

Bearing gifts, we traverse afar

Festive entertainment—music, ballet, pantomime—is easy to find at this time of year, but the Christmas opera is a rarer beast, suggests **Henrietta Bredin**



YOU wouldn't need to search for long before finding a perfect Christmas ballet: *The Nutcracker* is an obvious choice, with its opening scene of children decorating a Christmas tree, running about and opening presents, followed by dancing tin soldiers, mice and snowflakes and the Sugar Plum Fairy ruling over the Kingdom of Sweets. A Christmas opera is not quite so easy to find, at least not a family-friendly one. Taking an excited group of children or grandchildren to Hindemith's *The Long Christmas Dinner* could end in tears. Based on Thornton Wilder's one-act play (in turn filched by Orson Welles for a scene in *Citizen Kane*), it traces the history of the Bayard family over 90 years, complete with births, deaths, alcoholism and depression.

‘*The Long Christmas Dinner* is complete with births, deaths, alcoholism and depression’

An opera that was written specifically for children, and for television, is Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. As children in Italy, Menotti and his younger brother would try to stay awake on Christmas Eve, awaiting the arrival of the Three Kings bearing presents. They each had their favourite: Gian Carlo liked King Melchior, whereas his brother preferred King Kaspar,



Danielle de Niese will sing the guardian angel in English National Opera's UK premiere of Jack Heggie's *It's a Wonderful Life*

who he insisted was kind, eccentric and very deaf. In the fullness of time, this interpretation was to make its way into the opera.

It was first broadcast, live, on December 24, 1951, and went on to become traditional Christmas fare in America, almost as much of an institution as a festive-season viewing of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, which had appeared in cinemas in 1946. There is now an operatic version of that, by American composer Jake Heggie, which will receive its UK premiere at English National Opera this December; there shouldn't be a dry eye in the house when a despairing and suicidal George Bailey is convinced by Clarence, his guardian angel, that his life is more than worth living.

Rimsky-Korsakov wrote an opera called *Christmas Eve* based on a short story by

In the Christmas spirit

It's well known that the Three Kings bring with them gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but, in *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, King Kaspar has a box (he never travels without it) with different, possibly more useful, contents—liquorice.

The Sorrows of Young Werther was hugely popular in its day. A rather surprising fan of the story was Frankenstein's monster, described by the author Mary Shelley as empathising with Werther as a fellow sufferer from unrequited love.

Michael Tippett wrote an opera entitled *New Year* and Harrison Birtwistle's *Gawain* opens on New Year's Eve at Camelot, where the merry-making of King Arthur and his friends is interrupted by the arrival of an uninvited guest. A gigantic green knight challenges one of the assembled company to take his axe and strike his head off with a single blow, on condition that he will get the chance to return that blow a year later. Gawain accepts the challenge...

Gogol. It's a thoroughly wild and whimsical work, with a colourful and occasionally confusing plot. There's a mysterious magician who is so lazy that he can't be bothered to feed himself and conjures up a meal of magic dumplings that dip themselves into sour cream and then leap into his mouth under their own volition. There's a capricious heroine who demands a pair of new shoes from her besotted suitor, who ends up flying through the night sky—glorious music for the Dance of the Moon and Stars—to the imperial court in St Petersburg, where the Tsarina graciously takes off her jewelled slippers and gives them to him. There are Ukrainian carols, too, a stirring Cossack polonaise and a joyfully happy ending on Christmas morning.

The second act of *La bohème* is a riot of festivity. The four Bohemians of the title have managed to get out of paying the quarterly rent for their Paris garret, have pooled their meagre resources and headed out to the Café Momus for a blow-out Christmas Eve dinner. They are joined by Mimì, who has only just met and fallen in love with Rodolfo. He is equally besotted, clutches her tiny frozen hand and buys her a pink bonnet, spurning the other offerings from assorted street vendors, who are busily tempting passers-by with roast chestnuts, oranges, nougat and children's toys.

When everyone eventually settles down to eat, they order a lavishly indigestible →



Facing page: *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, an opera written by Gian Carlo Menotti for children and television. Above: *Hansel and Gretel* is regarded as a Christmas opera

meal of turkey, lobster and venison washed down with Rhenish wine. The impossibly capricious, but golden-hearted Musetta improvises an outrageous scene about a painful shoe, packs her elderly admirer off to find a replacement and lands the poor man with the bill and a threatened heart attack.

Three oratorios, each in their different ways, are extremely atmospheric and beautiful and are almost operas: *El Niño* by John Adams, J. S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* and *L'enfance du Christ* by Berlioz. The first is not a current of warm ocean water accompanied by high winds, but a work telling the story of the Nativity and early life of Jesus, weaving together texts from the Bible, the Wakefield mystery plays, Martin Luther and poems by Chilean, Mexican and Nicaraguan poets.

Bach wrote his oratorio in six parts, almost 300 years earlier, in 1734, to be performed in churches on feast days from Christmas Day through to Epiphany. Berlioz depicts the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, but also winds back to episodes depicting Herod's dream about a child that will overthrow him and a charmingly tender lullaby sung by Mary and Joseph over the newborn Christ in the manger at Bethlehem.

One person who would sadly fail to bring the Christmas spirit with him is Werther. The character created by Goethe in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, first published in 1774, became an unlikely role model for those of a Romantic sensibility and started the phenomenon known as Werther-Fever. This infected young men all over Europe, who started dressing in the dishevelled and sombre fashion described in the book and, more disturbingly, provoked the first known cases of copycat suicide.

In Massenet's opera, the curtain rises on a touching scene, in midsummer, of the local magistrate of the German town of Wetzlar starting his preparations early by teaching his youngest children a Christmas carol. They get the hang of it in time for Christmas Eve, but unfortunately by then Werther has fallen in love with their older sister Charlotte (who is engaged to someone else) and, in despair, marks the occasion by shooting himself.

William Makepeace Thackeray considered the story and Werther's unrequited passion to be overblown and hysterical, mocking his effusions as he 'sighed and pined and



Above: The second act of the Puccini opera *La bohème* features a blow-out festive dinner. Below: Rimsky-Korsakov's *Christmas Eve* is blessed with a colourful and confusing plot

‘A mysterious magician conjures up a meal of magic dumplings that leap into his mouth’

ogled’ and rather approving of the pragmatism of Charlotte who, ... having seen his body Borne before her on a shutter, Like a well-conducted person Went on cutting bread and butter.

Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* was first performed on December 23, 1893 and is often regarded as a Christmas opera, although there is nothing innately Christmassy about it—the gingerbread house studded with sweets that tempts the hungry children became associated with the festival after the opera rather than before.

Another fairy-tale opera, seldom performed, but written with a specifically Christmas theme, is Hans Pfitzner's *Das Christ-Elflein*. It started off as a play with incidental music, premiered in Munich in 1906, and was

condemned by the critic Eduard Wahl as being childish, as well as trying to be childlike, sentimental and in thoroughly bad taste. Despite Pfitzner's subsequent efforts, revising the work as an opera, composing more music, turning some of the spoken parts into singing parts, it never became a popular hit.

The little elf or Elflein lives in the forest and wants to know what Christmas means—why do humans ring bells and sing and celebrate? He is puzzled by the human world and, rather like the Little Mermaid, longs to be a part of it. When the Christ Child appears to take the deathly sick young girl Trautchen to heaven, Elflein offers to take her place. He is granted a soul and Trautchen is cured.

Finally, how about joining in the feasting at the end of Benjamin Britten and W. H. Auden's *Paul Bunyan*? Over ham, turkey, mince pies and hot biscuits, the loose ends of the story are neatly tied up by the narrator Johnny Inkslinger:

Dear friends with your leave
This Christmas Eve
I rise to make a pronouncement!

The full cast, complete with Moppet and Poppet the cats, assembles for a joyous chorus and, as they all depart, the voice of that mythical, mysterious figure, Paul Bunyan, the lumberjack as tall as the Empire State Building, can be heard:

Where the night becomes the day,
Where the dream becomes the fact,
I am the eternal guest,
I am Way, I am Act. 🐉

Jake Heggie's 'It's a Wonderful Life' will be performed by the English National Opera on December 3, 7, 9 and 10 (www.eno.org)

