Extended Program Notes if you are interested in more information on the music we are performing:

Setting the Ambience

O Christmas, Merry Christmas!
Is it really come again,
With its memories and greetings,
With its joy and with its pain?
...As we listen in the starlight
To the "bells across the snow.

But Christmas, happy Christmas,
Sweet herald of good-will,
With holy songs of glory
Brings holy gladness still.
For peace and hope may brighten,
And patient love may glow,
As we listen in the starlight
To the "bells across the snow."

“Carol of the Bells”

The air crackles with anticipation. It's December, and the familiar, enchanting melody of “Carol of the Bells” fills our homes, stores, and hearts.

Our story of Carol of the Bells begins in Kyiv, Ukraine, in December 1916 with a performance of this Ukrainian Christmas Carol-a testament woven with Ukraine's rich musical heritage and enduring spirit. Following World War I, Ukraine was fighting for its independence.

Amidst this struggle in 1919, the Ukrainian National Chorus embarked on a concert tour across Europe to not only share their culture but to garner support for their fledgling nation. Carol of the Bells became a powerful ambassador, captivating audiences with its unique sound.

Today, as Ukraine faces new challenges, the story of “Carol of the Bells” resonates more powerfully than ever. It serves as a poignant reminder of Ukraine's rich cultural heritage, its unwavering spirit, and its enduring connection to the world. Each time we hear those familiar notes, let us remember the song's origin, and the people who continue to fight for their freedom and identity.

When the carol premiered in the United States in 1922 American ears were instantly smitten with the carol becoming a favorite in the American Christmas tradition. Today as we celebrate this holiday season, let “Carol of the Bells” be more than just a festive tune. Let it be a symbol of hope, resilience, and the enduring power of music to connect us across cultures and continents. May the bells of “Carol of the Bells” ring out with a message of peace,unity, and hope for a brighter future for Ukraine and the world.

Hark! How the bells, sweet silver bells All seem to say,
"Throw cares away"Christmas is here, bringing good cheer To young and old, meek and the bold
Ding, dong, ding, dong, that is their song With joyful ring, all caroling..... (Carol of the Bells)

“Jingle Bells”
James Murray wrote Jingle Bells in 1857. We understand that it was originally a Thanksgiving song for a children’s play at his church, but history has made it into a Christmas song. This probably makes sense since we’re more likely to “dash through the snow” in December than November … most years anyway! This arrangement is for a small ensemble of 4 ringers playing 8 bells and a pianist.

“Can You Hear the Christmas Bells?” (Lyrics)
Can You hear the Christmas bells, ringing in the night?
Can you see the Christmas light shining through the darkest night. Can you feel the Christmas joy? Have you heard about that baby boy? Can you hear the Christmas bells?
Can you hear the angel song echo in the night?
Can you see the Christmas star pouring out its golden light? Can you feel the peace on earth? Have you heard about the Holy Birth? Can you hear the Christmas bells?
Ring! Ring! Rng out the good news, joy to the world. Sing, Sing up the good news fill up the night with songs of praises. Glorious now Behold him arise. King and God and sacrifice. Alleluia, Alleluias sound through the earth and sky.
Ring, Ring Ring out the good news, Joy to the world. Sing, Sing Sing up the night with songs. Can you hear the Christmas bells ringing in the night? Can you see the Christmas light shining through the night? Can you feel the Chrstmas joy? Have you heard about the Baby Boy? Can you hear the Christmas bells? Can you hear the Christmas bells?

“Snowfall”
The first flakes of snow began to fall just as twilight painted the sky in hues of lavender and rose, each flake a tiny masterpiece. The world was transformed into a winter wonderland, a scene straight out of a fairy tale.

It was Christmas Eve, and a hush had fallen over the land, a serene silence broken only by the gentle whisper of the wind through the snow-laden branches of the fir trees. A blanket of white transformed the familiar landscape into a breathtaking panorama.

“Breath of Heaven”
Breath of Heaven (Mary's Song) is a tender, prayerful, and reflective modern Christmas classic that tells the nativity story from the intimate, vulnerable perspective of Mary as she travels while heavily pregnant with Jesus.
Core Meaning and Themes:
**Humanizing Mary: Written originally as a general prayer by British songwriter Chris Eaton, the song was adapted when Amy Grant (who was pregnant at the time) collaborated on it for her 1992 holiday album, Home for Christmas. Grant reframed the verses to imagine Mary's real-life fears, weariness, and human doubts on the cold, dark journey to Bethlehem.
**Faith Amid Uncertainty: The lyrics highlight the contrast between the miraculous weight of carrying the Son of God and the raw, isolating reality of being a frightened young girl facing an uncertain future.
**A Universal Prayer: While the verses reflect Mary's specific historic experience, the chorus—"Breath of heaven, hold me together / Be forever near me"—serves as a

timeless, simple prayer for any believer seeking divine strength, grace, and comfort through life's dark or overwhelming moments.

"I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"
You will hear elements of text painting to musically describe Henry W. Longfellow's four stanzas of his 1863 poem "Christmas Bells."

Typical bell patterns are heard in the introduction and later in the transition to verse two. Rolling movement in the melody is heard on the words "rolled along the unbroken song."

Verse three is the most picturesque and dramatic. A minor key and tempo changes are used to portray the despair of the reality that there is no peace on earth. The chord on "hate" is strident and clashingly dissonant. Mockery is depicted with the bass martellatos laughing up the scale on "mocks the song." However, the bells persist in ringing good news, first slowly in a minor carol, then gradually faster and louder as more and more bells peal and toll and join in the joyful affirmation that there is a greater reality, that God will prevail.

The triumphant final verse looks forward to the day when the Prince of Peace will reign and all the tower bells wildly celebrate their joy.

I Heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

I thought, as how the day has come
The belfries of all Christendom,
Had rolled along the broken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men

And in despair, I bowed my head
"There is no peace on earth" I said
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep
"God is not dead, nor doth he sleep.
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail
With peace on earth, good will to men."
Henry W. Longfellow, 1863

"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" (Carol)
Hark! The Herald Angels Sing is the celebration of Jesus Christ's birth. The song imagines humanity joining with the angelic chorus in glorifying and worshipping Christ the newborn king. The lyrics paraphrase the announcement of Jesus' birth found in Luke 2:14.

"Hark!": An old-fashioned command meaning "listen," "pay attention," or "be alert."
"Herald Angels": Messengers who announce important news. In the Christmas story, angels appear to the shepherds to proclaim the birth of Jesus.
"Glory to the newborn King": Giving honor, praise, and majesty to the baby Jesus, who is viewed as the long-promised Messiah and King.
"Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled": The core Christian message that Jesus came to bridge the gap between God and humanity, offering gentle mercy and peace.

"Luminiere"
Lumiere is a piece that needs some explanation and demonstration.

Lumiere means "light" in French.

At the beginning there are two massive chords that are intended to depict Genesis 1:4 "and God separated the light from the darkness." The entire piece is a contrast between light and dark, which are represented by two distinct chords.

The first chord represents the flickering, primordial ray of light.

The second chord represents the chaotic darkness.

They coexist at first, and the swings of the bells bring these two elements in and out of focus, until at last, the light gains the victory.

"Cold December Flies Away"
This setting of the lively tune LO DESEMBRE CONGELAT is just plain fun! Utilizing just 12 bells and piano, *Cold December Flies Away* contrasts the chill and dark of winter with the sudden, radiant warmth of Christ's birth, featuring poetic imagery of a rose blooming in winter and light breaking through the darkness.

Cold December flies away at the rose-red splendor,
April's crowning glory breaks while the whole world wonders,
At the holy unseen pow'r of the tree that bears the flow'r.
On the blessed tree blooms the rose-red flow'r.
On the tree blooms the rose here in love's own garden.
Full and strong in glory.

In the hopeless time of sin shadows deep had fallen.
All the world lay under death. Eyes were closed in sleeping.
But when all seemed lost in sight, came the sun whose golden light
Brings the endless joy of our hope's bright dawning.

Now the bud has come to bloom, and the world awakens.
In the lily's purest flow'r dwells a wondrous fragrance.
And it spreads to all the earth from the moment of its birth;
In the flow'r it lives, and it spreads its heav'nly brightness.
Sweet perfume delightful.

“Riu, Riu Chiu”
Riu Riu Chiu is a sixteenth-century Spanish villancico attributed to the Feast of the Immaculate Conception during Advent. It will add moments of excitement to your listening ear. Malleting, martellato, and tambourine add rhythmic vitality along with the excitement of the driving rhythms and dynamic changes.

“Handel Christmas Medley”
Handel's "Messiah" and his Christmas hymns are combined in a wonderful way! This work includes "Joy to the World" and "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks", plus "For Unto Us a Child is Born" and the "Hallelujah Chorus". It uses bell peals, shakes, and optional chimes and is sure to be a hit for the Christmas season as listeners try to identify their favorite Messiah excerpts!

“Go Tell It”
The spiritual "Go Tell It On the Mountain" is given a jazzy treatment in this uplifting and accessible arrangement. Swinging eighth notes, multiple techniques (including malleted bass lines, ring touch, vibrato, gyro, and martellato), plus the addition of hand chimes add to the fun. How about all this for a fun piece?

“I’ll Be Home With Bells On”
Dolly Parton’s classic Christmas song is upbeat and full of festivity, and ready to celebrate a holiday spirit of togetherness.

"Trim the tree and wrap the presents, turn the Christmas music on, this Christmas I'll be home with bells on."

“Wizards in Winter”
No Christmas concert would be complete without, of course, Wizards! For our final piece we rock out on Wizards in Winter! This high energy song by the Trans Siberian Orchestra has been arranged for handbells – might we say with some of our own enhancements - naturally! Picture a group of wizards celebrating and having a wild time. Imagine them decked out in pointy hats and shimmering robes, throwing the most epic winter solstice bash EVER!

I am sure the piece would be on their party list. Hopefully you have as much fun listening to it as we do playing it! Get ready to be spellbound!

“We Wish You a Merry Christmas”
We wish you a Merry Christmas
We wish you a Merry Christmas
We wish you a Merry Christmas
And a Happy New Year

Good Tidings we bring to you and your kin
Good tidings for Christmas and a Happy New Year.