popular Celtic folk tunes, reels, and airs. New texts

written to complement the traditional words emphasize social justice and living a life of love in action as a response to the Nativity story. Hand in hand with the choral music is the instrumentation which includes flute, fiddle, bodhran (drum) and piano. The suite of carols includes: “Noel!”, “Creation Sings”, “Peace on Earth”, “The Call”, and “Alleluia!”.

“Balulalow” from *Ceremony of Carols* by Benjamin Britten

This delicate lullaby comes from Benjamin Britten’s beloved *Ceremony of Carols* (1942), a work he composed for treble voices and harp while crossing the Atlantic by ship during World War II. Written during a period of homesickness and uncertainty, “Balulalow” sets a 16th-century Scots cradle song, whose title comes from the Scots dialect for *lullaby*. The unusual spelling and challenging pronunciation capture the raw, unpolished flavor of the text’s origins, while the meaning remains tender and universal: a mother’s song of comfort to the Christ child. Britten’s setting is spare and hauntingly beautiful, with long, arching lines that float over hushed harp chords, an intimate contrast to the brighter, more jubilant movements of the larger work.

Britten had a lifelong fascination with Celtic and folk traditions, which shaped not only this carol cycle but also many of his later arrangements of British and Irish folksongs. His *Ceremony of Carols* though remains one of the most iconic choral works of the 20th century, prized for its fusion of medieval text, Celtic color, and modern harmonic imagination.

“The Darkest Midnight in December” by Stephen Main

“The Darkest Midnight in December” is an Irish carol with text written by Fr. William Devereux, an Irish priest who published it in 1728. Unlike many devotional verses of its time, the poem paints the Nativity with vivid scenes of the cold wind on a starry night, alluring gifts of incense, the dazzling glory of the Christ child, and the softness of Mary’s arms. The composer himself remarks that “the text is remarkable for its sensuality”.

Contemporary composer Stephen Main pairs the centuries-old text with shimmering harmonies and the bell-like timbre of the celesta. The effect is atmospheric and tender, casting the Irish carol’s imagery in a new light, at once ancient and strikingly modern.

“A Spotless Rose” from *Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal: Four Madrigals on Rose Texts* by Paul Mealor

Welsh composer Paul Mealor (b. 1975) has become one of today’s most widely performed choral voices, admired for music that balances lyrical beauty with emotional honesty. He gained international attention when his *Ubi Caritas* was sung at the wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton in 2011, and he has since written for many additional royal occasions being a particular favorite of Britain’s current monarch, King Charles.

His setting of the 15th-century text “A Spotless Rose” translated into English by Catherine Winkworth, is part of his cycle on roses written in 2009. Dedicated to the memory of Audrey Halliwell, “a wonderful lady” and to Mealor’s friends in the University of Aberdeen Chamber Choir, the piece holds deep personal resonance for the composer. He has said that he can never hear it performed without tears as it recalls his dear departed friend.

“Be All Merry” by Eoghan Desmond

Arranged in 2021, Irish composer Eoghan Desmond wrote “Be All Merry” for conductor Desmond Earley and the University of Dublin Choral Scholars. Drawing on a 15th-century English carol text, the piece blends medieval poetry with a fresh contemporary choral language with a glistening Irish flair in the accompanying solo fiddle part.

The carol’s message is simple and universal, an exhortation to joy and festivity at Christmastime. Yet, in Desmond’s setting, it becomes something more: a celebration of Irish choral artistry. The work beautifully captures the spirit of Celtic Christmas itself, where ancient texts and melodies find renewed life through today’s singers and performers.

“Curoo, Curoo” by Elaine Agnew

In 2008, the Irish composer Elaine Agnew was commissioned to write “Curoo, Curoo” by the RTÉ (Irish National Broadcast). It is an expressive arrangement for female choir with harp, strings, and vibraphone accompaniment.

An eighteenth-century traditional Irish poem forms the basis of this carol. It is also known as the ***Carol of the Birds*** because three of its four verses refer to the lark, the dove, the redbird, and the owl who visit the manger to sing “on Christmas Day in the

morning.” Its refrain concludes with the gentle cooing of the birds, but the wide-eyed owl at Mary’s side in the third verse is singled out for more exciting treatment.

“Christmas in Killarney” arranged by Cristi Cary Miller

The lively song “Christmas in Killarney” was written in 1950 by John Redmond and Frank Weldon, and quickly became a holiday hit when Bing Crosby recorded it the following year. (Crosby, though an American crooner, was of Irish descent on his mother’s side, perhaps helping explain his fondness for Irish-themed songs.) The tune has remained a favorite, reappearing in later recordings by artists such as Neil Diamond on his *Acoustic Christmas* album.

Killarney itself is a picturesque town in County Kerry, in Ireland’s southwest, known for its lakes, mountains, and traditional hospitality. This arrangement by Cristi Cary Miller captures the song’s cheerful spirit with a bagpipe-like lilt in the piano part and a fiddle obbligato, giving the performance a distinctly Celtic flair. Both nostalgic and festive, “Christmas in Killarney” invites listeners to celebrate the holidays “the way they do in Ireland”.

“Sans Day Carol” arranged by John Rutter

The “Sans Day Carol” takes its name from St. Day, a village in Cornwall named for a Breton saint, St. Dei or St. They, whose shrine once stood there in the early Middle Ages. According to the *Oxford Book of Carols* (1928), Canon G. H. Doble, a local antiquarian, first noted the ancient Cornish carol down in the early twentieth century from the singing of an old man in St. Day. While the text shares imagery with *The Holly and the Ivy*, the melody is distinct, and the familiar dotted opening rhythm often sung today was not part of the original tune.

This arrangement by John Rutter preserves the freshness of the Cornish folk style while adding his trademark clarity and warmth. In doing so, it carries a local carol once sung in a single Cornish village into the repertoire of choirs around the world.

“Bells Over Belfast” by George Millar, arranged by Alexis Renee Ward

“Bells Over Belfast” was written by George Millar of The Irish Rovers and popularized by the Irish band in the 1990s. Unlike many traditional carols, this modern Irish Christmas song was born out of a troubled time: it reflects on the violence and division of Northern

Ireland's Troubles while imagining the sound of Christmas bells ringing out as a call to peace and reconciliation.

Set against the backdrop of Belfast, a city long associated with both hardship and resilience, the song carries a message that transcends its local roots. Its vision of bells uniting a community in hope and harmony makes it as poignant today as when it was first sung, a reminder of music's power to imagine peace even in the darkest of winters.

“A Christmas Blessing” by Philip Stopford

Philip Stopford wrote and premiered “A Christmas Blessing” in 2008 while serving as Director of Music at St. Anne's Cathedral in Belfast from 2003-2010. Composed for the Belfast Cathedral Choir, it was sung as the closing benediction of their traditional Nine Lessons and Carols service.

The text, adapted slightly by Stopford, comes from the *Church of Ireland's Book of Common Prayer*, whose roots reach as far back as 1549. With flowing lines and radiant harmonies, hallmarks of Stopford's style, the piece transforms this centuries-old blessing into a moment of luminous peace. Rooted in Belfast's Anglican tradition, “A Christmas Blessing” stands as a Celtic offering of comfort and hope, resonating far beyond the walls of its cathedral home.

“Oíche Chiúin (Silent Night)” by Franz Gruber, arranged by Alexis Renee Ward

“Silent Night”, originally written in 1818 in Austria, is among the world's most beloved Christmas Carols, translated into over 300 languages. This arrangement presents the carol in Irish Gaelic (*Oíche Chiúin* - pronounced EE-hah K'yoo-in with the *ch* in *chiúin* like a soft German *ich*), giving the melody a distinctly Celtic voice.

This version arranged especially for this concert performance was inspired by a YouTube video from Irish singer Colm R. McGuinness, whose interpretation carries echoes of Enya's ethereal style and recording of “Oíche Chiúin”. Sung here by our tenor soloist in the beautifully challenging Irish language, the carol is accompanied by a Celtic-flavored orchestra with fiddle, harp, strings, percussion, woodwinds, brass, and traditional colors. The result is both familiar and fresh: a timeless carol reframed through the sounds and spirit of Ireland.