

Christmas in Connecticut

Full steam ahead for the month of December

Much like a dentist's appointment or a family wedding, I always find the anticipation of Christmas more daunting than the time itself. I'm sure this – my third Christmas as director of music at a parish church in Connecticut – will be no different.

Although Trumbull is a small town, St Theresa's is the biggest church in the diocese and has a congregation to match. We have two wonderful resident priests and a deacon: hard-working, dedicated, holy men who never tire.

Music here is valued and supported by clergy and congregation alike. The parish choir is a hearty gang of 17 committed and passionate singers, including four professional section leaders who often sing as a quartet. We also have a children's choir of about 35 enthusiastic youngsters. Most are drawn from the parochial school, but a sizable minority attend other schools in the town.

Church music serves to illuminate and beautify the liturgy, helping the faithful draw closer to God. This is particularly pertinent at Christmas, when congregations are at their largest and most varied. For many music directors, the planning for Advent and Christmas begins in the summer months – and it always feels a bit odd getting *In Dulci Jubilo* stuck in your head as the temperature soars.

Variety is key when selecting repertoire. I consciously choose pieces from across the centuries, avoiding the temptation to over-indulge on saccharine melodies – Christmas is sugary enough. You have to include some new discoveries alongside familiar favourites, aiming for music that will be rewarding for the most able choir members while accessible for the less experienced.

You also have to plan for the unexpected, being confident that the show can go on even if half the sopranos come down with colds, or the strongest bass has to visit an ailing grandmother three states away at the last

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minute, or the 7th-graders turn a shade of green having overdone the holiday candy. Life happens outside of choir (so I'm told), and when the curveballs fly your way, you just have to take a deep breath and give yourself a minute to find perspective. Or possibly two.

Stamina is also an important consideration; this season is a marathon, not a sprint. By mid-December it's entirely reasonable for singers to feel a bit tired, perhaps grumpy, and occasionally to forget why they volunteered to be in a cold church for hours on end at all times of the day and night.

As well as shaping the music, the conductor's role is to keep the troops enthused, energised and on the right track. Organists and conductors need to monitor their own stamina as well, especially as choirs reflect the energy levels in front of them. During this intense, sleep-deprived period, concentration can lapse and mistakes can creep in.

Usually at the back of my mind throughout December is a carol service I attended several years ago. In a cathedral packed to the rafters, the organist – a great man and brilliant musician – inadvertently played the intro to "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" rather than the advertised "O Come, All ye Faithful". The director

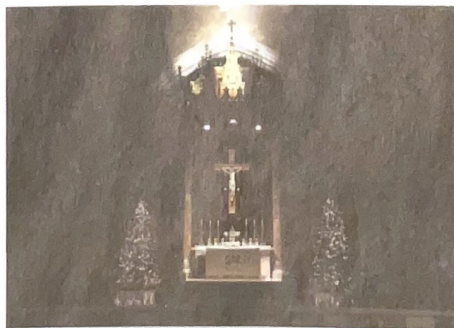
calmly stopped proceedings, mouthed the title of the correct carol in the organist's direction, and away we went.

It's easy to misread an order of service; these things happen. However, just one reading later, our keyboard wizard made exactly the opposite mistake. "They all sound the same by this stage of December," he protested. Fair point, I thought. The conductor took a bit longer to come round.

The communion motet at Midnight Mass is always a special moment. Having been running at full pelt since Advent Sunday, I hear the "last lap" bell in my head; the finishing line is just hours away. It's also a deeply spiritual moment. By this point, it is now actually 25 December, the pinnacle towards which we have been journeying for weeks. Most of us will just have received Holy Communion, and the motet is usually one of dignified profundity.

That peace and serenity is soon cheerfully obliterated by a thunderous *Adeste Fideles* to conclude. Midnight Mass is the first opportunity to sing Verse 7: "Yea Lord, we greet Thee / born this happy morning." The David Willcocks reharmonisation, especially "Word of the Father", has become so celebrated by choral nerds that you can buy T-shirts and mugs emblazoned with that one crucial chord.

Sometime between the last Mass on Christmas Day and the festivities that follow, I like to take a few quiet moments in church. A time of silence, without having to think about balance and tuning, about photocopyers, nut allergies, brass parts and whatever else. It's a time to be grateful for what we've done and to reflect on why we've done it: the *magnum mysterium* of the Incarnation. Then follows a well-deserved glass of something. Or possibly two. **CH**



Christmas in St Theresa's Church, Trumbull, Connecticut

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