

December 20, 2025

7:30 pm

“Holiday Glories”

La Crosse Symphony Orchestra

Emily Birsan, soprano and André Previn Peck, piano

Christmas Overture

Nigel Hess (1953 -)

White Christmas

Irving Berlin (1888 - 1989)

Robert Russell Bennett, arr. (1894 - 1981)

Variations and Improvisations on Christmas Carols

Bryan Kelly (1934 -)

The Christmas Song - “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire”

Mel Tormé (1925 - 1999)

Calvin Custer, arr. (1939 - 1998)

Stille Nacht

Louis F. “Chip” Davis, Jr., arr. (1947 -)

Calvin Custer, arr. (1939 - 1998)

Hanukkah Festival Overture

Lucas Richman (1964 -)

Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 10, in D-flat Major

Sergei Prokofiev (1891 - 1953)

André Previn Pack, piano

INTERMISSION

Gloria

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A Holiday Sing-Along

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Christmas Overture

Nigel Hess (b. Somerset, England, July 22, 1953)

Christmas Overture was commissioned by highly acclaimed English composer, conductor, editor, arranger, and record producer, John Rutter who is primarily known for his choral music. It was premiered by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall in 2007. Conductor Nigel Hess composed this work. Hess is active in writing music for films, television and the theater having studied music at Cambridge University.

According to the music publisher Faber Music, Ness’ colorful *Christmas Overture* highlights traditional carols. *Angels, from the Realms of Glory* brings the overture to a majestic close. Fragments of other songs appear along the way to enrich the texture.



Nigel Hess

White Christmas

Irving Berlin (b. Tolochin, Russia, May 18, 1888; d. New York City, New York, September 22, 1989)

Robert Russell Bennett, arr. (b. Kansas City, Kansas, June 15, 1894; d. New York City, August 18, 1981)

White Christmas, the Irving Berlin song that became a modern Christmas carol, was written for Bing Crosby in the 1942 movie *Holiday Inn*. “It won an Academy Award for best song, sold more than 50 million records and 4 million copies of sheet music, earned over \$1 million in royalties, and is one of the most frequently played songs ever written,” writes the *New York Times*.

“While many a film trades on the established goodwill of a well-known song, Berlin’s *White Christmas* went on to be even used in another film entitled *White Christmas*,” reads *This Business of Music, the Definitive Guide to the Music Industry*.

Robert Russell Bennett orchestrated many Hollywood musicals – including this work - as well as songs by George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, and Richard Rodgers.

A composer and lyricist, Berlin is considered one of the greatest American songwriters. His music forms a large part of the *Great American Songbook*, with many professional vocalists independently recording his works. Karl Haas writes in *Inside Music* that “Berlin combined his remarkable talents as a prolific song writer, theatrical producer, and music publisher.”

Over the years he was known for writing music and lyrics in the American vernacular: uncomplicated, simple and direct. “My ambition is to reach the heart of the average American,” he once told the *New York Times*.

“*White Christmas* became part of the fabric of American life. In doing so, he helped write the story of this country, capturing the best of who we are and the dreams that shape our lives.” Classical violinist Isaac Stern continues, “With one song, the career of Irving Berlin and American music were intertwined forever.”

“At the beginning of World War II, Berlin wrote the song *God Bless America*,” writes James Kaplan in his biography *Irving Berlin: New York Genius*. “But the Berlin song that would have the greatest impact on Americans was the great holiday song he had first conceived of years earlier – *White Christmas*.”

Kaplan continues, “Nostalgia is certainly essential to *White Christmas*. Yet, when it was first performed the *New York Times* called it ‘tender’ and the *Herald Tribune* called it ‘tuneful.’ Happily, the song *White Christmas* unexpectedly became the first big sentimental song hit of World War II.”

Author Philip Furia writes in his book, *Irving Berlin: A Life in Song*, “As a song, *White Christmas* is the counterpart to Robert Frost’s great modern poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* which uses the simplest of rhymes and the barest of imagery to evoke a beautiful but melancholy scene.”

Furia continues, “*White Christmas* evokes the associations of home, family, and landscape that are as endemic to Christmas as the religious celebration, but makes them all the more poignant by having them voiced by a singer who cannot share but only recall them”

According to the *New York Times*, “Not only did he compose the melodies; he also wrote the lyrics. And businessman that he was, he established the Irving Berlin Music Corporation in 1919 to publish his works and retain control over all the copyrights, which he guarded fiercely. His was a classic rags-to-riches story that he never forgot could have happened only in America.”



Irving Berlin

Variations and Improvisations on Christmas Carols

Bryan Kelly (b. Oxford, England, 1934)

Bryan Kelly was born in Oxford in 1934. He studied at the Royal College of Music with Gordon Jacob and Herbert Howells, then with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. After some years on the staff of the Royal Scottish

Academy of Music, he was appointed to a post at the Royal College of Music in 1963 and taught there for twenty-two years. One year was spent in Washington DC, teaching at the American University.

Recent compositions include a forty-minute cantata, 'Look, Stranger at this Island' (a Millennium commission); 'Don Quixote', a suite for saxophone and piano; and 'Umbrian Variations', for eight cellos. Bryan Kelly currently divides his time between France, the UK and the Middle East.

Other orchestras have performed this work including the Bruckner Orchestra in Linz, Austria; the Halle Orchestra in Manchester, England; the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra; the Boston Pops Orchestra; and the US Air Forces Europe Band.



Bryan Kelly

The Christmas Song - "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire"

Melvin Howard Tormé (b. Chicago, September 13, 1925; d. Los Angeles, June 5, 1999)

Calvin Custer, arr. (b. July 15, 1939; d. April 21, 1998)

Melvin Howard Tormé wrote songs and musical arrangements and in 1999 was awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. The writer of more than 250 songs, several of which became jazz standards, he also frequently wrote the arrangements for the songs he sang. He often collaborated with Bob Wells, and the best known Tormé-Wells song is *The Christmas Song* (1946), referred to by its opening line "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire." Calvin Custer made numerous arrangements of his works for orchestra, many of which were performed by the Boston Pops Orchestra.



Mel Tormé

"Stille Nacht"

Louis F. "Chip" Davis, Jr. (b. Hamler, Ohio, September 5, 1947)

Calvin Custer, arr. (b. July 15, 1939; d. April 21, 1998)

Silent Night (German: *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*) is a popular Christmas carol, composed in 1818 by Franz Xaver Gruber to lyrics by Joseph Mohr in a small town near Salzburg, Austria. The song was declared an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2011 and has been recorded and arranged for every music genre, including by the New Age music group Mannheim Steamroller.

*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*

One of Mannheim Steamroller's most popular carols, its unique effects of this Christmas standard make it an ideal centerpiece for the holidays. Davis was awarded his 19th Gold Record in 2010. The Recording Industry Association of America has also awarded Davis four Multi-Platinum and eight Platinum records. Davis' arrangement of *Stille Nacht* was adapted for orchestra and concert use by Calvin Custer.

Davis began piano lessons at the age of four, going on to study music at the University of Michigan's School of Music, specializing in bassoon and percussion. After graduation, he performed with the Norman Luboff Choir, one of the leading choral groups which toured from 1963 to 1987, and recorded more than seventy-five albums.

Davis, now a Grammy Award-winning composer and musician, is credited with introducing what has become known as New Age music more than twenty-five years ago. Mannheim Steamroller has sold more than twenty million copies of their four holiday albums. Davis, founder and president of American Gramophone, a record company, lives with his wife and children near Omaha, Nebraska.



Chip Davis

Hanukkah Festival Overture

Lucas Richman (b. January 31, 1964)

The score calls for three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings.

Hanukkah Festival Overture, composed by Lucas Richman, is a piece based on the traditional tunes that mark the celebration of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, also known as the Festival of Lights. The festival is observed by lighting one candle each day on a nine-branch candelabrum, called a menorah. One branch is typically placed above or below the others and its candle is used to light the other eight candles. Hanukkah is celebrated with a series of rituals that are performed every day throughout the eight-day holiday. In 2025, Hanukkah begins on Sunday, December 14th at sundown and ends at nightfall on Monday, December 22nd.

The overture incorporates six specific tunes that speak either of the miracle of the oil that burned seven days longer than expected or that illustrate the manner in which the holiday is celebrated today. The Pacific Symphony Orchestra commissioned this work in 1994. On his website (lucasrichman.com), Richman describes the work: "A rousing piece based on the traditional tunes that mark the celebration of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. This work has been performed by over 300 orchestras since 1994."



Lucas Richman

Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 10 in D-flat Major

Sergei Prokofiev (b. Sontsivka , Ukraine, April 23, 1891; d. Moscow, Soviet Union, March 5, 1953)

André Previn Peck, piano

This work calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, percussion and strings. It lasts about 16 minutes.

Sergei Prokofiev set about composing his *Piano Concerto No. 1 in D-flat Major, Op. 10*, in 1911, and finished it the next year. "This concerto was written shortly after the death of Prokofiev's father," writes Harlow Robinson in his book *Sergei Prokofiev, A Biography*. "If Prokofiev found it difficult to express his feelings verbally and emotionally over his father's passing, he did express them musically."

The shortest of all Prokofiev's concertos, it is in one movement, and about 16 minutes in duration.

The concerto was first performed in Moscow on July 25, 1912, with the composer as soloist and Konstantin Saradzhev conducting. "Prokofiev noted 'by the way, this concerto is not at all easy, and I must play it well! Since it will be my first appearance with an orchestra, I'll have to know it cold,'" continued Robinson in his book, *Sergei Prokofiev, A Biography*. "The performance went well. Some critics hailed it as the dawn of a new musical era. Prokofiev was satisfied."

The 22-year-old composer-pianist won the Anton Rubinstein Prize for pianistic accomplishments in an May 18, 1914 performance of the work at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. He had proposed his own concerto for the program. Prokofiev found a publisher willing to produce 20 copies in time for the event. The jury headed by Alexander Glazunov awarded Prokofiev the prize.

Maurice Hinson writes in the book *Guide to the Pianist's Repertoire* that "Prokofiev developed an individual, percussive style, which was probably the most significant innovation in piano technique since Chopin. His percussive manner of treating the piano is uniquely blended with a lyric element frequently accompanied by strong dissonance, yet his basic arsenal of figuration stems directly from the nineteenth century. Influences of Russian folksong are evident in his melodies and energetic rhythms. Biting percussive effects, physical endurance, and a fine octave technique are requirements for many of Prokofiev's works."



Sergei Prokofiev

INTERMISSION

Gloria

Francis Poulenc (b. Paris, January 7, 1899; d. Paris, January 30, 1963)

- I. Gloria in excelsis Deo
- II. Laudamus te
- III. Domine Deus, Rex caelestis
- IV. Domine Fili unigenite
- V. Domine Deus, Agnus Dei
- VI. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris

Emily Birsan, soprano

This work is scored for three flutes and piccolo, three oboes and English horn, three clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, harp, strings, chorus, and solo soprano. The length is 28 minutes.

The *Gloria* is a setting of the Gloria text from the Mass. One of Poulenc's most celebrated works, it was commissioned by the Koussevitsky Foundation in honor of Serge Koussevitzky and his wife Natalia, the namesakes of the foundation. The score was completed July 1960.

What to Listen For

The first movement opens with a great chordal fanfare from the brass instruments. The chorus then enters singing in a declamatory manner. After the introduction begins the woodwinds enter, then the chorus enters in double-dotted rhythms, reminiscent of the brass fanfare.

The second movement opens with a quick brass introduction. A light tune repeats throughout this movement. The last line of the text, beginning "Gratias agimus..." is in a somber mode, giving an other-worldly characteristic in the middle of the revelry of the movement. After this respite, there is a diversion to a bass figure.

The third movement begins with woodwinds followed by an extremely dramatic solo soprano line. The movement then prepares for the more joyful fourth movement.

The fourth movement is the shortest and resembles the second movement in the jocular nature of the orchestral phrases but contains some of the accented nature of the first movement in the chorus parts. The melodic lines, and the quick tempo and rousing rhythms, give a whirling and dancing impression, grounded by the constant return of the theme.

The fifth movement opens with woodwinds and resembles the third movement with the return of the soprano soloist as leader. The music is dark in the soprano's opening melodic line. The movement culminates in an uneasy, mysterious feeling.

The sixth movement begins with alternating chorus and interjections of the orchestra intoning the fanfare theme from the first movement. After the introduction, the main setting of the text is reminiscent of the first movement, with the sixteenth note line in the upper strings above a walking bass. The final section is preceded by a solo "Amen" from the soprano, echoed by the chorus. The

chorus proceeds to repeat the text. The fanfare theme from the first movement returns one last time before the final "Amen," triumphantly slower and grander. The last final "Amen" is intoned by the soprano.



Francis Poulenc

A Holiday Sing-Along

John Finnegan, arr. (b. August 18, 1926, Salem, Massachusetts; d. January 2, 2007, Milford, Massachusetts)

John Finnegan received his bachelor's and master's degrees in music from Harvard University and went on to Boston University for additional studies. He attended the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood (the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra located in the towns of Lenox and Stockbridge in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts). Finnegan also played in the Springfield (Massachusetts) Symphony Orchestra.

His orchestral and band arrangements include more than twenty-five scores for the Harvard University Band and for several band publications. A highlight of Finnegan's career was guest conducting the Boston Pops Orchestra at the twenty-fifth reunion of his Harvard class.

This work is a traditional Christmas sing-along for orchestra and audience - a delightful way to start the holiday season. With all the holiday carols many of us remember learning in our childhood, the sing-along is sure to be enjoyable when harmonizing with everyone. "Rock of Ages" is a new addition. Join in the merriment – a copy of the words of this sing-along is provided!

- *Jingle Bells*
- *Joy to the World*
- *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*
- *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*
- *Silent Night*
- *Away in a Manger*
- *Rock of Ages*
- *Deck the Halls*
- *O Come, All Ye Faithful*



