

# Winter warmers

Marketed as an antidote to the stress of Christmas, winter music festivals have a place of their own. Andrew Green rounds up three of the best

**W**hy aren't there more music festivals at Christmas? By which I don't mean clusters of 'Christmas music for all the family' concerts, but through-thought, serious-minded affairs such as are warp and weft to our musical life at so many other times of the year.

Those involved in December music festivals I speak to reckon that in fact this season of the year is a good time to draw audiences. 'People often say we give them welcome relief from the hustle and bustle of Christmas,' says Stephen Layton, artistic director of St John's Smith Square's Christmas Festival, now in its 29th year (which helps mark the 300th anniversary of the venue's construction). 'Our central location also means it's easy for them to pop in after work or shopping.'

Delma Tomlin, director of the National Centre for Early Music at York and thus responsible for the city's Early Music Christmas Festival, markets the event as 'an antidote to the stress of Christmas. For locals the festival is part of "what happens at Christmas". And we're very much linked to the tourism marketing team in York, helping project the city as a pleasant place to come and stay.'

Abigail Pogson, CEO of the multi-locational Spitalfields Music Winter Festival in East London, notes that even though hers isn't specifically a Christmas-themed

affair, 'clearly there are people who come to concerts in groups with family or friends in a celebratory way.'

Pogson sees her event as a way of keeping in touch with the established audience for the summer Spitalfields Festival, while also picking up plenty of 'one-off' seasonal custom. For Tomlin, the need was both to do the same and yet also build a somewhat different audience from the summer festival 'for a relaxed series of concerts loosely held together with the common theme of Christmas. The idea was to be deliberately less academic and from have the chance to welcome different and maybe younger artists.'

These three festivals offer different takes on repertoire. For Tomlin and Layton, the accent is on Christmas but with forays into other repertoire areas. This year York offers everything from a concert helping mark the 20th anniversary of ensemble La Serenissima (music of Vivaldi) and a tenth birthday bash for vocal group Stile Antico which, like its counterpart ensemble Renaissance, offers a miscellany of Christmas music. Lighter seasonal fare comes from the evergreen Mellstock Band and the boisterous Joglearesa sixsome.

Also part and parcel of the event is an arm of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment's Watercycle project, involving the whole spectrum of A level students, special needs groups, and even 'Tots', offering all

manner of reflections, as it were, on water.

The SJSS festival also gives itself licence to explore other avenues than merely Christmas – there is a Mass in B Minor this year, for example, from Stephen Layton's Trinity College Cambridge choir. 'We like to programme a variety of music while obviously providing opportunities to perform music that couldn't be performed at any other time of year,' he says, adding that the challenge for prospective performers is to come up with new takes on the familiar theme. 'There's such a wealth of Christmas music to draw on from across the centuries, but what often draws it together is imaginative thematic programming by the artists.'

'As this year has been commemorating the start of world war one, we'll be celebrating themes of re-birth and creation. Highlights are festival debuts for the Tenebrae Consort [a range of Christmas pieces], Ensemble Plus Ultra [renaissance Spanish repertoire] and National Youth Music Theatre [a 'Winter Wonderland' presentation in music, song and dance]. But we're also welcoming back so many of our festival regulars, like The Tallis Scholars and Polyphony, whom audiences enjoy coming to hear year after year.'

The (always themeless) Spitalfields festival rarely focuses on Christmas itself, but it often takes as one of its cues 'the idea of ending one year and looking ahead,' says Abigail Pogson. 'This



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KIEVICTOR



KEITH SAUNDERS



St John's Smith Square's Christmas Festival offers 'welcome relief from the hustle and bustle of Christmas,' says director Stephen Layton



MARCO BORGGREVE



York Early Music Christmas Festival is a 'chance to welcome different and maybe younger artists,' says director Delma Tomlin, whose programme includes a tenth birthday bash for vocal group Stile Antico

can provide something intimate and reflective, marking the cycle of time in different ways. For example, this year's evening of music and readings for the winter solstice, featuring Simon Callow.'

Pogson is not one for dealing in over-packaged ideas, preferring to see concerts develop organically in discussion with performers. 'We've been looking at having the Siglo de Oro vocal ensemble appear for a while, and now we've finally put together a programme [of Christmas choral music across 12 centuries] that works and fits.'

The festival's Orgelbüchlein mini-marathon goes on, featuring Bach's music but also new organ works and choral music from the 16th century. 'This project is taking audiences on an incredible journey via a series of intimate spaces,' says Pogson,

'this year, the Chapel Royal at the Tower of London.'

Also on offer is 18th-century music from French ensemble Le Concert Spirituel and composer Claudia Molitor's part performance, part installation piece, *Vast White Stillness*, featuring letters of Rainer Maria Rilke.

Is there any sense of disappointment that so many other performing organisations opt for playing safe at Christmas? Not at all, says Stephen Layton. 'It means there's something for everyone.'

'I understand promoters' nervousness about experimenting when a myriad other entertainments are on offer at Christmas,' says Delma Tomlin. 'What I do know is that unless we at York offer something striking, different and exciting, audiences

will stay at home.' Abigail Pogson agrees. 'Many people are looking for something unusual and interesting to do at this time of the year. And it's always attractive knowing that you're being offered something of world-class quality.'

London's extensive transport links have rendered the SJSS and Spitalfields festivals immune from major problems with the winter weather – so far. In York, Delma Tomlin agrees there is always going to be a risk that the elements could create serious difficulties for both audiences and artists. 'However, a few years back when the snow stayed with us for months, amazingly no artist pulled out. Some audience members resorted to walking in because of the dreadful conditions. We didn't cancel a single concert.'

