

Wondrous Love is a collection of timeless Celtic and Appalachian hymns - old, haunting melodies that have slipped through many sets of lyrics, some for more than a thousand years, endlessly recreated by each new generation. Local artist **Caroline Bowles** is one of the current generation who reinterprets these hymns.

One of the songs dates back to the 4th century and is attributed to St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland. Another is drawn from the ancient *Liturgy of St. James* set to a 17th century French folk tune. Her clear soprano vocals are accompanied by a variety of acoustic instruments, including guitar, cello, oboe, piano, violin, dulcimer, even bagpipes.

Body, Mind & Soul quarterly review

Spring 2001

Houston, Texas

Celtic Christian Tunes

Wondrous Love, 2000 Radio Angel Music:

It's always refreshing to hear recordings hit the scene from "new talent", especially in a genre as relatively narrow as Celtic Christian. **Caroline Bowles'** *Wondrous Love* and *Christmas Carols* are two such recordings. Bowles, who has for several years led worship at contemporary services at St. John the Divine Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas, has selected several folk hymns that are important parts of Christian musical heritage, and updated them to appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of modern audiences. Musically, these recordings combine elements of new age music with more subtle folk and Celtic influences.

From the bagpipe-emulating electric guitar work of "My Shepherd" to the real shuttle pipes of "Amazing Grace", to the clear Celtic flavor of "Wondrous Love's" cello accompaniment, this album contains several Celtic punctuation points among a sea of mellow contemporary music. It is all tied together, however, with the haunting percussion work of Ray Dillard, which I consider to be one of this recording's most distinctive elements. As an example, "I Will Arise" is a sweet ethereal piece whose tonal instrumentation is limited to cello and flute, but its impressive percussion keeps it moving along. Though reminiscent of Michael Card's adaptation of this old hymn, Caroline's is more mellow and less melodramatic.

Also impressive is Karen Leslie Birch's fresh oboe treatment in "St. Patrick's Hymn". The oboe is joined by a pleasing hammered dulcimer arrangement; I haven't heard this familiar hymn quite this way before.

--**Cory C. Engel, CelticChristianTunes.com** - August 2001

Christmas Carols, 2000 Radio Angel Music:

Despite its deceptively plain title, this album is anything but ordinary. These tracks gain a new personality on this disc, thanks largely to the arrangement and conducting of Paul English, who also contributed his keyboarding and production skills to the project. The orchestration adds a certain richness to these familiar sacred hymns.

Celtic influences in this album are somewhat more subtle than in *Wondrous Love*, but nonetheless clear in the Highland pipes of "Away in a Manger" and "In the Bleak Midwinter". Continuity of this style is maintained by harp and flute emphases in several songs.

Music selection is important when considering holiday music purchases, so I've taken the liberty of listing the tracks below:

O Come, O Come Emmanuel
Of the Father's Love Begotten
Creator of the Stars of Night
Lo, How a Rose e'er Blooming
What Child is This?
Huron Carol
A Stable Lamp is Lighted
Away in a Manger
When Jesus Left His Father's Throne
Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence
In the Bleak Midwinter
O Little Town of Bethlehem
Silent Night

I really enjoyed these choices of songs; they seem to flow somehow, unlike the smattering of tunes often heard on Christmas CDs. Like "Wondrous Love", this album is representative of the continuity of a strong Christian musical heritage from ancient times to the present. While the lyrics and music of most of these tunes were composed in the 19th century, some lyrics date back to the 4th century, with music composed in the 11th century.

I encourage you to listen to clips from these recordings at Radio Angel. Both are available at Barnes & Noble Booksellers, Borders Books & Music Café, and Body Mind & Soul Books, Inc. CDs and cassettes may also be purchased on line at Radio Angel.

--Cory C. Engel, CelticChristianTunes.com - August 2001

Lively Arts

This CD is a real find. **Caroline Bowles** brings a warmth and freshness to this eclectic collection of Christmas and traditional melodies

Why have I not heard of Caroline before? She is an original talent. Her voice has a rare and entrancing combination of achingly pure tone and sensual warmth. She's always sincere but never earnest.

Bowles clearly takes pleasure in broad musical palette. Celtic, folk and gospel influences echo though the album. Enya-like resonances meet the haunting simplicity of the Voix Bulgares. There's a lively musical intelligence at work here.

David Pearl - Lively Arts, London - January 2001

Lively Arts
Aberdeen Studios
22 Highbury Grove
London N5 2EA

SVPworld

Wondrous Love is a collection of inspirational hymns performed in a unique blend of Celtic, baroque and new age styles. The album combines relaxing warm vocal performances accompanied by some of the most beautiful keyboard and acoustic musical arrangements I have heard for a long time. Also reviewed from Radio Angel Records is Christmas Carols, a soothing musical seascape of acoustic and electronic instruments for truly seasonal late night listening and relaxation.

Wondrous Love:

The album opens with a beautiful symphonic blend of strings, keyboard and classical guitar, a sea of warmth on which Caroline floats with her pure and clear vocal performance of "Gentlest Savior". Almost immediately I was captivated by the relaxing warmth from both Caroline's voice and the music. A mellow backdrop of piano, deep strings and keyboard orchestration provide a somewhat haunting but relaxing mood to the second track, "Lover of my Soul". In an expressive arrangement of "Were you there", Bowles begins to sing unaccompanied with a crispness and purity that kept me gripped to every word. A beautiful ambient silence embellishes each word, as a delicate classic guitar and cello accompaniment slowly unfolds. The track manages to maintain a wondrous atmospheric sensibility throughout, open and slightly haunting, yet warm, incredibly relaxing and totally beautiful. Moving through the album we find an intriguing arrangement of "My Shepherd", combining distant thick sustained overdriven guitar textures overlaid with a deep sequence of pounding tom drums. Caroline's voice is contrasted her again, seated high over the wash of rich underlying texture and projecting a strong but still pure and warm performance. An Irish flute solo introduces "I will arise", arranged with a distinctive rhythm composed of deep drum, congas and some wonderful almost Arabic like percussion. The vocal performance flows seamlessly throughout each verse, capturing a wonderful sense of the underlying rhythms.

More baroque-like orchestration and subtle Celtic percussion lines unfold in "St Patrick's hymn", where the lead vocal is further enriched by some pleasant backing harmonies towards the end of the track. The eighth track on this ten track album, "Wondrous Love" combines a chillingly rich cello solo line to accompany Bowles's warm and expressive vocals. The music does drop out midway for a few measures, allowing the sheer presence of Caroline's voice to stand front stage and then finishes with an expressive sweet violin solo. The soft percussion is picked up once more in the penultimate track, together with expressive and open string orchestrations, acoustic guitars and dulcimer, slowly unfolding with an almost oriental feel.

The album finishes off with a traditional arrangement of "Amazing Grace", complete with highland bagpipes. Caroline's warm deliverance of each verse is accompanied by open tabla percussion, deep pipe drones, subtle acoustic guitar and rich cello. A beautiful instrumental solo picks up the melody midway, followed by a change in key as a warm atmospheric soundtrack accompanies the final verses.

In conclusion, Wondrous Love is simply that, a wondrous collection of inspirational hymns performed in a unique blend of Celtic, baroque and new age styles. The album combines relaxing warm vocal performances accompanied by some of the most beautiful keyboard and acoustic musical arrangements I have heard for a long time. Even if hymn albums aren't necessarily your thing, the captivating musical beauty of this album is enough to warrant adding it to any collection.

- **Simon Williams, SVPworld** - July 2001

Christmas Carols:

When I embarked upon reviewing this CD in July, I wondered just how I could begin to review a Christmas album in mid summer! How wrong I was, this CD is just so appealing right from the start. From the opening rich, warm synthesizers textures and dreamy new age backdrop of acoustic sounds, I couldn't help but feel myself dissolve into relaxation with this album. Caroline's voice has a certain warmth and comfort which makes her music so easy listening, especially for late nights and relaxation. The album has a beautiful classical new-age feel, combining the sweet natural beauty of strings, Steinway piano and acoustic guitar with beautiful dreamy keyboard textures and soft exotic percussion sounds. Don't expect any up-tempo pop beats or ballads here; this is expressive heart warming music. Modern arrangements of centuries old hymns such as "Lo, How a Rose e'er Blooming" and "Huron Carol" combine sweet but warming vocal performances from Caroline with classical string sounds, delicate percussion, warm synthesizer textures and expressive acoustic guitar. A deeply expressive arrangement of "Away in a manger" contrasts bold highland bagpipes with soft harp, velvety strings and sensual vocals. Track 10 pushes forward the dreamy new age style once more, as soft cello lines, occasional haunting percussion and warm evocative synthesizer textures take the listener on a heavenly journey. The highland pipes are reintroduced in track 11, this time in chorus to accompany Caroline's outstanding performance of "In the bleak midwinter". The remainder of the album "O little town of Bethlehem" and "Silent Night" are again warm and sensible performances, featuring a Celtic harp backing and subtle strings. Combining vocal purity and sensual warmth with a soothing musical seascape of acoustic and electronic instruments, "Christmas Carols" goes top of my list as seasonal late night listening and relaxation.

- ***Simon Williams, SVPworld*** - July 2001