



## MARY'S NOTES

### *Christmas Quartetstart*

- pick out individual items, or play as a sequence
- can be used with an experienced grade 1-2 quartet
- also suitable for grade 2-4 quartets, or with adult pupils.
- the violin 3 part is an exact alternative to the viola part
- can be used with a string ensemble
- imaginative sound worlds: 'painting pictures', stretching players' imaginations
- great for developing ensemble skills - musical ideas shared equally

### *Once in royal David's city*

This tune starts with two upbeats, so the rehearsal letters are positioned above dotted lines to make it easy to find starting points. In verse 1 the phrases are distributed amongst the players – it can be done almost 'by ear'. Verse 2 has more quartet texture, but the tune still moves across the parts. When we perform *Christmas Quartetstart* all the way through, my pupils have established a tradition of starting this carol in darkness (just using stand lights), and having the main lights switched on at verse 2. Pizzicato can sound unpleasant unless it is taken seriously and played with good technique. The trick is to use the soft part of the finger pad, and to use arm weight to help produce good tone, rather than 'picking' at the string with the finger tip.

### *Good King Wenceslas*

This makes a good short 'performance piece' and there is an opportunity for the audience to join in with the 'stamping snow off boots' bars. Lots of interesting sounds to work at in this arrangement: at the beginning violin 1 needs to find the best place on the edge of the shoulder of the violin to produce clear 'drum-like' sounds; viola /violin 3 have lovely resonant open string double stopping; violin 2 has some simple harmonics. In bars 25 -35 the tune is heard against a 'cloud of snowflakes', and bars 40-43 has unison *sul pont.* for an icy effect. The phrases are passed between parts, with occasional unison sections.

### *Away in a Manger*

This evokes the kind of nativity painting often seen in Christmas cards produced by famous art galleries: the 'glowing' manger set centrally, with darkness round the edges. The tune is in violin 1 throughout, and violin 2 provides the shimmering light; viola/violin 3 and cello add a guitar-like/harp-like bass. A simple but very effective 'quiet' moment for a concert.

## *The Holly and the Ivy*

Carols were originally once 'circle dances', and the rhythmic drumming and 'drone' figures here in viola/violin 3 and cello should be lively, like the accompaniment to a Renaissance dance. Spend a few minutes of preparation clapping the rhythms in this arrangement before trying it through. It's not hard to put together but needs concentration, and the players have to avoid 'catching' each others' rhythms by mistake! If you want an element of audience participation in a concert, it would be easy to pick out a simple rhythmic element for clapping.

## *Silent Night*

Another opportunity for a 'quiet moment' in a concert. The pizzicato in the accompaniment is a reminder that the carol was written to be performed with a guitar accompaniment. For some reason the rhythm in bar 11 is always contentious, as there are several different versions in common use. You may need to change it to the one everyone seems to be *trying* to play!

## *O come, all ye faithful*

This arrangement is intended to evoke the sound world of a big church or cathedral on Christmas Day, with bells pealing in violin 2 bars 9-12. Cellists never really *believe* the counting in bars 1-2 first time round – it isn't difficult, but they hear all the other parts moving at the beginning of bar 2 and long to go with the crowd! So it's good to have a preparatory clapping session on this opening few bars. Clapping practice for bars 16-17 will also help the violin 2 entry in bar 17; the extra rest is to allow the switch from pizz to arco. There is a missing bowing: violin 1 can link the crotchets in bar 9.

## *Jingle Bells*

Everyone's favourite Christmas song, and pupils regard it as a 'must play' item at this time of year. There is plenty for the players to do in this arrangement, with *col legno* and pizzicato for the horses' hooves, tremolo painting the snow falling, and the opportunity for some easy *spiccato* practice too. There are potential opportunities for audience participation here too, or for younger players to add percussion: an obvious place for this is with the viola/violin and cello quaver figures bar 4 onwards – try getting two different sounds from opposite sides of the room. Shake a bunch of keys for a bell sound! The horse sounds at the end are either loved or hated (never anything in between!) so add a final bell shake if preferred.

## *We wish you a merry Christmas*

This is a real performance piece, designed as a fun ending for a concert, or the last ensemble session of the term. It requires patience to 'get the hang of it' and put it all together, but is very effective if performed with confidence and panache. The tune is passed around the instruments, so everyone has to be on their toes. Although I would normally encourage counting of rests as a positive activity, in this case it is almost better to do the entries 'by ear' once the players have sorted out the notes. Lots of opportunities for additional younger players to make a batch of 'sounds' for the improvisations; and with a screen or a whiteboard handy with the words, the audience could join in the shouts.