

'Bah! Humbug!' said Scrooge. 'Out upon merry Christmas! If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!'

Christmas CDs and DVDs would doubtless have brought about a similar splutter of disdain from old Ebenezer and he wouldn't have found a great deal to rejoice about in the unusually early delivery of my Christmas stocking from Santa Claus this year. Thankfully there were more plums than turkeys, but one or two items where Scrooge's energetic criticism of carol singers would have been perfectly appropriate:

At the first sound of 'God bless you, merry gentleman! May nothing you dismay!' Scrooge seized the ruler with such energy of action, that the singer fled in terror, leaving the keyhole to the fog and even more congenial frost.

## Sound the trumpet (or tuba)

A Christmas disc with *When you wish upon a star* performed by solo tuba, with backing from sweeping strings and a female chorus? It's no hallucination of old Jacob Marley ... it really does exist. Apparently, it's become a popular carol in Nordic countries, but there's no accounting for taste. Øystein Baadsvik can certainly make the tuba sing – just listen to the soaring lines in **Schubert's** *Ave Maria* – and shakes off the 'oompah' image which has perpetually dogged the instrument. There's plenty of digital dexterity on display in *Ding! dong! merrily on high*, which swings along nimbly. Tuba turns into didgeridoo/beatbox on a couple of occasions: in the Sami song *Eatnemen Vuelie*, a choral piece with percussive lip beats on the tuba, and in the virtuosic (and bizarre) *Snofnugg* ('Snowflakes') which gives the disc its title. Annoyingly, texts and translations are entirely missing; not a problem for *God rest you merry, gentlemen*, sung as it is in English, but in an unfamiliar (though exceedingly beautiful) carol such as **Alice Tegnér's** *Star of Bethlehem* ('Gläns över sjö och strand' in Swedish) it's frustrating not to be able to appreciate Viktor Rydberg's poetry without recourse to online searches and translation tools. This is actually an enjoyable disc, not only for its novelty value but also for some eloquent tuba playing amid the sometimes schmaltzy arrangements **BIS CD1885**, 1 hour 5 minutes).

For a more sober reflection on Christmas, try 'Canite tuba' from Onyx Brass. This is a classy collection of Christmas-related music arranged for brass quintet, much of it Early and Baroque, with **Palestrina**, **Monteverdi**, **Corelli**, **Schütz** and **Bach** represented, including two versions of the latter's *In dulci jubilo*. Arrangements are entirely sympathetic and Schütz's 'Herodes', a dramatic interlude from his *Weihnachtshistorie*, is impressively presented, as are the various Bach arrangements.

# More plums than turkeys

by Mark Pullinger

*The Wexford Carol* and **Holst's** *Four Old English Carols* are the nearest this gets to populist repertoire, but again the arrangements are sincere rather than flashy. **Tchaikovsky's** *The crown of roses* (based on his Op. 54 *Children's Songs*) is included, here under the title *Legenda*, while **Berlioz's** 'The Shepherds' Farewell' from *L'Enfance du Christ* has great nobility, although I missed the reedy oboe calls from the original orchestration at its opening. This collection is available only via download: it comes in excellent sound and with a PDF booklet containing introductions to each track (**Resonus RES10105**, 57 minutes).

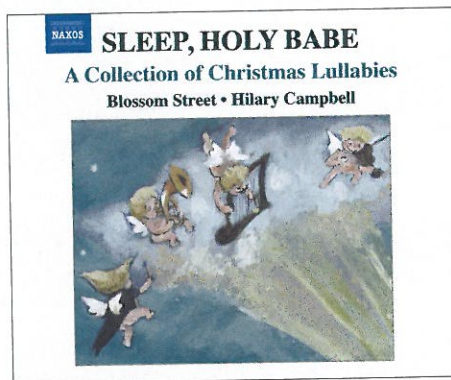
blend well. The recording was made in the warm acoustic of St Sepulchre-Without-Newgate in Holborn (**Naxos 8.572868**, 57 minutes).

## A Musical Advent Calendar

Perhaps it's a little uncharitable to criticize Hänsler's 'Musical Advent Calendar', but Scrooge wasn't strong on charity. Here are 24 tracks which will be played on SWR radio and television through Advent, featuring different performing groups from Baden-Württemberg, Rheinland-Pfalz and Saarland, with one Euro from the sale of each disc going to SWR's annual Children Aid campaign. It's a varied (and variable) sequence. *The Little Drummer Boy* is given a truly hideous *Boléro* treatment, while those listeners allergic to saccharine carol arrangements are forewarned about Door Six ... no, not a 'Lake of Tears' à la *Bluebeard's Castle*, but **John Rutter's** *Child in a Manger*. Even worse is **René Kollo's** flute and harp-infested *Christmas Peace*, with cloying choral harmonies that bring back dreaded memories of Sunday afternoons and *Sing Something Simple* on the radio. Scrooge would have been grinding his teeth at the arrangement of **Bach's** *Wachet auf* for vocals, guitar and accordion, as he would the number from a 40-year-old boy band! The Mainz Chamber Orchestra offers the beguiling 'Hirtenmusik der Ismaeliten' from **Berlioz's** *L'Enfance du Christ*, but it suffers from a swimming-pool acoustic in which the flutes drown in an aural mush of strings. In this aural pick'n'mix there are some worthwhile moments. I enjoyed *Maria durch ein Dornwald ging* ('Mary wanders through the thorns') from Freiburger Spielleyt, the Trio from **Saint-Saëns's** *Christmas Oratorio* and **Manfredini's** *Pastorale* were all pleasant surprises. **Bruno Coulais's** 'Vois sur ton chemin' from the film *The Chorus* is enchantingly sung by the Children's Choir of Stuttgart State Opera. In fact, children's choirs generally come out of this well; the Südwestpfälzer Children's Choir's rendition of *Hört der Engel helle Lieder* ('Angels from the Realms of Glory' to British listeners) is delightful. There is no booklet information at all about the music, but potted biographies of performers are included. One to dip into with caution (**Hänsler Classic CD93.279**, 1 hour 13 minutes).

## An American Christmas

The Taylor Festival Choir offers a Celtic-American-flavoured disc, 'Sing we now of Christmas', complete with fiddle, guitar, whistle and bodhran in selected numbers. Its



## Nessun dorma?

A disc full of lullabies seems like asking for trouble, however beautifully sung, but the quality of musical inspiration on 'Sleep, Holy Babe' means that I never once threatened to doze off, despite a late-night glass of mulled wine or two! Blossom Street, a group of young singers founded by Hilary Campbell, include no fewer than eight world première recordings among the dozen lullabies offered here, including an unknown one by **Finzi**. *O magnum mysterium* is sensitively set by **Anthony Mudge** and **Campbell** includes her own lullaby, setting a text by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The Basque carol *Sing Lullaby* is sung in **Jonathan Rathbone's** arrangement, while **Daniel Burges's** version of the *Coventry Carol* weaves the familiar melody tantalizingly around the four parts so it never quite comes into focus. **John Duggan's** Brittenesque *O Babe, born bare*, written in three parts, brings about interesting clashes of harmony, and the disc closes with **Francis Pott's** *Lullay, my Liking*, which is gloriously sustained across its seven-minute span. A couple of sixteenth-century items, edited by Tom Shorter, add variety to the programme. Solo singing is of a consistently high standard and Blossom Street's voices