

Rolling Stone MUSIC

The 25 Greatest Christmas Albums of All Time



24. 'Christmas Joy in Latvia – Latvian Christmas Cantatas' (2012)

If you're looking for actual, traditional Christmas music, you couldn't do better than this rich, fascinating album of carols done by the New York Latvian Concert Choir, which is conducted by 74-year-old Andrejs Jansons. Mixing modern and ancient, Christian and pagan, sung in a clean, distinctly Baltic vocal style, this music powerfully evokes the richly textured, American immigrant experience. "On Christmas Eve" recalls old-time Broadway musicals, while "My Lovely Flax Field," connects to a distant, more exotic past. And if you think Christmas music has lost its sense of religious meaning, "The Word Was Made Flesh" is all you'll need to reset your spiritual clock.

@ <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/the-25-greatest-christmas-albums-of-all-time-20121219/christmas-joy-in-latvia-latvian-christmas-cantatas-2-aa2-19691231>

Father Christmas Comes to Yonkers

The legend behind the most beautiful holiday album you've probably never heard

By **DAVID FELTON**

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During the cold and desolate nights of late December, before light defeats darkness and the sun daughter is reborn, the Northern World keeps warm with crazy stories.

A jolly geezer delivers toys to the earth's children, at least the good ones. Winged creatures descend from the sky and terrify shepherds, 2,000 years before Spielberg. An angel earns his wings by saving a bankrupt businessman from suicide. Macy's shakes hands with Gimbels.

And Latvian-Americans in the greater New York area believe that every year a white-haired old man comes to Yonkers and magically transforms ordinary families with ordinary voices into a choir of angels who sing enchanted Christmas music never before heard on the planet. Unbelievable? Wait till you hear the music. So far the New York Latvian Concert Choir, created and conducted by 74-year-old Andrejs

Jansons, has recorded five holiday albums, one of which, *Christmas Joy in Latvia* on Albany Records, is the most exquisitely beautiful Christmas album I have ever heard.

And I've heard quite a few. I'm something of a Christmas music nut. A few years ago I sent a yuletide greeting to friends that listed my favorite Christmas albums, culled from six-and-a-half days of music on my "holiday" iPod. I included Sufjan Stevens' fabulous homegrown box set, *Songs for Christmas* on Asthmatic Kitty (his new Christmas box set, *Silver & Gold*, has just come out), Sir Thomas Beecham's massively indulgent *Messiah* on RCA, and my favorite carol album of all time – *The Christmas Album* with the Royal Philharmonic and Ambrosian Singers on Intersound, a toasty collection oozing with the sweet nog of Jesus' first supper.

But that was before I discovered *Christmas Joy in Latvia: Latvian Christmas Cantatas* and was blown away by its mystical visions of bleak countryside and pagan winter rituals, written by contemporary Latvian composers I'd never heard of. On track seven, "My Lovely Flax Field," a clarion, rustic-voiced soprano sang a melody of such haunting beauty that to this day I can't get it out of my brain. And later, near the end of the cantata "Our Lord's Nativity," there was this 142-second section of unworldly choral drones that struck me like a musical epiphany.

Obviously the album had me hooked. I even read the album notes. Turns out Andrejs Jansons and his Latvian choir hang out in Yonkers, rehearsing and performing at the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church there. His phone number was listed on their website, and when I called it, he invited me to a rehearsal. They would be working on a new cantata for their annual Advent concert on December 2nd. Apparently cantatas are their thing. "When we started the choir there was only one cantata," said Andrejs. "We had to commission the others." Since 1975 the choir has commissioned 43 new holiday cantatas from leading composers in Latvia, a major contribution to Latvian music.

And so it came to pass in the city of Yonkers on a Sunday in September that Andrejs Jansons, white tufts sprouting from the side of his head like George Washington on the dollar bill, but with glasses, directed his choir to take its mid-morning coffee break shortly after I arrived. As we all chatted over bagels and doughnuts in the church kitchen, I began to realize this was more than a choir, it was a community – the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Latvian refugees who came to the United States to escape Soviet occupation after World War II. More amazing, this was a choir of families. The group had performed at Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall and major concert halls in America and Europe, and they were all amateurs – *relatives*.

In the kitchen I met 14-year-old Aija Zamura, her 17-year-old sister Krista, her mother, associate conductor Laura Padegs Zamura, her grandmother, Gita Padegs, and Laura's uncle, Andris Padegs. Each Sunday these families drive to Yonkers, some for two and a half hours, from Connecticut, New Jersey, Brooklyn and Long Island, and rehearse for half a day. "I've been singing these folk songs all my life," said Aija, whose grandfather, the late Juris Padegs, helped start the choir. The family thing was his idea.

After the rehearsal, Andrejs and I sat down for an interview, joined by the Zamura family and Sandra Bayer, the choir's president. I asked about Christmas traditions in Latvia and learned they were primarily pagan, just like in America. The Latvian word for Christmas, "Ziemassvetki" (pronounced ZIEM-es-VAT-kee), literally means "winter fest" and originally referred to pre-Christian celebrations of the winter

solstice. "The traditional dinner for the common folk is pig snout and beans and peas" said Andrejs, and Sandra added, "You have to eat the whole bowl of peas, otherwise you'll have bad luck in the new year. As many peas left, that's how many tears will fall in the new year."

These traditions pop up throughout *Christmas Joy in Latvia*, with stanzas like "*There will be beans and peas/And a pig's snout too*," "*Children, come and welcome/The fine horses of Christmas*," and a personal favorite, "*I felt shame yesterday/I'll feel shame tomorrow/Tis only on Christmas Eve/That I feel no shame*," plus untranslatable exclamations like "*Kaladu, kaladu*," and "*Totari, totari*."

It may be the pagan/Christian mix that gives this album its exotic sound. As soon as you enter "My Lovely Flax Field" by Ugis Praulins, you know you're in another musical country. There's that breathtaking soprano voice – it belongs to Laila Liepina of New Jersey – crying out in a wilderness of pulsating strings, harp, glockenspiel and soft choral echoes. Is that a Latvian voice? "Well, I think the lack of vibrato, the direct sound, the very clean sound – that's very Latvian," said Laura Zamura. "It's actually a Baltic sound."

Every track on *Christmas Joy in Latvia* holds a surprise. The first cantata, "On Christmas Eve," opens like a Broadway musical. Track 12, "Gentle Lamb of God" is easily the catchiest tune on the album. Finally, with "Our Lord's Nativity" by Rihards Dubra, the music ascends to the heavens. Or rather, the heavens descend to the earth in a moment of spiritual terror 2,000 years ago.

"This composer, he sings in a group of monks," said Andrejs of Dubra. "He's very religious, he doesn't use folklore, it's all very Christian." The text, in Latin rather than Latvian, comes mostly from the Gospel of Luke. But the music comes from outer space. You can almost see the star-filled sky and desolate fields below, setting the stage for the Spielberg revelation, "There Were Shepherds," in which an angel appears and stuns the shepherds with good news of great joy and all that. Suddenly a huge army of angels fills the sky and sings, "Glory to God in the Highest" like a scene from *Close Encounters*. But that's not the scariest part.

The next song, "The Word Was Made Flesh," comes not from Luke but the Gospel of John, and it stirred up an old fear. As a boy I was brought up as a High Episcopalian, lots of ritual and incense – they call it "bells and smells." The Mass always ended with "the Last Gospel," the beginning of John 1, one of the most hypnotic and poetic passages from the King James Bible. It's like Elizabethan rap: "*In the beginning was the Word/And the Word was with God/And the Word was God/The same was in the beginning with God . . .*"

Anyway, the priest would rattle off the Last Gospel in a robotic voice, and when he got to "*And the Word was made flesh*" – this is what scared me – the whole congregation would go down on one knee. *Whump!* Now I probably didn't dig what was being said, I was usually more high than Episcopalian, but when 150 people hit the deck at the same time with the same thud, you know some awful truth has filled the room.

And awe is what I felt when I heard the passage on the album, sung softly by the choir, in a melody as gentle and comforting as a lullaby: "*And the Word was made flesh/And dwelt among us/And we beheld his glory/The glory as of the only begotten of the Father/Full of grace and truth.*"

And then with the last syllable of the Latin word for truth, "veritatis," the choir holds the note, G above middle C, for the next 142 seconds. Meanwhile horns and winds slowly build a celestial ambiance in G

major, as other voices sing "alleluia" and hold the last syllable on C3, then D4 and finally E2 – an open chord of drones that grows in power and spaciousness like a great dawning.

"It's like the dawning of awe – I don't know how to describe it," I stammered to Andrejs and the others. "Like the beginning of comprehension."

"Enlightenment," suggested Sandra.

That's it, enlightenment. If enlightenment has a sound, that is the sound. It's the sound of minds being blown. Then with a huge, boisterous anthem of "Allelulia," the cantata, and the album, comes to a sumptuous end. Christ is born and the sun begins its year-long journey.

In Yonkers, our interview had come to an end. Sandra gave me a book, *Voices Across the Sea*, a history of the choir. Laura offered me a lift to the train station. And outside the church, Andrejs Jansons pulled a helmet over his white hair and mounted a bicycle for the ride home. And I thought to myself, what a rich life this man has lived, creating new music, keeping the spirit alive for his fellow exiles, and every Christmas giving voice to whole families of herald angels. "I can't complain," he told me later. "I've had a successful career as an oboist and a conductor. And I still very much feel strongly about being a Latvian." Plus, at 74, he still commutes on a bicycle.

On the 1 train back to Manhattan, I plugged earphones into my iPhone and listened to "My Lovely Flax Field." And through the subway window of my mind, on that blue-sky Sunday afternoon, I could see Father Christmas pedaling across the George Washington Bridge from Yonkers to his home in Fort Lee, New Jersey.

A few days later, Andrejs sent me a test pressing of the choir's latest Christmas CD, *Latvian Winterfest* on Albany, and oh holy night, it might be as good or even better than the last one. I mean, it's not as adventurous or mystical as *Christmas Joy in Latvia*, but boy does it have tons of beautiful tunes. And there's one song, "Light the Torch" by Valts Puce, that melody-wise gives "My Lovely Flax Field" a run for its money. Kaladu, kaladu!

@ <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/father-christmas-comes-to-nyonkers-20121219>

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