



THE LABEL FOR CLASSICAL ARTISTS

## AMERICAN RECORD GUIDE NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2010

### **Christmas Spirit**

DANSON: A Christmas Carol—A Dickens of a Tale; 16 other Christmas Selections

Mainstreet Brass

MSR 1325—68 minutes

The Mainstreet Brass was formed in 1986 and this new Christmas Spirit recording is their second album on the MSR label. Every year, a number of new Holiday brass recordings are released, and while it's nice to hear fresh interpretations of old classic arrangements, it's even more enjoyable to hear exciting new arrangements of standard carols. For the most part, that is what we have here. Except for Richard Price's arrangements of 'Once in Royal David's City' and the 'Wexford Carol'—both played with caring sensitivity—the rest of this music is new to me. The Mainstreet Brass has had a long-standing relationship with composer-arranger Alan Danson, and a number of his pieces are represented here. In a brilliant arrangement of 'Joy to the World', Danson pays tribute to the high baroque music of George Frideric Handel with bustling rhythmic lines, flourishing piccolo trumpets, and stately timpani interjections. His arrangement of Gustav Holst's setting of 'In the Bleak Midwinter' is peaceful and calm and beautifully played. There are a number of light pieces too. Vince Guaraldi's famous 'Linus and Lucy' and 'Christmas Time is Here'—from the children's special A Charlie Brown Christmas—are accompanied by a brushed drum set in stylish arrangements by Kevin Long and Zachary Smith. Other pieces that children might enjoy include jazzy readings of 'Frosty the Snowman' and 'Rudolph and Santa'. There is also a nice suite called A Little Christmas Medley arranged by Jonathan Smith. It starts with a somber 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel', followed by a Renaissance-like 'Rejoice and Be Merry', and ends with a hokey '12 Days of Christmas' that uses every percussion instrument but the kitchen sink while paying tribute to composers like Bizet and Fucik. The central work on this recording is the narrated reading of Charles Dickens's Christmas Carol by composer Alan Danson. Danson's musical narrative is a perfect complement to the famous Dickens tale. The English carol 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' is the basis of the entire piece, and fragments of the tune are artfully woven into the music. Haunting and eerie moods set the stage for a night before Christmas where three ghostly apparitions visit Ebenezer Scrooge to show him the error of his ways. Danson's reading is excellent—his natural English accent makes it that much better. This kind of piece is what makes a new recording of Christmas music so special. The Mainstreet Brass is fine group, and though they are not at the highest level, it doesn't really matter. What does matter is that they've taken care to play to their abilities and present a wonderful selection of festive Christmas arrangements that will make even the stingiest of Scrooges crack a smile.

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