

Coro dos Amigos



Newsletter, November 2016.

Our Christmas Concerts.

Friday 9th December. Igreja Matriz, São Brás 21.00 Free entry

Donations will be sought at this concert, and a donation will be made to a local charity.

Saturday 10th December. Museum São Brás 18.00 €5

Saturday 17th December. Igreja da Misericórdia, Tavira 18.00 €5

Being in a choir in the autumn is always a slightly strange experience, because no sooner are you home from the summer holiday than you start to rehearse songs about snow, angels, stars and Santa. Coro dos Amigos has been hard at work for almost three months now, preparing for *Os Celebrações de Natal*.

In many ways, this will be our most ambitious Christmas programme, both in terms of the demands of the pieces and the number of new songs. As an appetiser, here are some details about pieces and their composers.

We were delighted at the start of rehearsals to find that our Maestro António had chosen some extracts from Handel's 'Messiah' as part of this year's offering. We shall sing three choruses and one or two solo sections from the first 'Christmas' section of the work. The score of Messiah was, famously, composed by Handel in less than a month, in July and August of 1741, using a Bible-based text written by Charles Jennens, friend of the composer and well-known literary figure at the time. Many legends have arisen around this monumental work, including the story that King George II attended a performance in London and stood in awe during the Hallelujah Chorus. There is no evidence that this event ever happened, or that the King ever heard Messiah, but a few years later it had become a custom, one maintained to this day, in Britain at least.

(Please note that we shall not sing the Messiah extracts at the concert in São Brás Museum.)

Two pieces in Latin have been added to the repertoire this year.

Dixit Maria (St. Luke 1:38) was written by German composer Hans Leo Hassler (1562 – 1612). Nuremberg-born, Hassler studied in Venice under Andrea Gabrieli before returning to Germany and working in two or three towns before becoming Kapellmeister to Charles II of Saxony, a post he held until his death. In his religious compositions, Hassler was conservative, using the polyphonic style of earlier times rather than the incoming baroque, but he also composed many secular pieces where he allowed himself more freedom. *Dixit Maria* is typical of his religious work, using traditional techniques but making the result approachable and pleasing to lay audiences.

En Natus est Emanuel is a song by the renowned German composer Michael Praetorius, whose famous setting of *Es ist Ein Ros' entsprungen* has been in our repertoire for many years. Real name Michael Schultheiß, he was born in Kreuzberg around 1571, and spent his life in the service of German royal and noble households, his final post, from 1613, being at the court of Saxony, where he died in 1621. As well as composing a vast number of songs and hymn tunes, in the latter category trying to achieve a blend of Lutheran and Catholic traditions, he wrote extensively about music theory and practice in his day. His writings have been invaluable to present-day musicians in their efforts to reproduce the instrumentation and sound of 'early music'. The piece we are to sing was included in a collection called *Musae Sioniae*, published in nine volumes in 1609. (he wrote or arranged over 1200 songs in all.)

Ó Meu Menino, arranged by living Portuguese composer Eurico Carrapatoso, is one of two Portuguese pieces new to the choir this year. Two original versions of this exist. It formed part of a Catholic religious observance in the 18th and 19th centuries, and was originally performed in the traditional Alentejan vocal style. Carrapatoso adapted the version from Pias in the Beja District for four-part harmony. The composer has had a glittering career, achieving national honours. He is not only a composer and musician but he also has major qualifications in History and Economics. His musical works range over many genres, with both religious and secular themes.

Fernando Lopes-Graça (1906 – 1994) is probably the most important Portuguese composer of recent times. The choir has had his '*O Milho da Nossa Terra*' in the repertoire for several years. This year we are including '*O Menino nas Palhas*' in our Christmas concerts. Lopes-Graça spent his life working to preserve and promote Portuguese traditional music as part of his political work in opposition to the Salazar regime. His musical education also took him to France, where he came into contact with wider European traditions. He was noted for his work to promote the work of Hungarian Bela Bartok. After the 1974 Revolution, he was involved in the development of the new musical education programme. He has left behind an enormous legacy of writings and music.

Ring Christmas Bells (The Carol of the Bells) is just one more of those songs that has entered the seasonal repertoire, its origins quickly lost to view. It is derived from traditional Ukrainian folk chants called Shchedrivky and was written in 1914 by Mykola Leontovich as a commission from the national choir of Ukraine. Several versions of the words in English exist, the best-known written by American Peter Wilhousky.

Peter Cornelius (1824 - 1874) German composer, poet and music critic, is most famous in the English-speaking world for his carol *Three Kings from Persian Lands afar*, originally written for solo and piano but today usually sung with choral backing. The choral part is a chorale by Philipp Nicolai which translates as, *How Brightly Shines the Morning Star*. Cornelius moved in prestigious musical circles in his lifetime, including those of Wagner and Liszt, but his own contributions are no longer well-known.

Our main programme will feature one standard English carol, *In the Bleak Midwinter*. The words are by English poet Christina Rossetti, who wrote them as a commission for a magazine around 1872. It first appeared as a hymn in 1906, with a tune by Gustav Holst. This was adapted as an anthem for choir and soloists by Harold Darke in 1911, and has become one of the best-loved Christmas pieces.

A real departure for us will come when we perform a version of Irving Berlin's *White Christmas*. This iconic secular offering holds all kinds of world records as the most purchased, the most recorded etc. Written in 1941, it achieved almost instant success when recorded by Bing Crosby – wartime nostalgia no doubt helped it along. The verse that precedes the universally-known lines is not always sung, but we shall sing it, in the arrangement by Hector MacCarthy.

Two classic Christmas pieces from our 'back catalogue' complete the main part of our programme – *The Shepherd's Farewell* by Hector Berlioz, and *O Holy Night* by Dwight and Adam.

At the concert in the Museum, following the choir performance, there will be the now traditional opportunity for the audience to join us in singing carols from Portugal, Germany and Britain.

We look forward to seeing you at one or more of our Concerts for Christmas!

