

# SNOWCAROLS

Christmas Music  
by William Ferris



William Ferris Chorale  
Paul French, conductor

**CEDILLE**  
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# SNOWCAROLS

Christmas Music by William Ferris (1937-2000)

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Nancy Bieschke, soprano  
Cecelia Hall, alto  
Garrett Johannsen, tenor  
Dan Rose, tenor  
Jerry Privasky, baritone  
Daniel Peretto, bass*

**William Ferris Chorale**  
**Composer Festival Orchestra**  
Paul French, conductor  
Paul Nicholson, organ

## WILLIAM FERRIS CHORALE

*Soprano*  
Nancy Bieschke  
Stephanie Clarke  
Melissa Dagley  
Michelle Desjardins  
Heidi Jo Fuhst  
Emily Lee  
Laura Langseth  
Karen Nussbaum

*Alto*  
Robin M. Agne  
Mary Atkinson  
Diane Bryks  
Judith Compton  
Dorea Cook  
Cecelia Hall  
Carolyn Kline  
Amy Pickering

*Tenor*  
Michael Beetley  
Jack Cotterell  
Brian Hoffman  
Jerry Jelsema  
Garrett Johannsen  
Dan Rose  
Damien Villeneuve

*Bass*  
Sean Egan  
Robert Heitzinger  
Thomas Orf  
Daniel Peretto  
Jerry Privasky  
Anselm Soyring  
Brent Weiland  
Brad Whaley  
Davin Youngs

## COMPOSER FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA

Janice MacDonald  
*flute*  
Ricardo Castañeda  
*oboe*  
Wagner Campos  
*clarinet*  
Peter Brusen  
*bassoon*  
Greg Flint  
*horn*

Karen Suarez  
*flute horn*  
David Inmon  
*trumpet*  
Matt Lee  
*trumpet*  
Adam Moen  
*trombone*  
Ward Stare  
*trombone*

Bobby Everson  
*timpani*  
Leo Murphy  
*percussion*  
George Blanchet  
*percussion*  
Michael Folker  
*percussion*  
Stephen Hartman  
*harp*

Katherine Hughes  
*violin*  
Lisa Fako  
*violin*  
Ben Wedge  
*viola*  
Jill Kaeding  
*cello*  
Jason Heath  
*bass*

*Producer:* James Ginsburg

*Engineer:* Bill Maylone

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TT: (70:25)

# SNOWCAROLS

Notes by John Vorrasi

I know snowstorms. In my hometown of Rochester, New York, every winter brought at least two or three of what the local weathermen called “The Classic Lake-Effect Snowstorm.” As a child I reveled in snow on snow, drifts as tall as hills, traffic at a standstill, and closed schools. The whole world seemed silent under a blanket of white, punctuated only by the drip-drip of slender icicles.

Such poetic memories from childhood hardly prepared me for the Chicago blizzard of 1979. A great city ground to a halt is not so much fun viewed from an adult vantage point. Streets, alleys, sidewalks, and driveways were utterly impassible for more than a week. The simplest of everyday personal tasks became formidable challenges, compounded by mass disruption of everything — public transportation, waste collection, emergency services, burials — well, everything. Chicago’s Department of Streets and Sanitation just couldn’t keep pace with the relentless accumulation. So much snow had fallen that there was no place to dump it all. As a last resort, the city decided to

pack it into empty railroad cars, sending tons of snow south to delight Floridian children. Here in Chicago, however, there was no delight. Angry citizens blamed Mayor Michael Bilandic for the breakdown of public services. Fair or not, they took their revenge, voting him out of office in favor of Chicago’s first female mayor, Jane Byrne.

A lifelong Chicagoan, William Ferris knew snowstorms too. In 1979, Ferris was chairman of the theory department at the American Conservatory of Music. The hundred-year-old Conservatory was then still quite strict about the number of class hours required of each student to receive credit for coursework. So braving the snow, the dedicated and tenacious Ferris made the long and slow trek to his studio in the Fine Arts Building on Michigan Avenue. Of course, not one student showed up. So to pass the time, he began paging through an old hymnal. Coming upon Gustav Holst’s setting of Christina Rossetti’s “In the bleak midwinter,” he decided to use his newly found “free time” productively by making his own setting of the text. And from this came the genesis of *Snowcarols*.

The William Ferris Chorale traditionally began its subscription series with a Christmas con-

cert. After the first few seasons, Ferris tired of programs filled with twenty or so short works, beautiful though they might be, and wanted to build his program around a more substantial central offering. Much of the music that appealed to him called for large orchestras and choruses, well beyond the ensemble’s early budgets. So he decided to tailor-make cantatas for the Chorale to sing. Three major works for which I had the privilege of providing texts were the result of this practical impulse: *Make We Joy* (1976), *A Song of Light* (1977), and *Snowcarols* (1979–1980).

*Snowcarols* was constructed from the inside outwards, beginning with the unaccompanied carol, written during the winter of 1979, then moving forward and backward throughout the spring of 1980, with orchestrations completed in early fall.

The meaning of the word “carol” is stretched significantly in these quasi-symphonic movements much as “motet” is expanded by Bach’s essays in that form. Ferris’s meditation on snow is singable, listenable, and memorable. A sense of narrative, declamation, and unself-conscious tunefulness creates a world full of variety. Like all of the great carols, he makes an important musical statement in the gentlest and most beguiling of ways.

The orchestration of *Snowcarols*, particularly the last movement, shows Ferris at his most inventive and coloristic. With a liberal use of mallet instruments, kettle drum glissandi, frolicking woodwinds, and tremulando gongs and cymbals, the listener — and performers — come to feel almost actually caught up in a snowstorm.

Stylistically, Ferris’s music is informed by the Gregorian chant and polyphony he sang as a boy chorister, by the formal structures he absorbed as an organist and in his studies with Leo Sowerby, and by his love for the emotional directness of Italian opera. The basis of his music is a lyrical gift for long-lined melody. Even his instrumental works sing with a vocal character.

Conductor Christopher Keene described the Ferris harmonic language as polymodal chromaticism. His harmonies are formed by the confluence of modal lines merging to a pivotal tonal center from which a truly individual style emerges. Rhythmic structure, too, is driven by the melodic or textual material rather than by any desire to employ metric complexities for their own sake.

*Chicago Sun Times* critic Robert Marsh described him this way: “Ferris is a conser-

vative composer in the best sense of the word. His music makes its points easily and well, but he is innovative, imaginative and unafraid to write something that makes an immediate appeal through its pure beauty of sound."

The dedications of the five movements of *Snowcarols* offer an interesting insight into Ferris's thinking:

*to President Jimmy Carter* (Ferris, a lifelong Democrat, was a staunch supporter of the beleaguered Carter);

*to Dr. Joan Ferris* (his sister, in gratitude for her support and encouragement);

*to Dr. Eric Fenby* (the amanuensis of Frederick Delius, one of Ferris's most beloved composers, who was also a guest and friend of the Chorale);

*to my mother on her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday* (Ferris sketched most of this rather melancholy movement sitting at her side in a hospital); and

*to Michel Sullivan* (a boyhood friend and fellow composer).

*Snowcarols* was nominated for the 1980 Pulitzer Prize in music.

Ferris was fond of saying that his first aesthetic experience came as a boy soprano in the Cardinal's Cathedral Choristers of Holy Name Cathedral. The inherent drama of the Catholic liturgies moved him greatly but never more so than at Christmas. It was, above all others, his favorite holy day, so it comes as no surprise that he composed a great deal of music for the feast.

To view these deceptively simple pieces (composed between 1966 and 1998) as merely *gebrauchsmusik* (music for use) does them a disservice, for Ferris crafted each one with the same stylistic integrity he crafted his concert works, the only difference being that these were meant for liturgical use.

Whether his Christmas music waxed melancholy, bittersweet, or triumphant, each work reveals the spirit of a skilled composer who was at his core a man of deep childlike faith.

## TEXTS

### 1 The Lord Said to Me

The Lord said to me: "You are my Son;  
This day I have begotten you."  
Why do the nations rage  
and the people utter folly?

Glory be to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit,  
as it was in the beginning is now and ever  
shall be world without end, Amen.

*Adapted from the text of the Christmas Introit*

### 2 Gentle Mary

Gentle Mary laid her child  
Lowly in a manger;  
There he lay, the undefiled,  
To the world a stranger.

Such a babe in such a place,  
Can he be the Savior?  
Ask the saved of all the race  
Who have found his favor.

Angels sang about his birth,  
Wise men sought and found him,  
Heaven's star shone brightly forth,  
Glory all around him.

Shepherds saw the wondrous sight,  
Heard the angels singing;  
All the plains were lit that night,  
All the hills were ringing.

Gentle Mary laid her child  
Lowly in a manger;  
He is still the undefiled,  
But no more a stranger.

Son of God of humble birth,  
Beautiful the story  
Praise his name in all the earth  
Hail the king of glory. Amen

*Joseph Simpson Cook*

### 3 Lift Up Your Heads, O Mighty Gates

Lift up your heads, O mighty gates;  
Behold the King of glory waits!  
The King of Kings is drawing near;  
The Savior of the world is here.

O blest the land, the city blest,  
Where Christ the ruler is confessed!  
O happy hearts and happy homes  
To whom this King of triumph comes!

Fling wide the portals of your heart;  
Make it a temple set apart  
From earthly use for heav'n's employ,  
Adorned with prayer and love and joy.

Come, Savior, come with us abide;  
Our hearts to you we open wide;  
Your Holy Spirit guide us on,  
Until our glorious goal is won.

*Psalm 24: 7-10*

adapted by Catherine Winkworth

**4 Infant Holy, Infant Lowly**

Infant holy, infant lowly,  
For his bed a cattle stall:  
Oxen lowing, little knowing  
Christ the Child is Lord of all.  
Swiftly winging, angels singing,  
Bells are ringing, tidings bringing:  
Christ the Child is Lord of all.

Flocks were sleeping, shepherds keeping  
Vigil till the morning new;  
Saw the glory, heard the story,  
Tidings of a Gospel true.  
Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow,  
Praises voicing, greet the morrow;  
Christ the Child was born for you!

*Traditional Polish Carol /  
Translated by Edith M. Reed*

**5 O Mary of Graces**

O Mary of Graces, blest Mother of God;  
O lead me in the paths that thine  
own feet have trod;  
As Gabriel came to thy dwelling one day,  
Grant I, too, may hear angel voices, I pray.  
  
The power of God's Holy Spirit filled thee,  
That mother yet maiden thou, Mary, might be;  
May that Holy Spirit within me abide,  
With God e'er before me and Christ by my side.

*Alan Hommerding*

**6 Long is Our Winter**

Long is our winter dark is our night  
O come set us free O saving Light.  
O come dwell among us O saving Light.  
Amen.

*Eleanor Walker*

**7 Hail Mary**

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou among women  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,  
Now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

*Traditional prayer*

**8 Come, Lord, and Tarry Not**

Come, Lord, and tarry not!  
Bring the long-looked-for day!  
O why these years of waiting here,  
These ages of delay?

Come, for your saints still wait  
Daily ascends their sigh;  
The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come!"  
Do you not hear the cry?

Come, for creation groans,  
Impatient of your stay,  
Worn out with these long years of ill,  
These ages of delay?

Come, and make all things new,  
Build up this ruined earth;  
Restore our faded paradise,  
Creation's second birth.

Come, and begin your reign  
Of everlasting peace;  
Come, take the kingdom to yourself,  
Great King of righteousness! Amen.

*Attributed to Horatius Bonar*

**9 Creator of the Stars of Night**

Creator of the stars of night,  
Your people's everlasting light,  
O Christ, Redeemer of us all,  
We pray you hear us when we call.

In sorrow that the ancient curse  
Should doom to death a universe,  
You came, O Savior, to set free  
Your own in glorious liberty.

When this old world drew on toward night,  
You came, but not in splendor bright,  
Not as a monarch, but the Child  
Of Mary blameless Mother mild.

At your great name, O Jesus now  
All knees must bend, all hearts must bow:  
All things on earth with one accord,  
Like those in heav'n shall call you Lord!

Come in your holy might, we pray,  
Redeem us for eternal day;  
Defend us while we dwell below  
From all assaults of our dread foe.

To God, Creator, God the Son,  
And God the Spirit Three-in-One,  
Praise honor might and glory be  
From age to age eternally.

*Conditor Alme Siderum*

**SNOWCAROLS**

**10 I. The snow lies thick upon the earth tonight**  
*for President Jimmy Carter*

The snow lies thick upon the earth  
Tonight, when God is come to birth;  
*O collaudantes Dominum (Let us praise the Lord)*  
Let's run to give him greeting.  
His lodging but a stable, see!  
Where ox and ass his courtiers be,  
The mighty Lord in poverty  
Laid low for our salvation!

I hear sweet Mary sing to rest  
The little one against her breast  
*O collaudantes Dominum (Let us praise the Lord)*  
We'll make sweet music round them;  
For gentle as a breeze in June  
Must be tonight our carol's tune,  
Lest we awake the babe too soon,  
That's born for our salvation.

Good Joseph, may we enter here  
To watch her and her child a-near,  
*O collaudantes Dominum (Let us praise the Lord)*  
And kneel about his cradle?  
The humble beasts that homage pay,  
And we as humble sure as they,  
Would keep still watch to break of day  
O'er him that brings salvation.

But see, but see! The child's awake!  
His pretty hands stretch out to take  
*O collaudantes Dominum (Let us praise the Lord)*  
The simple gifts we bring him;  
Yea, he forgets for every love  
The glory of his home above,  
Nor cares but only this to prove,  
He's come for our salvation.

Then let us great and let us small,  
And young and old, and one and all,  
*O collaudantes Dominum (Let us praise the Lord)*  
With dance and song draw hither!  
Bring boughs of holly green and red  
To deck about his little bed,  
This very God, who lays his head  
So low for our salvation.

*Selwyn Image*

**11 II. The snow lay on the ground**

*for Dr. Joan M. Ferris*

The snow lay on the ground,  
The stars shone bright,  
When Christ our Lord was born  
On Christmas night.  
*Venite adoremus Dominum (Oh come adore him).*

'Twas Mary, virgin pure of holy Anne  
That brought into this world the God made man.  
She laid him in a stall at Bethlehem;  
The ass and oxen shared the roof with him.  
*Venite adoremus Dominum (Oh come adore him).*

Saint Joseph, too, was by  
To tend the child;  
To guard him, and protect His mother mild.  
The angels hovered round, and sung this song:  
*Venite adoremus Dominum (Oh come adore him).*

And thus that manger poor became a throne;  
For he whom Mary bore was God the Son.  
O come, then, let us join the heavenly host,  
To praise the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.  
*Venite adoremus Dominum (Oh come adore him).*  
Amen.

*Traditional Anglo-Irish text*

**12 III. In the bleak mid-winter**

*for Dr. Eric Fenby*

In the bleak midwinter,  
Frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him,  
Nor earth sustain;  
Heaven and earth shall welcome him,  
When he comes to reign;  
In the bleak midwinter, a stable place sufficed,  
The Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Angels and Archangels may have  
gathered there;  
Cherubim and Seraphim thronged the air.  
But his mother only, in her maiden bliss,  
Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.  
Yet what I can I give him,  
give him my heart.

*Christina Rosetti*

**13 IV. See amid the winter snow**

*for my mother on her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday*

See amid the winter's snow  
Born for us on earth below;  
See the tender lamb appears,  
Promised from eternal years.

*Refrain:* Hail, thou ever blessed morn;  
Hail, redemption's happy dawn;  
Sing through all Jerusalem,  
Christ is born in Bethlehem.

Lo, within a manger lies  
He who built the starry skies,  
He who throned in height sublime  
Sits amid the cherubim. *Refrain...*

Say, ye holy shepherds, say  
What your joyful news today,  
Wherefore have ye left your sheep  
On the lonely mountain steep? *Refrain...*

"As we watched at dead of night,  
Lo, we saw a wonderous light,  
Angels singing 'Peace on earth'  
Told us of the Saviour's birth." *Refrain...*

Sacred infant, all divine,  
What a tender love was thine,  
Thus to come from highest bliss  
Down to such a world as this. *Refrain...*

*E. Caswell*

**V. Christmas Eve**  
*for Michael Sullivan*

*Refrain:* Glory to God in the highest heaven;  
And peace on earth to all men of good will.

Down from the starry skies above  
The snow-bright angels came  
Filling the earth so round and wide  
With songs, with songs of praise.  
*Refrain...*

Trumpeting angels singing bright,  
Telling the world this news,  
Now glory lives in Bethlehem,  
Tonight our King is born.  
*Refrain...*

Snowcapped mountains in crystal skies,  
White meadows and white plains,  
Ice-bound streams and cold frozen lakes  
Shout back the song of praise.  
*Refrain...*

Now winter snow that falls so white  
Proclaims the joy again;  
God came to earth on Christmas eve  
So this could be our song.  
*Refrain...*

*John Vorrasi*

## About William Ferris and the William Ferris Chorale

**William Ferris** (1937-2000) was a lifelong champion of contemporary composers. He and the **William Ferris Chorale**, which he founded in 1971 with tenor **John Vorrasi**, have been acclaimed for their concerts of music by Dominick Argento, Samuel Barber, John Corigliano, William Mathias, John McCabe, Gian Carlo Menotti, Steven Paulus, Vincent Persichetti, Ned Rorem, William Schuman, Leo Sowerby, William Walton, and many, many others, often with the composers as honored guests. Under his direction, the Chorale has performed at the Aldeburgh Festival and the Spoleto Festival: USA and given over 160 world, American, and Chicago premieres of important new literature.

A distinguished composer in his own right, Ferris's music was commissioned and premiered by the Chicago and Boston Symphony Orchestras. Among his compositions are two operas, numerous concerti, symphonic and chamber works, hundreds of choral works, and dozens of songs. Northwestern University houses his complete musical archive.

A man of devout faith, Ferris worked for the Church from his early youth, holding positions as Organist/Music Director and Composer in Residence at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Rochester, NY, and most notably at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Chicago. It was his profound belief that music for the liturgy should be of the highest quality and his work is a shining example of that principle.

Ferris's sudden death in May 2000, while conducting a rehearsal of the Verdi *Requiem*, shocked the music community. His was a unique and distinctive voice on the American music scene.



**William Ferris (1937–2000) and the 2007 William Ferris Chorale**



## About Paul French

Composer/conductor Paul French has distinguished himself on the Chicago choral scene. For nearly two decades he has worked in parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Chicago. He was named Music Director at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church in 2001.

French studied composition, conducting, chant, and organ at St. John's University, Northwestern University, the Pontificio Istituto di Musica Sacra in Rome, and privately with William Ferris.

A composer of more than 200 instrumental and choral works, French was appointed Music Director of the William Ferris Chorale in May 2005. This new role for Mr. French exemplifies the concepts guiding the Chorale, as his history with the organization and with William Ferris underscores continuity of purpose and style. His work as a composer marks the continuation of the Chorale's tradition as an active collaboration between composers, conductor, and singers.

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