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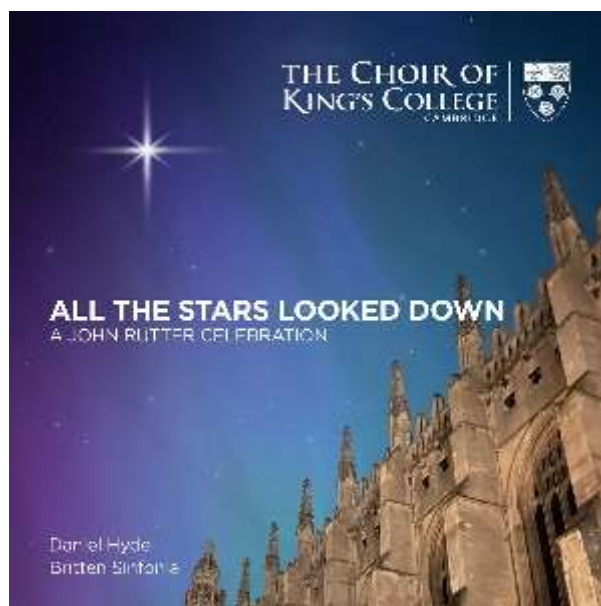
HOME » [ALL THE STARS LOOKED DOWN: A JOHN RUTTER CELEBRATION \(KING'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE\)](#)

🕒 NOVEMBER 30, 2025

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***All the Stars Looked
Down – A John
Rutter Celebration***

Britten Sinfonia
The Choir of King's
College,
Cambridge/Daniel
Hyde
rec. 2023/25,
Chapel of King's
College, Cambridge
Texts included



King's College, Cambridge KGS0075 SACD [71]

This is the second disc I've reviewed in recent weeks in which a Cambridge collegiate choir has paid tribute to Sir John Rutter on the occasion of his 80th birthday. His alma mater, Clare College, was first out of the blocks ([review](#)), now closely followed by King's College. The Clare disc offered a mixed programme, including just a couple of pieces for the Christmas season. Here, Daniel Hyde has chosen to focus entirely on Christmas pieces, which is fair enough since, for many people, Rutter's name has become synonymous with Christmas music.

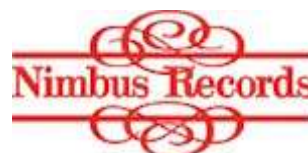
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Not everything on the programme is by Rutter, however. Hyde has taken the opportunity to pay tributes to some of his predecessors as Director of Music at King's. His immediate predecessor, the late Sir Stephen Cleobury is represented by the inclusion of an orchestration he made of Walford Davies' setting of *O little town of Bethlehem*. In fact, Cleobury didn't finish the orchestration; Hyde explains in the booklet that he found the manuscript in some old files and has completed and expanded Cleobury's work; the result is very pleasing. Sir Philip Ledger is represented by a setting of *A spotless rose* which, Hyde says, Ledger made for Cleobury and the King's choir "many years after his retirement". I don't recall hearing this little piece before but I loved it. The music is disarmingly lovely and the gentle orchestration is entirely apt. Of course, the name of Sir David Willcocks is inextricably linked with Christmas music at King's and Daniel Hyde very fittingly opens and closes the programme with Willcocks' arrangements of two great Christmas hymns. These involve brass and organ and, if memory serves me correctly, Sir David made them for the Bach Choir's annual Christmas concerts. The fanfares that open *Hark! the herald angels sing* are splendid. My only disappointment is that after this majestic introduction it's a bit of a let down that we don't hear a substantial congregation/audience singing the hymn. Willcocks' last verse descant is still the best I've ever heard for this perennial favourite. If anything, that's even more the case with *O come, all ye faithful* which is also given with full panoply of brass and organ. After Willcocks, anyone else's descant to 'Sing choirs of angels' comes a distant second. But how clever of Willcocks to provide the descant for the *penultimate* verse. Even more imposing, arguably, is his treatment of the unison last verse, especially what Hyde refers to as 'that chord' when the line 'Word of the father' is reached. It makes its full impact here.

A couple of other Cambridge musicians are saluted here; both of them are St John's men. It's good to hear David Hill's subtle arrangement of *Away in a manger*. Christopher Robinson's arrangement for choir and organ of a Hereford Carol appears in an orchestration by John Rutter. The carol in question, 'Come all ye faithful Christians' is one of the *Twelve Traditional Carols from*



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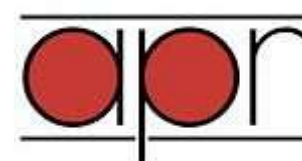
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Herefordshire which Vaughan Williams and Ella Mary Leather edited and published in 1920. It's a lovely, quintessentially English tune and the Robinson arrangement does it proud. The new orchestration also works very well.

It's John Rutter's original work that dominates this collection, though. Two purely orchestral pieces are included: 'Candlelight' and 'What sweeter music'. These are from a set of *Five Meditations for Orchestra* (2003) in which Rutter made purely orchestral versions of five of his short choral pieces at the behest of a record company. Another was included on the aforementioned Clare College disc. I commented then that shorn of words to give the music extra lift, the orchestral version is simply a pleasant tune. I'm afraid that's just as true of the two arrangements included here; they're skilfully done but I particularly regret that the original vocal version of 'What sweeter music' was not included instead; after all, the piece was originally written for King's in 1987.

In a recent review for *The Guardian* of John Rutter's 80th birthday concert at St Paul's Cathedral, Flora Willson described him as "a virtuoso of the jaunty rhythm and the doyen of the singable tune". That's a very neat and apt verdict and it applies in spades to *All bells in paradise* which Rutter wrote for King's in 2012; the refrain is particularly appealing. I liked this piece when first I heard it and I still do. I'm glad Daniel Hyde included *Sans Day Carol*, a piece I've sung countless times. This was written in 1968; it's a fine arrangement and the often-perky orchestration is a delight. *Nativity Carol* is an even earlier piece: indeed, if memory serves me correctly, it was the first piece by Rutter in which I sang, while I was still at school. I'm unsurprised that it has retained its popularity. *Dormi, Jesu* is another piece written for King's, in 1998. This is a trickier proposition for amateur choirs than either *Sans Day Carol* or *Nativity Carol*. The harmonies present challenges, not least towards the end, but it's a piece that would be well worth the effort for a choir to learn. The King's College Choir is ideally equipped to bring out the subtleties of Rutter's composition. The latest piece on this programme is *All the stars looked down* which Rutter was invited

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to compose in 2023 in memory of Stephen Cleobury. The text is a poem by G K Chesterton. The poem is very touching and Rutter sets it beautifully. I hadn't heard this piece before but it struck me as both affecting and effective.

It would be a mistake to assume that this is "just another" disc of Christmas music by John Rutter; it's much more than that. As I've tried to show, the programme has been thoughtfully chosen to make a very sincere and enjoyable tribute to a composer whose music has touched countless people, performers and audiences alike. As you'd expect, the Choir of King's College and Britten Sinfonia give expert performances. Just as expert is the work of producer Adrian Peacock and engineer David Hinitt; the SACD sound is excellent in all respects. The disc is housed in a handsome casing which includes very useful notes by Daniel Hyde and John Rutter as well as all the texts.

John Quinn

Contents

Felix Mendelssohn, arr. Sir David Willcocks – *Hark! the herald angels sing*

Sir Philip Ledger – *A spotless rose*

Sir John Rutter – *All bells in paradise*

English traditional, arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams, orch. Daniel Hyde – *Sussex Carol*

Adolphe Adam, arr. Sir John Rutter – *O Holy Night*

Sir Henry Walford Davies, orch. Sir Stephen Cleobury & Daniel Hyde – *O little town of Bethlehem*

Sir John Rutter – *Five Meditations for Orchestra: III. 'Candlelight'*

Cornish traditional, arr. Sir John Rutter – *Sans Day Carol*

From 'Piae Cantiones', arr. Sir David Willcocks – *Unto us is born a son*

Sir John Rutter – *Five Meditations for Orchestra: I. 'What sweeter music'*

Traditional, arr. Christopher Robinson, orch. Sir John Rutter – *Hereford Carol*

Traditional, arr. Sir John Rutter – *Child in a manger*

Sir John Rutter – *Dormi, Jesu*

Sir John Rutter – *Nativity Carol*

Sir John Rutter – *All the stars looked down*

Franz Xaver Gruber, arr. Sir John Rutter – *Silent night*

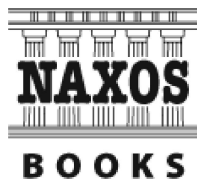
English traditional, arr. David Hill – *Away in a manger*

John Francis Wade, arr. Sir David Willcocks – *O come, all ye faithful*

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Discs for review may be sent to:

Jonathan Woolf

76 Lushes Road

Loughton

Essex IG10 3QB

United Kingdom

jonathan_woolf@yahoo.co.uk

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