



A STUNNING ADAPTATION OF THE TALE BY CHARLES DICKENS

BENEDICT SHEEHAN

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

SKYLARK VOCAL ENSEMBLE

SARAH WALKER

A Christmas Carol

Music by Benedict Sheehan, based on traditional carols and folksongs

Story by Charles Dickens, abridged and edited by Matthew Guard

Narrated by Sarah Walker

Sung by Skylark

Matthew Guard, Artistic Director

Total Running Time: 66:27

Stave One: Marley's Ghost

1	The Truth from Above	<i>Nathan Hodgson, Tenor; Sophie Amelkin, Soprano</i>	2:07
2	In the Counting House		2:26
3	Surplus Population		2:43
4	God Rest You Merry	<i>Paul D'Arcy, Tenor; Peter Walker, Bass-Baritone</i>	1:37
5	Marley's Ghost		3:07
6	Mankind was my Business	<i>Sarah Moyer, Soprano; Michael Hawes, Baritone</i>	3:41
7	Remember	<i>Robbie Jacobs, Tenor; Helen Karloski, Mezzo-Soprano</i>	2:07

Stave Two: The First of the Three Spirits

8	The Ghost of Christmas Past		3:01
9	Little Fan	<i>Robbie Jacobs, Tenor; Helen Karloski, Mezzo-Soprano</i>	1:18
10	Sussex Carol	<i>Michael Hawes, Bass-Baritone</i>	2:13
11	Fezziwig's Ball	<i>Peter Walker, Bones</i>	4:33
12	Gain is Loss		1:32

Stave Three: The Second of the Three Spirits

13	The Ghost of Christmas Present	<i>Dana Whiteside, Baritone</i>	2:15
14	Not a Handsome Family / Silent Night	<i>Sarah Moyer, Soprano</i>	5:09
15	A Child Himself		1:40
16	Deck the Halls		1:45
17	The Bell Struck Twelve		1:11
18	Ghost of the Future		2:18

Stave Four: The Last of the Spirits

19	The Body of a Man		0:50
20	My Little Child	<i>Michael Hawes, Bass-Baritone</i>	3:31
21	Coventry Carol	<i>Carrie Cheron, Mezzo-Soprano</i>	4:29
22	The Spirits of All Three		2:09
23	Poverty		2:48

Stave Five: The End of It

24	Christmas Day		2:01
25	Back Payments	<i>Sophie Amelkin, Soprano</i>	2:10
26	God Bless Us, Every One	<i>Nathan Hodgson, Tenor</i>	1:54
27	It Came Upon the Midnight Clear	<i>Sarah Moyer, Soprano; Clare McNamara, Mezzo-Soprano</i>	4:57

Album Introduction

In the Summer of 2019, we recorded our album *Once Upon a Time*, our first recorded version of a “story concert.” Although we had explored this concept for several years prior with storyteller Sarah Walker, *Once Upon a Time* was our first collaboration with Benedict Sheehan, who composed incidental music (almost like a choral movie score) to accompany Sarah’s dialogue and to connect the musical dots between existing works by an array of composers.

That summer, it became clear that we had stumbled onto something unusual and special. First, the idea of a continuous choral *story score* – combining elements of classical performance, storytelling, film scoring, and theatricality – seemed to be a rich new idiom for choral performance art. Second, the collaborative team of the project seemed like a dream come true – there was a strong sense of mutual respect for everyone’s unique talents, and a rare ability for creative push and pull.

In agreement that we were eager to explore something even more intentional, Christmas was a topic of great interest to all of us. Choral music seems to have a special appeal during the holidays, and Christmas is a time when stories seem to have a unique ability to move people. In some ways, the Dickens is both the best and worst choice for our nascent art-form. The best because it is so well known and beloved by many; familiarity creates an entry point for many listeners. The worst because it has been done so many times, it has the danger of being seen as a holiday trope (who doesn’t see a poster of an old man in a stocking cap?).

For the first time in my adult life, I went to the original source material, ~30,000 words written by hand in 1843. Being familiar with several film and theatrical productions, I couldn’t believe how moved I was by the *text alone*. Imagining Sarah Walker’s inspired reading of the story was already exciting – the idea of a score with Benedict’s realization of classic carols to accompany the story was absolutely thrilling. We were hooked.

The first task was abridging the miraculous source text. Aiming for a ~70 minute concert work with music, we needed roughly 5,000 words. That meant removing over 80% of the Dickens text, a horrifying and daunting prospect. My rule for this process was only to *remove* words – I never added or changed any material. I aimed to preserve the essence of the story, eyeing a dramatic flow that would make room for musical offerings to step into the narrative spotlight.

Once we had a working text, Benedict and I assembled a list of contender carols that were favorites of ours, a “stable” of sorts for ideas. Benedict went through the libretto and sketched out an initial outline for musical ideas, marrying carols with plot points. The mockup changed and evolved over several weeks as new ideas emerged, and as we debated and considered the right balance between carols that are familiar and more obscure. I’ll never forget the first time I heard “Poverty” – I had never encountered the carol, and it appeared in Benedict’s first draft of the progression. I jumped onto YouTube and found a recording. Only knowing the context for the piece in the story, I burst into tears hearing the first two bars. I suspect that this impact will stay with me for life, enhanced by Benedict’s gorgeous arrangement.

Early on, Sarah Walker provided a sample recorded reading: a voice memo, of sorts, of the whole story. This enabled Benedict to compose the music with a clear idea of Sarah’s delivery pace and timing, which creates a marriage of words and music that feels truly organic. When it actually came down to the recording in the summer of 2021, it was incredibly clear how everything was meant to be, and the pieces fell into place remarkably easily (despite the fact that the narration was recorded nearly 2 months before the music)!

Writing this now, on the day that I’ve heard the final mastered recording for the first time, it’s hard to believe that this particular arrangement of words and music has never existed before. Like many great works of art, it feels to me as though this has always *been there* waiting to be discovered, like a beautiful figure carved from a single piece of wood whose form is revealed by a master wood carver. As Benedict’s early vocation was as a carpenter, this analogy feels particularly apt.

Looking forward to our debut concerts in a few months, I cannot wait to share this dramatic experience with the world. Yes, it’s a story that has been told before. Frequently. Yes, it calls to mind images of early Victorian England – not a particularly modern story to bring the table in 2021. But, the story is ultimately a story of redemption – how one human is transformed to see the world differently; to open eyes and hearts to others, to offer love and joy rather than bitterness and contempt. It’s a journey we all should contemplate. My greatest hope for this recording is that this collaborative labor of love will encourage many people to contemplate such a journey each and every year.

- Matthew Guard, Artistic Director

Creative Team



Matthew Guard, Artistic Director

Two-time GRAMMY®-nominee MATTHEW GUARD is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and thoughtful programmers in American choral music. Praised for his “catalyzing leadership” (Q2/WQXR) and “musically creative and intellectually rich” programming (Opera Obsession), Matthew is passionate about communicating something unique in each concert and recording. He scours the world of available repertoire for each program, exhaustively researches each piece, and crafts concerts and printed programs that captivate audiences with their hidden connections and seamless artistry.



Sarah Walker, Storyteller

GRAMMY®-nominated storyteller SARAH WALKER is the daughter of two traditional Appalachian storytellers, who instilled in her a love of hearing and telling great tales. She has performed extensively in her home state of West Virginia and throughout New England. She performs regularly with Skylark and is the narrator on the group’s highly-acclaimed album *Once Upon a Time*. Sarah holds degrees in Medieval Studies and Art History from Vassar College and received her Master of Library Science from the Pratt Institute. Upcoming collaborations include Three Notch’d Road Baroque Ensemble, Alkemie, and Chapter House.

Benedict Sheehan, Composer

GRAMMY®-nominated conductor and composer BENEDICT SHEEHAN has been called “a remarkable musician” (Choral Journal). He is Artistic Director of the Saint Tikhon Choir and the newly-founded Artefact Ensemble, as well as Director of Music at St. Tikhon’s Monastery and Seminary in Pennsylvania. His *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (2020), on which he conducts the Saint Tikhon Choir, has garnered critical acclaim as “simply beyond praise for excellence” (Fanfare), “radiant...superb...a masterstroke” (MusicWeb International), and “a new standard for excellence in the American choral landscape” (The Living Church Magazine). His innovative choral “story score” was featured on Skylark’s 2021 GRAMMY®-nominated album *Once Upon A Time*, and has been hailed as “evocative” (Gramophone), “quite extraordinary” (Limelight), and “otherworldly” (Boston Musical Intelligencer). Benedict’s new *Vespers* was recorded in 2021 by the Saint Tikhon Choir under the composer’s direction, and was also released in November of 2021. Sheehan’s music is published by Oxford University Press, Artefact Publications, and others. Upcoming performances of his music in the 2021-22 season will include new commissions from Conspirare and Cappella Romana, and performances by Skylark and the Houston Chamber Choir. Benedict lives in Pennsylvania with his wife Talia and their seven daughters.



Sung texts

The Truth from Above

Traditional English carol; Traditional text, revised by Benedict Sheehan

This is the truth sent from above,
The truth of God, the God of love;
Therefore don't turn me from your door,
But hearken all, both rich and poor.

The first thing, which I do relate,
Is that God did man create
In Paradise, there to remain,
But by his sin hath man been slain.

Thus we were heirs to endless woes,
Till God the Lord did interpose;
And so a promise soon was run
That He'd redeem us by His Son.

Thus He in love to us behaved,
To show us how we must be saved
And if you want to know the way
Be pleased to hear what I do say.

In the Counting House

Text from the Welsh carol *O Deued Pob Cristion*

Tune and text by Jane Ellis, 1840

Daeth Brenin yr hollfyd i oedfa ein hadfyd Comes the King of creation to deal with our weakness,
Er symud ein penyd a'n pwn; Removing our suffering and load;

Heb le yn y llety, heb aelwyd, heb wely, With no place to lodge in, no dwelling, no bedroom,
Nadolig fel hynny gadd hwn. A Christmas like that he was given.

Ni fegir cenfigen na chynnwrf na chynnen, So don't stir up envy or turmoil or strife;
Dan goron bydd diben ein Duw. Our God plans to wear a crown.

Surplus Population

Text from a traditional English carol *Hey, Ho, Nobody Home*, 16th century

Hey, ho, nobody home,
No meat, nor drink, nor money have I none,
Still I will be Merry.

God Rest You Merry

Traditional English carol, 16th century

God rest you merry gentlemen,
let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Savior
was born on Christmas Day
To save us all from Satan's pow'r
when we were gone astray,

Oh tidings of comfort and joy,
comfort and joy,
Oh tidings of comfort and joy.

From God our heav'nly Father
a blessed angel came,
And unto certain shepherds
brought tidings of the same;
How that in Bethlehem was born
the Son of God by name,

Oh tidings of comfort and joy,
comfort and joy,
Oh tidings of comfort and joy.

"Fear not then," said the Angel,
"Let nothing you affright,
This day is born a Savior
of a pure Virgin bright,
To save all those who trust in Him
from Satan's pow'r and might,"

Oh tidings of comfort and joy,
comfort and joy,
Oh tidings of comfort and joy.

Now to the Lord sing praises,
All you within this place,
And with true love and brotherhood
each other now embrace;
This holy tide of Christmas
all other doth deface:

O tidings of comfort and joy,
comfort and joy,
O tidings of comfort and joy.

Remember

Tune by Benedict Sheehan, 2020

Text by Thomas Ravenscroft, 1611

Remember, O thou Man,
O thou Man, O thou Man,
Remember, O thou Man,
Thy time is spent.
Remember, O thou Man,
How thou camest to me then,
And I did what I can.
Therefore repent.

Remember Adam's fall,
O thou Man, O thou Man,
Remember Adam's fall
From Heav'n to Hell.
Remember Adam's fall,
How we were condemned all
To Hell perpetual,
There, for to dwell.

Remember God's goodness,
O thou Man, O thou Man,
Remember God's goodness
And promise made.
Remember God's goodness,
How his only Son he sent
Our sins to redress.
Be not afraid.

The Ghost of Christmas Past

Traditional German carol *In Dulci Jubilo*

Text by Heinrich Seuse, c. 1328

In dulci jubilo

Now sing with hearts aglow!

Our delight and pleasure

Lies *in praeseptio*,

Alpha es et O!

Ubi sunt gaudia

In any place but there?

There are angels singing

Nova cantica,

There the bells are ringing,

In Regis curia,

O that we were there!

Sussex Carol

Traditional English carol

Text by Luke Wadding, 1684

On Christmas night all Christians sing,
To hear the news the angels bring.
News of great joy, news of great mirth.
News of our merciful King's birth.

Then why should men on earth be so sad,
Since our Redeemer made us glad,
When from our sins he set us free,
All for to gain our liberty.

All out of darkness we have light,
Which made the angels sing this night;
"Glory to God and peace to men,
Now and forevermore, Amen."

Fezziwig's Ball

Based on the traditional English slip jig, *Sir Roger de Coverley*

The Ghost of Christmas Present

Traditional English carol *The Boar's Head Carol*, 15th century

The boar's head in hand bear I,
Bedeck'd with bays and rosemary;
And I pray you, my masters, be merry,
Quod estis in convivio

*Caput apri defero,
Reddens laudes Domino.*

The boar's head, as I understand,
is the rarest dish in all the land,
Which thus bedeck'd with a gay garland,
Let us servire cantico.

*Caput apri defero,
Reddens laudes Domino.*

Not A Handsome Family / Silent Night

Traditional German carol *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*

Tune by Franz Xaver Gruber, 1818

Text by Joseph Mohr

Silent night! Holy night!
All is calm, all is bright
'Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child,
Holy infant, so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace.
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! Holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar,
Heav'nly hosts sing Alleluia.
Christ the Savior is born!
Christ the Savior is born!

Silent night! Holy night!
Son of God, love's pure light,
Radiant beams from thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

Deck the Halls

Traditional Welsh New Year carol, *Nos Galan*, 16th century

Text by Thomas Oliphant, 1862

Text by Joseph Mohr

Deck the halls with boughs of holly,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
'Tis the season to be jolly,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
Don we now our gay apparel,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
Troll the ancient Yuletide carol,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!

See the blazing Yule before us,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
Strike the harp and join the chorus.
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
Follow me in merry measure,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
While I tell of Yuletide treasure,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!

Fast away the old year passes,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
Hail the new, ye lads and lasses!
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
Sing we joyous all together,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!
Heedless of the wind and weather,
Fa, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!

My Little Child

Text from *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens

First line quoted from Mark 9:36, King James Bible

Text by Joseph Mohr

And he took a child and set him in the midst of them.

Spirit of Tiny Tim, thy childish essence was from God!

Coventry Carol

Traditional English carol, 16th century

Text by Joseph Mohr

Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child,
Bye bye, lully, lullay.
Thou little tiny child,
Bye bye, lully, lullay.

O sisters too, how may we do
For to preserve this day
This poor youngling for whom we do sing,
“Bye bye, lully, lullay”?

Herod the king, in his raging,
Charged he hath this day
His men of might in his own sight,
All young children to slay.

That woe is me, poor child, for thee!
And ever mourn and day
For thy parting neither say nor sing,
“Bye bye, lully, lullay.”

Poverty

Traditional Welsh carol *O Deued Pob Cristion*

Tune and text by Jane Ellis, 1840; translation by K. E. Roberts, c. 1920

Text by Joseph Mohr

All poor men and humble,
All lame men who stumble,
Come haste ye, nor feel ye afraid;
For Jesus, our treasure,
With love past all measure,
In lowly poor manger was laid.

Though wise men who found him
Laid rich gifts around him,
Yet oxen they gave him their hay:
And Jesus in beauty
Accepted their duty;
Contented in manger he lay.

Then haste we to show him
The praises we owe him;
Our service he ne'er can despise.
Whose love is still able
To show us that stable
Where softly in manger he lies.

Christmas Day

Traditional English carol *Gloucestershire Wassail*, 18th century

Wassail, wassail, all over the town!
Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown,
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree;
With a wassailing bowl we'll drink to thee.

So here is to Cherry and to his right cheek,
Pray God send our master a good piece of beef.
And a good piece of beef that we may all see;
With a wassailing bowl we'll drink to thee.

And here is to Dobbin and to his right eye,
Pray God send our master a good Christmas pie,
And a good Christmas pie that we may all see;
With a wassailing bowl we'll drink to thee.
Wassail!

God Bless Us, Every One

Traditional American carol *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*

Tune by Richard Storrs Willis, 1850

Text paraphrased from Psalm 23 by Isaac Watts

The sure provisions of my God attend me all my days;
Oh, may Thy house be my abode, and all my work be praise;
There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come;
No more a stranger nor a guest, but like a child at home.

It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

Traditional American carol

Tune by Richard Storrs Willis, 1850

Text by Edmund Sears, 1849

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold:
“Peace on the earth, goodwill to men,
From heav’n’s all-gracious King.”
The world in solemn stillness lay,
To hear the angels sing.

Still through the cloven skies they come,
With peaceful wings unfurled,
And still their heav’nly music floats
O’er all the weary world;
Above its sad and lowly plains,
They bend on hov’ring wing,
And ever o’er its babel sounds
The blessed angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The tidings which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.

O ye, beneath life’s crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the weary way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
come swiftly on the wing.
O rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!

For lo! the days are hastening on,
By prophet bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years
Comes round the age of gold
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendors fling,
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing.

A Christmas Carol

Producer: Dan Merceruio

Recording Engineer: Daniel Shores

Editing: Dan Merceruio and Matthew Guard

Mixing and Mastering Engineer: Daniel Shores

Liner Notes: Matthew Guard

Executive Producer: Collin J. Rae

Recorded at Sono Luminus Studios in Boyce, VA, June and August 2021

About Skylark

GRAMMY®-nominated SKYLARK, “the cream of the American crop” (BBC Radio 3), is a premier vocal ensemble of leading American vocal soloists, chamber musicians, and music educators. Skylark’s dramatic performances have been described as “gripping” (The Times of London), “exquisite...thrilling” (Gramophone Magazine), and “awe-inspiring” (Boston Music Intelligencer). With “some of Boston’s best singers” (Boston Globe), the voices of Skylark “can sway you softly into calm and then all but throw you across the room with sheer harmonic force” (Thought Catalog). Skylark’s albums *Seven Words from the Cross* and *Once Upon A Time* were nominated for GRAMMY®-Awards in 2019 and 2021. Skylark strives to set the standard for innovative and engaging programs that re-define the choral experience for audiences and singers alike.

A note on Skylark’s approach to music-making

Many members of the ensemble lend their expertise in Skylark’s collaborative artistic environment (creating editions/transcriptions, coaching pronunciation, suggesting repertoire, discussing project concepts, and lending historical/cultural/musical expertise). The creative energy of the entire group shapes our work, and our performances benefit greatly from this spirit of collaboration. Not only are our Skylark artists great voices, they are also great minds and hearts.



DSL-92262

SKYLARK

VOCAL ENSEMBLE



Skylark Artists

Matthew Guard, Artistic Director

Sarah Walker, Storyteller

Soprano

Sophie Amelkin

Fiona Gillespie

Sarah Moyer

Fotina Naumenko

Janet Stone

Alto

Carrie Cheron

Carolyn Guard

Helen Karloski

Clare McNamara

Megan Roth

Tenor

John K. Cox

Paul D'Arcy

Erik Gustafson

Nathan Hodgson

Robbie Jacobs

Bass

Michael Hawes

Christopher Jackson

Enrico Lagasca

Peter Walker

Dana Whiteside

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