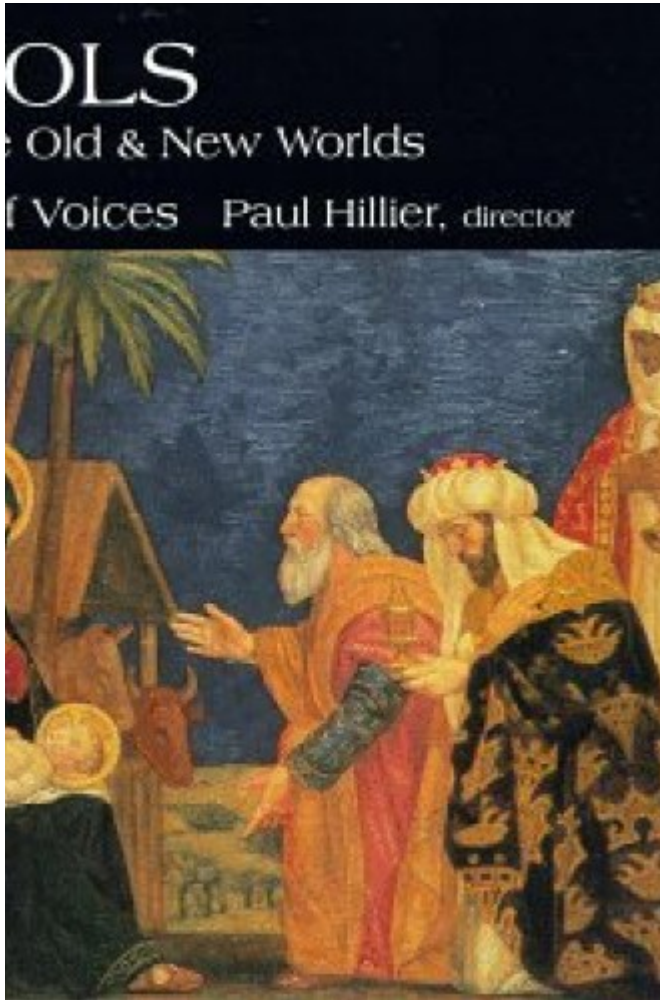


My favorite Christmas music

By [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

December 14, 2010

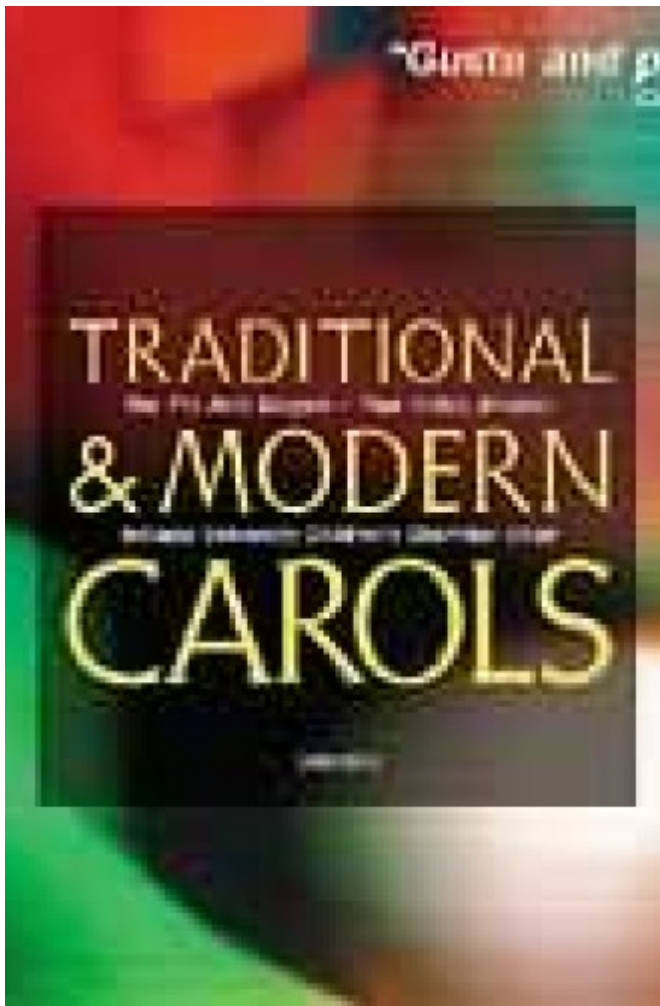
In Review



Carols from the Old and New Worlds

Theatre of Voices

Harmonia Mundi



Traditional and Modern Carols

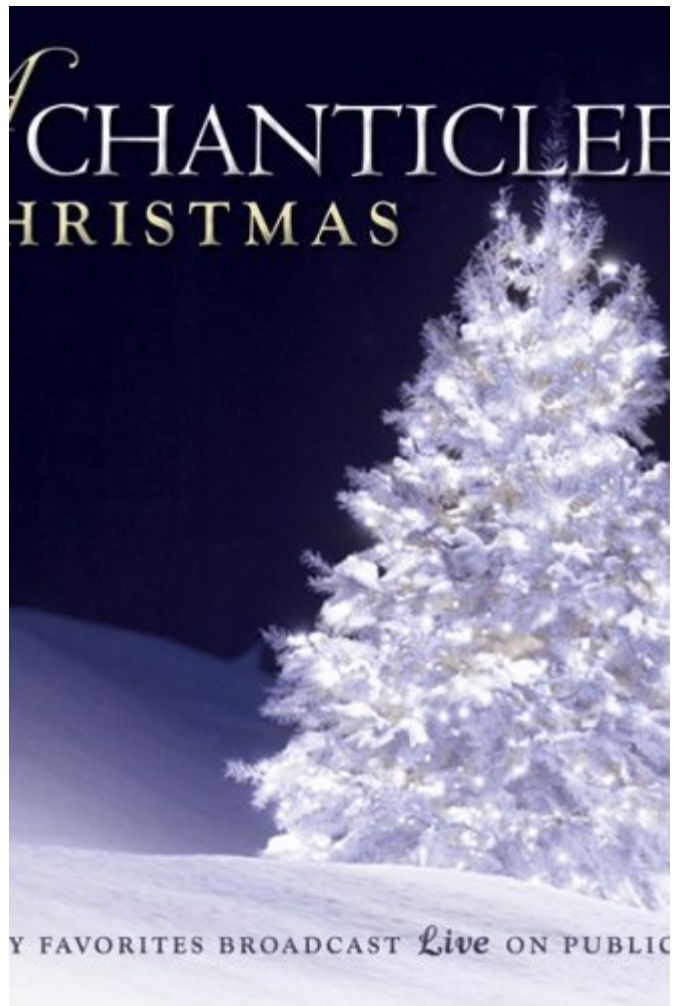
Pro Arte Singers, Indiana University Children's Chamber Choir
Harmonia Mundi



Sing We Christmas

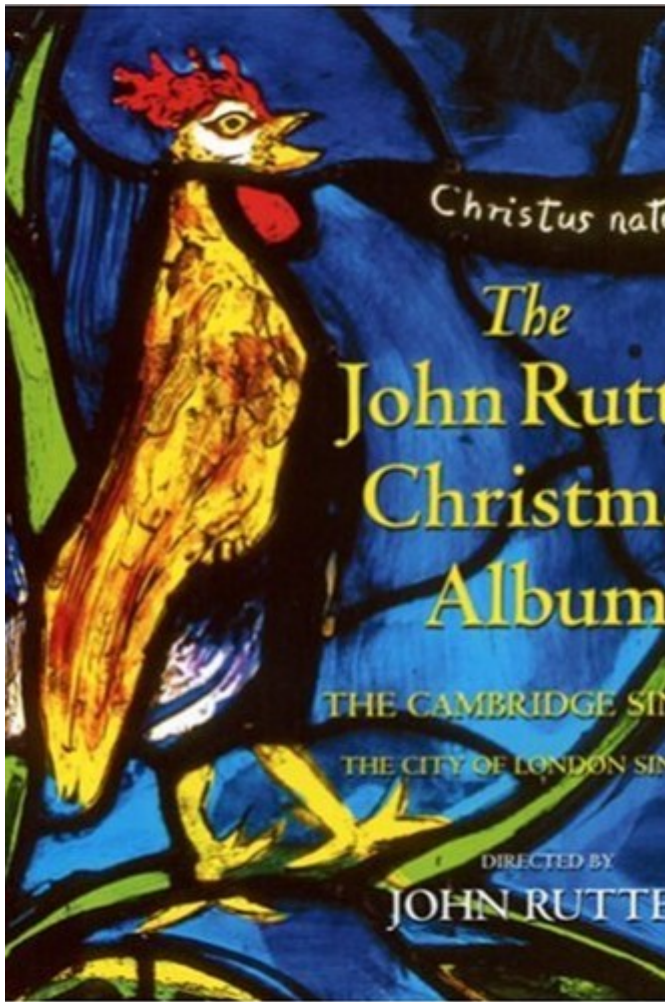
Chanticleer

Teldec



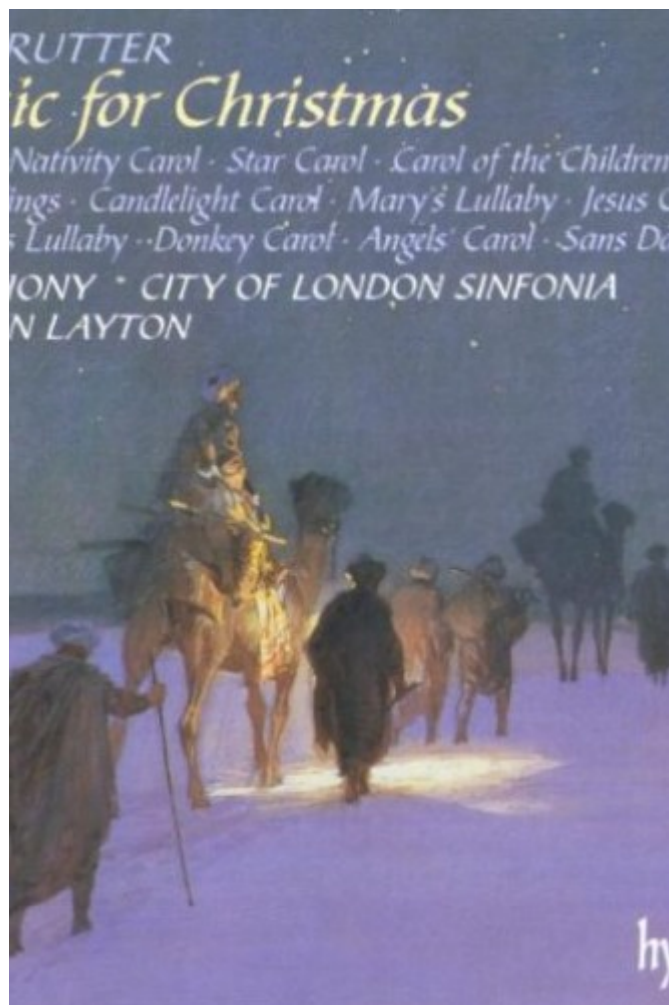
A Chanticleer Christmas

Chanticleer
Mesa Blue Moon



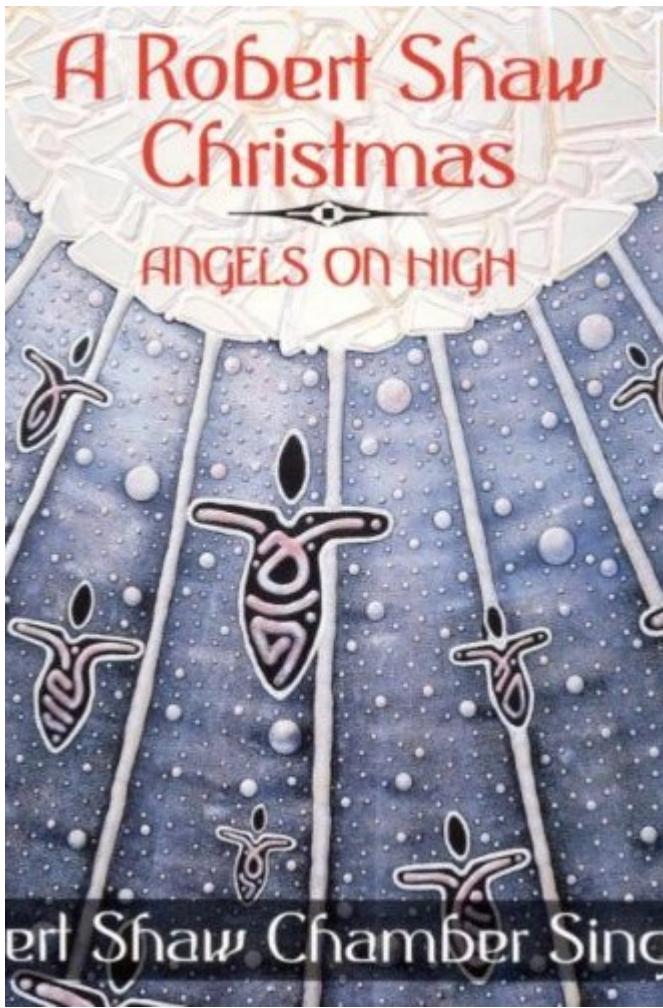
The John Rutter Christmas Album

The Cambridge Singers, The City of London Sinfonia
Collegium



John Rutter: Music for Christmas

Polyphony, the City of London Sinfonia
Hyperion UK



A Robert Shaw Christmas

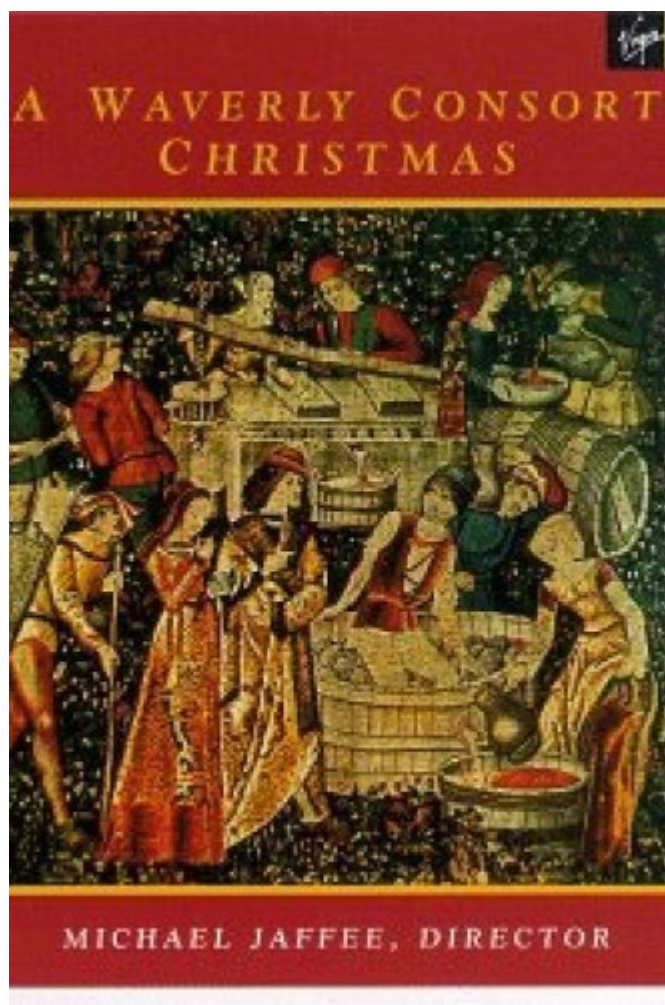
Robert Shaw Chamber Singers

Telarc



Bright Day Star

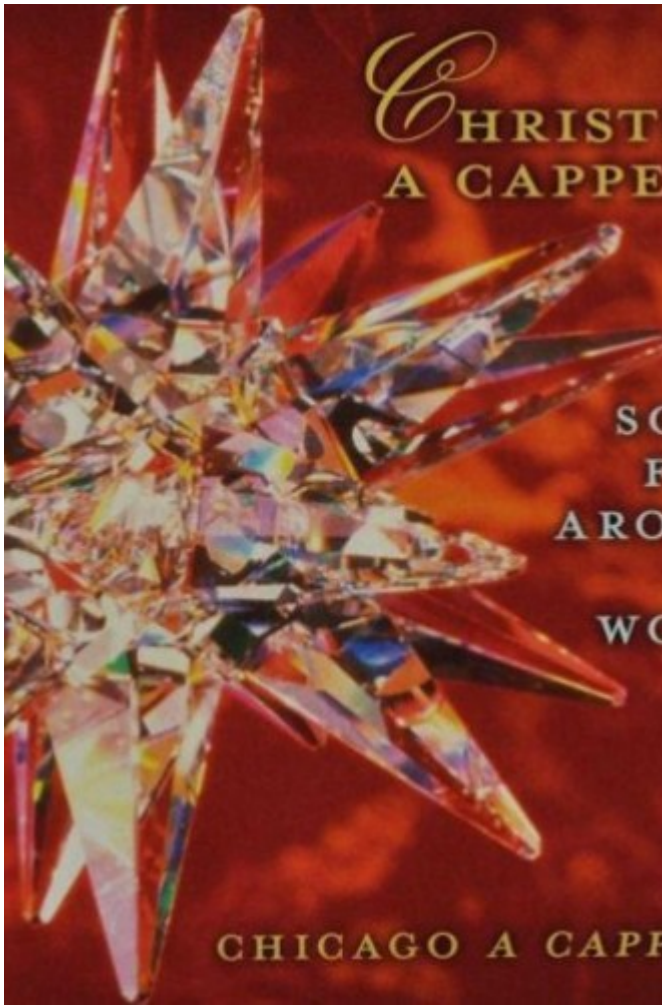
The Baltimore Consort
Dorian



A Waverly Consort Christmas

Waverly Consort

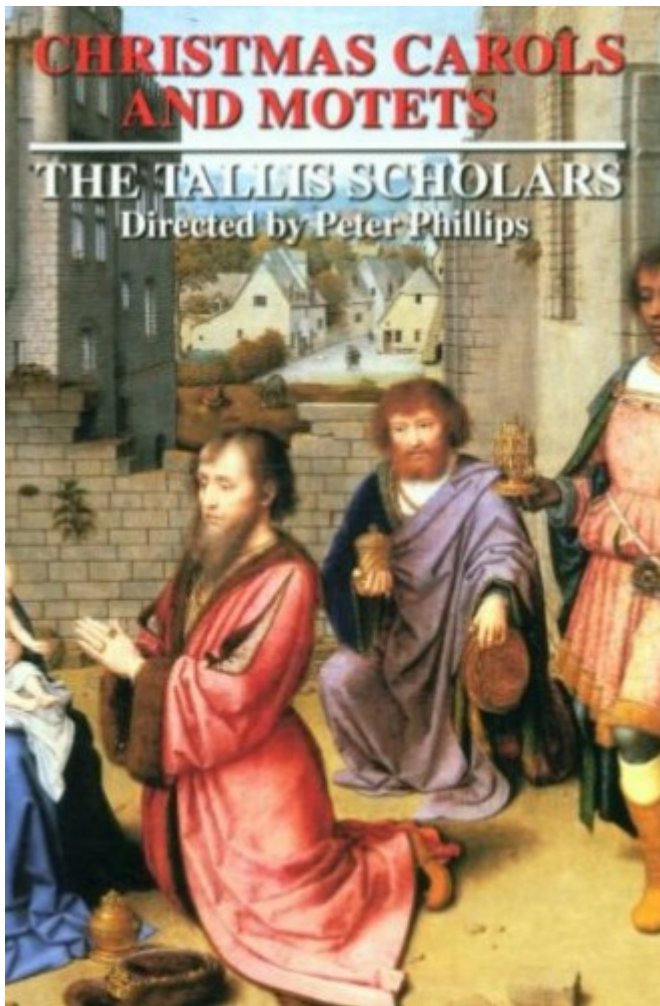
EMI Classics



Christmas A Capella

Chicago A Capella

Cedille



Christmas Carols and Motets

The Tallis Scholars
Gimell UK

I appreciate when other people recommend favorite CDs. In that spirit, I share with you some of my favorite Christmas CDs. (A warning: I tend to favor the less familiar over tried and true Christmas carols. I also prefer vocal music to instrumental and a cappella to accompanied.)

Theatre of Voices, Paul Hillier, director,
Carols from the Old and New Worlds.

The Pro-Arte Singers and the Indiana University Children's Choir, Paul Hillier, director, *Carols from the Old and New Worlds, vol. II*. These recordings draw on carols based on English and

German folk tunes, as well as early American music, some from the shape-note tradition. Unfortunately, the first volume appears to be available only used or in the form of mp3 downloads. The second one was reissued as *Traditional and Modern Carols* and is available on CD.

Chanticleer, *Sing We Christmas*. The sound produced by this San Francisco-based male ensemble is about as pure as blended human voices get. The more recent *A Chanticleer Christmas* ends with Franz Biebl's *Ave Maria* and almost makes a Mary devotee out of this dyed-in-the-wool Protestant. But if I had to choose between them, I'd still go with the earlier CD.

The Cambridge Singers, The City of London Sinfonia, John Rutter, director, *Christus natus est: The John Rutter Christmas Album*. Polyphony, the City of London Sinfonia, Stephen Layton, conductor, *John Rutter: Music for Christmas*. Although Rutter's work extends far beyond Christmas music, much of his better-known music was written for Christmas. As a student he began writing carols because it freed him from having to write atonal music, which was in vogue. Both CDs contain some of Rutter's own carols, along with his delectable arrangements of other Christmas songs. There is some duplication between the two volumes.

Robert Shaw Chamber Singers, Robert Shaw, conductor, *A Robert Shaw Christmas: Angels on High*. There's a consistency to the Robert Shaw Chorale sound and it can become predictable. Yet I recommend this CD for some of its selections: Randall Thompson's *Alleluia*, Morton Lauridsen's *O Magnum Mysterium*, Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, some of the chorales from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* and the previously mentioned Biebl *Ave Maria*.

The Baltimore Consort, Custer LaRue, soprano, *Bright Day Star: Music for the Yuletide Season*. This CD contains old carols and dance tunes from the British Isles, Germany and

Appalachia. What makes it unique are the arrangements and the use of instruments from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Waverly Consort, Michael Jaffe, director,
A Waverly Consort Christmas. People who enjoy early American or Celtic music or the compositions of William Billings will be drawn to this CD. The often spirited, sometimes tranquil songs are sung a cappella or accompanied by simple period instruments. Unfortunately, this album is available only as an MP3 download.

Chicago A Cappella, *Christmas A Cappella: Songs From Around the World*. I'm drawn to this CD because of its great range of songs--including newer numbers, some by younger composers, several from Africa. It contains the unfamiliar, like the opener "Amuworo ayi otu nwa" by Nigerian composer Christian Onyeji, and the very familiar, like "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." I'm thrilled that my friend Jim Clemens arranged "Jingle a cappella," which was written especially for Chicago A Cappella.

The Tallis Scholars, Peter Phillips, director, *Christmas Carols and Motets*. This CD includes medieval carols, Renaissance motets and German chorales mostly from after the Reformation. Four renditions of Ave Maria are offered, a reminder of the importance of Marian devotion in the Catholic tradition. The clarity and translucence demonstrated by the Tallis Scholars is not only remarkable, but also suited to this music.

At some point in the season, my spouse and I like to listen to Handel's *Messiah*, even though it isn't strictly a Christmas oratorio. I also try to listen to Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, which makes me think sentimentally about when I played the role of Balthazar in college.