

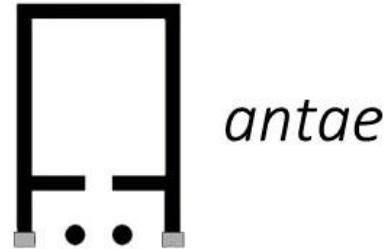
The Medicinal Qualities of Snow

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The Medicinal Qualities of Snow

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I think I had a touch of swine flu the other week. Just a touch, you understand—not the whole hog. Even so, my limbs felt as heavy as Parsifal without the attendant mythic vision, my voice descended to sepulchral realms un-trod even by Russian basses, and a backing cough sent my ageing body into the kind of spasms that used to kill Romantic poets and Puccini heroines on a weekly basis. To make matters worse, I am not even joking. It became even more catastrophic when I felt haunted by the pressing need to ‘read, think, and write’, for I was scheduled to submit a paper to *antae: A Postgraduate Journal on the Interspaces of English Studies* in just a few days.

At one point I was seriously thinking of asking a colleague to stand in for me—after all, if that is what happens at *La Scala*, why should it not happen on campus? When the leading lady (or any other singer, for that matter) is taken ill the understudy pretends to be very concerned about the mishap and leaps at the opportunity, stepping in and soldiering on with messianic purpose. That is what happened on the opening night of the season at *La Scala* three years ago, and the role did not just ask for the understudy to write a paper, without undermining the efforts that go into that exercise of course, but to sing the role of Elsa in Wagner’s *Lohengrin*. Realising the absurdity of my condition in comparison to the ill-fated soprano, I suddenly felt better, mentally and psychologically if not physically.

So, I live to tell the tale. What medicine did I take to cure me of my malaise? But let me start at the beginning, it has always been a very good place to start, as we know. The beginning is the chill factor....

The Chill Factor

I caught a chill, a bad one to boot. Suddenly feeling physically very ill, physically very old and physically perfectly useless, my mind went into chaotic overdrive. My stomach felt like fifty badly-tuned violins, to invert Dickens’s simile. I thought of all possible strategies that could alleviate the misery I was in. Everything came to my mind, except the most direct and simple route, namely, consult a doctor or, infinitely more sensibly, have a doctor visit me. I have many doctor friends, excellent people, but the impulse is to run a mile when I badly need one. I am, quite simply, afraid; afraid of a knowledge I do not share, afraid of the earnestness doctors invariably transmit, and quite petrified of their delicious interest in illnesses and maladies of all sorts—something I have not yet managed to understand. So, within the context of an irrational fear, reading P.G. Wodehouse was a more enticing alternative, but no sooner did I engage with the impossible pranks of Wooster and the equally impossible sensibility of Jeeves than I got into such paroxysms of laughter that I thought I would cease to be without remotely

feeling the regrets of a potentially teeming brain. In fact, there was no brain at all. Metaphorically speaking, I was quite brain-dead. In this case, certainly, laughter was not on the cards. It definitely did not live up to its reputation of being the best medicine. Rather, it almost killed me, literally. Before I knew it, I was in stitches and this without visiting a doctor.

So, as befits the reputation of a mild lunatic, I disconnected myself from my immediate surroundings and dreamt. I heard music in my mental ear, and my heart responded, immediately, as it is wont to do. Paris. Christmas Eve: and *La bohème*'s Mimí and Rodolfo are occupying themselves with trying to keep warm in their wind-beaten garret. However, Mimí's tiny hands are frozen, and the Bohemians' flat is so cold that they resort to burning manuscripts for warmth. Despite this, the musical temperature in the opening of Puccini's opera is surprisingly very hot. The composer knows that the impression of warm camaraderie must triumph over the source of everyone's discomfort, and so, he is less interested in Mimí's frozen digits than in the flame waiting to spark in Rodolfo. It is a paradox that Schubert might have recognised. In the course of the reluctant traveller's journey from May-time love to wintry despair in his song cycle *Die Winterreise*, again set on Christmas Eve, Schubert ransacks his musical vocabulary to illustrate Müller's poetry—a gusty accompaniment for 'Die Wetterfahne' ('The Weather Vane') here, the fastidious staccato drip of frozen tears of 'Gefrorene Tränen' there. Yet, the song with the biggest wind-chill factor is the last one, 'Der Leiermann', where Schubert is neither evoking howling blasts, nor icy blizzards. Over a droning bass, a simple 'pianissimo' right hand etches the hurdy-gurdy man's affecting melody. In its pauses the traveller numbly asks "what next?" It seems that cold is a state of mind as well as a marking on the thermometer, and, down the centuries, composers have become adept at nailing both.

'Winter is icumen in', writes Ezra Pound; 'Llude sing Goddam'. Benjamin Britten's boys' choir in *Ceremony of Carols* certainly sings loudly at the climax of 'In Freezing Winter Night', a setting with frost on its breath as the pinched intervals of the vocal writing are assailed by the unremitting flurries of harp dissonance. Dissonance is a useful ally for any composer in search of frozen vistas. It is almost obligatory. In the Estonian Veljo Tormis's choral cycle for women's voices, *Winter Patterns*, spiky rhythms echoing the lacerating harmonies fuel a 'Blizzard' that eventually surrenders to a magical evocation of the Northern Lights. Perhaps it helps to be Estonian; or Finnish, for that matter. Jean Sibelius, Finland's national composer, certainly knew a thing or two about desolate wastes and frozen landscapes at Christmas time. Quite literally, they go with the territory.

Two English composers, meanwhile, have planted a musical flag at the other Pole. In Vaughan Williams' case, the catalyst is the film *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) for which he composed a score eventually destined to fertilise the larger concerns of his *Sinfonia Antartica*. When Maxwell Davies was commissioned to write an update fifty years on, he found himself strapped to the mast, Turner-like, and experienced at first-hand the extraordinary intensity of the light which seems to pulse from within ancient green and blue icebergs and leap in eye-piercing shards from the endless expanses of snow and ice.

This is not how they did things in the Baroque. By attaching the lines of four sonnets at strategic moments to *The Four Seasons*, Vivaldi provides an easily identifiable checklist of

programmatic possibilities. In ‘Winter’, the last in the cycle, the harmonies huddle against shivering string figuration at the beginning, a slithery violin solo later teeters over the ice, and to whooshing downward scales the protagonist falls. This is effective but not over-sophisticated even in its own time. Twenty years Vivaldi’s senior (and sadly much less long-lived, having died at the age of just 32), England’s Henry Purcell had adjusted his thermostat using much subtler means. In *The Fairy Queen* (which, along with his *Dido and Aeneas*, is Purcell’s magnum opus in the realm of opera, setting Spenser’s epic to music), an eloquent tortured melisma on the word “cruel” lingers over the line ‘when a cruel long winter has frozen the earth’ and the bass is forced to pull on mittens to insulate himself from the chill of “Now winter comes slowly”. Composed perhaps a year before, the opera *King Arthur*—another Purcell collaboration, this time with Dryden—devotes a whole masque to a stand-off between Cupid and the Cold Genius, the latter introduced by notation that urges him to get in touch with his inner Tom Waits.

Leaping forward a few centuries, and a few thousand feet up, Richard Strauss’s *Alpine Symphony* clambers mountainous heights with its almost photographic reproduction of glaciers, storm and chilly wind on Christmas morning. In a letter to Nietzsche, Strauss insists that “for once I wanted to compose as naturally as a cow gives milk”. Judging by the result, the yield, as it were, must have been well above the EU average, consisting of twenty-two continuous sections and performed by a massive orchestra. However, other twentieth-century frozen sound-scapes, despite the presence of generous forces, seek musical truth with conspicuous restraint, and, as in Schubert’s ‘Der Leiermann’, the cold registered by the thermometer is but a sideshow to the real chill within. In Prokofiev’s ‘The Battle on the Ice’ (the fifth movement of his cantata *Alexander Nevsky*), as the title implies, a destiny-changing historical moment will result in a huge loss of life. This is the stuff of Sophoclean tragedy, where Prokofiev’s carefully-wrought picture signals the hushed but troubled upbeat to carnage. By coincidence, Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 11, entitled *The Year 1905* (marking the first Russian Revolution of the century) was a popular success at its premiere, although Western critics pressed charges of ‘film music’. Like ‘The Battle on the Ice’, the opening establishing shots locate more than a physical sense of wintry space (here inhabited by peaceful protesters outside the Winter Palace two days before the Orthodox Christmas). Marked *Adagio*, with muted strings, elemental fifths, bare harp low in its register, the ambience is menacing, conjuring up biting sounds of a world far removed from the tinselly sleigh-bell joy promised by either Mozart or Delius.

So, there was I, aurally travelling across icy Europe, sublimating my chill into wonderfully warm sound-scape. In a woolly state of mind, I thought that, whether nostalgic, heart-warming, or even profoundly disturbing, cold is also a musical state of mind for all seasons, but the contrast cannot be more glaring when the freezing conditions outside mirror a system immune to warmth on the inside at Christmas time. This brings me to the spirit, as opposed to the ghost, of Christmas (past, present and future), to the all-time Christmas writer, Charles Dickens, whom Chesterton sums up as follows: “Dickens rescued Christmas not because it was historic, but because it was human”.

The Spirit of Christmas

So, what was the history of Christmas when Dickens transformed it, and how does song come into it? It was a very long and ancient one, to be sure, and not particularly Christian. All the celebrations and rituals surrounding Saturnalia, part of the festival centred round the Winter Solstice, belong to the Mediterranean and to the Near East: they were deeply embedded in the pagan culture which the Christian faith sought to replace. Sensibly, however, the early Church, rather than abolishing these traditions, allied itself to them. In the 4th century A.D., it was decided to hitch the celebration of Christ's birth—hitherto observed on the sixth of January—to the ancient Saturnalia, a development formally endorsed two centuries later by that unique master of spin, aka Pope Gregory the Great, who was mindful of the advantages of allying the tiresomely tenacious old customs to the new theology. From that point on, right through the Norman Conquest in England and into the late fourteenth century, the pagan nature of the Festival was scarcely concealed, and with the Reformation, and the parallel rise of Puritanism, a conviction arose in certain quarters that because of this, Christmas should be suppressed. The Puritans denounced Christ-Masse (a term coined by the Anglo-Saxons in the eleventh century) as 'Saturn's Masse'—and they aimed two hits against it: it was both pagan (Saturn) and Catholic (the Mass). Even before the Puritans began their agitation, however, the plaintive note of the decline of the real Christmas, and the need to return to its true traditions, can be heard. This sense that Christmas represents an ancient dispensation which is somehow threatened is an insistent theme in writings about Christmas at least from the sixteenth century. From then to the present time, Christmas has been a sort of fabulous invalid, always seeming to be at death's door, yet always pulling round in time for the party.

There is an ever-present element of nostalgia for a vanished age which seems an essential part of the very idea of Christmas. However, by the nineteenth century, we find that Dickens's relationship to Christmas has nothing to do with re-inventing traditions and practices. For Dickens, Christmas is a living tradition, providing a unique and indispensable service for the living. His contribution is to the meaning of Christmas and he makes this contribution by the sheer force of his imagination and the inspiring quality of song.

Before the Victorians came along, it seems that Christmas hymns were a somewhat dull, snow-less affair. It could so easily have been Harvest, the favoured festival obsessively rehearsed and endlessly recycled by Thomas Hardy in his novels. Those grumpy Santas could have been irascible John Barleycorns; their Elves, Pixies. It did not have to be Christmas. Even Charles Dickens was in two minds about it at the beginning of his career. In 1836, his libretto which, in collaboration with fledgling composer John Pyke Hullah, eventually became the two-act burlesque opera *The Village Coquettes*, opened in mid-December. Bit of a hint there, you might think, but Dickens seems to miss it completely. "Hail to the merry Harvest time", carols the chorus, at both ends of the opera. A generation before Dickens, Christmas had to do with selling children expensive things they did not need, and dreaming of warmer climates. *Hook's Original Christmas Box: Bagatelles for Juvenile Amusement* was a blockbuster in the late 1790s. Jane Austen copied some of James Hook's arrangements into her music book, where we also find 'A Portuguese Hymn for the Nativity'. The opening words there are 'Adeste fideles'. The tune, of course, is *O come, all ye faithful*. It was not clear to Dickens that Christmas was the future

until 1843, when he published *A Christmas Carol*, with staves instead of chapters, perhaps symbolising the redemptive power of song. In *The Pickwick Papers*, the novel whose success swept away his little opera, Dickens had written a famous Christmas scene complete with a Christmas carol, but it aches with the unattainable past. “Many of the hearts that throbbed so gaily then, have ceased to beat”, wrote the twenty-four-year-old novelist. The only relief there is the sight of a skating Mr Pickwick. Sir Walter Scott’s epic poem *Marmion*, published in 1808, also speaks of Christmas as lost in the past: “Still linger, in our Northern clime,/Some remnants of the good old time”.

Harvest, on the other hand, was nothing if not topical. The Corn Laws of 1815 were not repealed until 1846, during the Hungry Forties, as they are well chronicled, and although the Vicar of Morwenstow, Robert Hawker, is said to have invented Harvest Festival in 1843, another West Country clergyman, Thomas Bartlett, Rector of Swanage, had already composed a special harvest hymn in 1830. Harvest was ripe, as it were. It could also tell a story.

However, Christmas won hands down, and it was the music that helped. Towards the end of the century, the Rector of Lew Trenchard in Devon, the Reverend polymath Sabine Baring-Gould, wrote in his Preface for *Carols for Use in Church*: “Christmas has held its place in the affections of the people from the use of carols at it”. His book, like the *Oxford Book of Carols* a generation later, tried to introduce carols for Harvest, but it just did not work for no-one wanted to sing them. Thomas Bartlett, too, turned away from harvest, and his favourite genre became the Acrostic Christmas Carol.

Those of us who wonder what tune the little boy sang through Scrooge’s keyhole (‘God rest ye merry, gentleman’) may consult Edward Rimbault’s *Little Book of Christmas Carols* of 1846, which gives two tunes, namely, an ‘Ancient Version, as sung in Cornwall’, and an ‘Ancient Version, as sung in the streets of London’, which is like the *God rest ye* we know. Thanks to such publications, by the time Victoria had been on the throne for ten years, carols were making a comeback in the cities, along with new family-enhancing traditions encouraged by Prince Albert. Christmas trees with a distinct look of the Black Forest were everywhere, and Father Christmas was wearing red and giving presents to children as early as 1842. However, the real breakthrough in Christmas music came straight from the reindeer’s mouth—Finland.

Thomas Helmore was Choirmaster of Chapel Royal, John Mason Neale a pillar of the Oxford Movement. Together, they produced books of hymns and chants for use in Church. In 1852, the British Ambassador to Stockholm presented Neale with a curiosity, a copy of a sacred songbook published in the Finnish city of Turku in 1582, two hundred and fifty years earlier. Helmore and Neale got to work on this treasure trove, one harmonising, the other translating. However, when they got to the Spring song *Tempus adest floridum*, all about flowers, Neale had a subversive brainwave. ‘Good King Wenceslas looked out’, he scribbled. Forget translation; like Milton’s Paradise, all had to get lost in order for it to be regained. Neale had just unlocked the key to the future dominance of Christmas. ‘The snow lay round about’, he went on, inspired, ‘Deep and crisp and even’. The excellent tune could take its place in *Carols for Christmas-tide*, published in 1853.

The huge importance of *Good King Wenceslas* lies in the fact that Neale had associated Christmas-song with snow, with the chill factor. No-one had done that before. The Yuletide wassails and carols, even the Christmas songs from Finland, make no mention of snow. In *God rest ye merry, gentlemen*, shepherds battle through 'tempest, storm and wind', but snow is not specifically on the menu. In *The First Nowell*, it is the cold winter's night that was so deep, not the snow. The only meteorological reference in *The Shepherds went their hasty way*, a carol by Coleridge, is to 'a summer's morn', although admittedly in a simile.

Neale's snow was reasonable snow in wintry Bohemia. However, in no time at all, poets saw possibilities for Christmas snow in more temperate climes. 'See amid the winter's snow', marvels Edward Caswall in 1858, writing of Bethlehem. By 1860, William Morris was pointing out the 'milk-white snow' in one of his carols, *Masters in this Hall*, and following it up with another one, *Snow in the Street*. Selwyn Image wrote *The Snow lays thick* for Christmas, while his Epiphany carol *Kings in Glory* reports: 'The wolves howl around them, and bitter the air/That blows o'er the snowfield all frozen and bare'. Most famous of all, Christina Rossetti, who also wrote the lyrics for *In the bleak mid-winter*, exposed herself to the ridicule of a million people who simply do not get poetry when, in 1872, she wrote: 'Snow had fallen, snow on snow,/Snow on snow'.

Those who misunderstand this mesmeric poetic device, those who are immune to the power and resonance of incantation, like those who naively roar out 'No!' after the first rhetorical question of Blake's *Jerusalem* ('And did those feet in ancient time/Walk upon England's mountains green?') are awful warnings against being too literal and not being sensitised to poetry and, by extension, to music and beauty. 'Philosophy would clip an angel's wings', Lycius tells Appolonius in *Lamia*. Yes, it occasionally snows in Bethlehem. Well, perhaps it does not necessarily snow at Christmas time, but we want to believe it snows on Christmas night in Bethlehem. Also, Caesar Augustus might have called his census in midsummer, for all we know. Do we really care? What kind of truth matters here—that which details precise facts or one that is mythical and, therefore, iconic? What poet wants facts in the Hardgrind fashion when the alternative is a dream? It was the relic of Augustus' Roman Empire, the Western Church, stretching a good way further north than the Holy Land, which decided in the fourth century that cold dark days were a good excuse for a party, and hijacked the pagan feast that marked the resurrection of the sun with a re-interpretation of that event, now meaning the birth of the Son.

The poets knew all that. Snow! Irresistible! The more unfamiliar, the more desired. Snow had an advantage that golden sheaves of corn could never cap. Like the quality of mercy, it came down to earth from heaven (to borrow a phrase from *Once in Royal David's City*), how silently, how silently, we sing in *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, how democratically beautifying all it touched, fair or foul. And, let us not forget Darwin.

The book that brought us *Good King Wenceslas* happened to be dedicated to the Lord Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, now mainly remembered for his role in the Darwinian debate in the University Museum in 1860. Wilberforce's apocryphal throwaway joke at Darwin advocate Huxley's expense ("Is it your grandfather's or your grandmother's side that you claim descent from a monkey?") has obscured his scientific credentials—he was a Fellow of the

Royal Society—and has hidden the fact that in the University Sermon the very next day, Frederick Temple, later Archbishop of Canterbury, welcomed the insights of evolution. Religious thought was willing to come to terms with new discoveries. However, to do so, it would need new ways to express itself, new metaphors and new tropes. It needed snow.

It is no accident that this unfeasible efflorescence of musical blizzards coincides with the Darwinian debate. If science were concerned with facts, religion allies itself to miracles, a bit like poetry here. In this scenario, the Victorians found a snowy bridge between them. Only song could convey these new meanings of Christmas snow: people were not reading out Dickens in the churches. Prose was too prosaic, poetry unsupported by music perhaps too individual and inaccessible. The familiar yet fundamentally irrational and mildly hysterical human act of singing together was the perfect medium. Irrationality is important in matters of the spirit: look at the idea of carols by candlelight, for instance, which could only become truly symbolic once electricity had made the candles pointless.

The very mirage of a white Christmas became a new way of thinking about miracles, allowing snow to become the outward sign of an inward grace—a secular sacrament, if I may be allowed the oxymoron. Snow imagined, snow longed for, snow on snow, makes space for a Christmas Miracle, and sometimes, miracles occur. So, let it snow, if only symbolically, and let us allow song to burst open our hearts to welcome the warmth that eases the chill out of our systems and makes us feel good to be alive. We could say that Christmas works so miraculously on the nervous system of a Scrooge, any Scrooge, precisely because he has been seized with a perfect convulsion of hospitality, bursting into song and de-Scrooging himself at the sight of snow on Christmas morning. We hope no Scrooge is ever cured of these convulsions!

All the time I have been writing this piece I have been sneezing and coughing my way virtually out of existence, without feeling remotely refined, to borrow a phrase from Joyce. That said, I cannot say that I don't feel much better. I may not have experienced snow directly, but writing about it has certainly been therapeutic.