



SACRED JOY

ESTHER RAYO, soprano
PETER GRÜNBERG, piano



Esther Rayo, soprano; Peter Grünberg, piano

Sacred Joy Celebration and Live Recording

1. Traditional	Adeste fideles - O Come, All Ye Faithful	1:53
2. Traditional	Away in a Manger	2:05
3. Michael Praetorius (157–1621)	Es ist ein Ros entsprungen – Lo, How a Rose	1:37
4. Franz Xaver Gruber (1787–1863)	Stille Nacht – Silent Night	1:32
5. Adolphe Adam (1803–1856)	Cantique de Noël – O Holy Night	3:34
6. J. S. Bach (1685–1750) arr. Charles Gounod (1818–1893)	Méditation sur le 1er Prélude de J.S. Bach – Ave Maria	2:37
7. J. S. Bach	Fugue No.1, BWV 846	2:31
8. Franz Schubert (1797–1828)	Ellens Gesang III – Ave Maria, D.839	4:33
9. Traditional	Puerto Rican El santo niño	2:00
10. Traditional Mexican	El rorro	1:26
11. Traditional Spanish Carol	A la nanita nana	1:48
12. Irving Berlin (1888–1989)	White Christmas	2:47

Total playing time 28:32

Traditions Across Continents



Sacred Joy is a live concert recording capturing an evening at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, California, in which soprano Esther Rayo and pianist Peter Grünberg presented a programme of carols both familiar and unfamiliar, including Latin and Iberian combined with German and American tradition.

For Rayo, this repertoire is more than a programme, it's a homecoming. She grew up singing in church, and that early experience of carols as lived joy shapes every phrase. *Sacred Joy* takes Rayo's church foundation and broadens it, weaving in the Latin American heritage that runs through her artistry, so that the evening becomes as much a personal statement as a seasonal one. That same instinct carries through to the recital's closing surprise: The trio of Spanish language Christmas carols and her reading of *White Christmas*, delivered with an unaffected, tender simplicity and naturalness rarely heard from a highly trained classical voice. This rousing finale to the album, following her deeply joyful expression of more traditional Christmas carols, underlines why this is more than just another holiday collection.

The concert opens with *Adeste fideles / O Come, All Ye Faithful*, before Praetorius's seventeenth century *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen / Lo, How a Rose* gives way to the evening's segue into the Spanish Language with the translation of Silent Night, shifting the programme beautifully towards the Latin American repertoire. Gruber's *Stille Nacht / Silent Night* and Adam's *Cantique de Noël / O Holy Night* follow in the grand nineteenth-century manner that made both carols so enduring, with Rayo resisting the temptation toward easy grandeur, instead colouring each phrase with restraint that makes the climaxes, when they arrive, beautifully genuine.

At the centre of the programme sits a detour into Bach-Gounod's *Méditation*, better known as *Ave Maria*, threaded over the First Prelude's familiar



arpeggios, followed by the Fugue that completes it, with Peter Grünberg given a moment alone at the keyboard before Schubert's own *Ave Maria* returns the focus to voice. It is a quietly thoughtful piece of programming, allowing centuries of music to be enjoyed before the recital takes a somewhat magical turn to the south and west.

The Puerto Rican *El santo niño / The Holy Child*, the Mexican lullaby *El rorro / The Baby Christ Child*, and the Spanish *A la nanita nana / Lullaby-Lullaby* is repertoire close to Rayo's own artistic identity, sung with the unforced intimacy of music swallowed whole rather than merely studied. Irving Berlin's *White Christmas* closes the programme. A secular carol given the same hushed sincerity as everything before it, it is a fitting final gesture in an evening built on the idea that the sacred takes many forms.

This recording arrives a year after Esther Rayo and Peter Grünberg's acclaimed *Estrellita* (Divine Art, 2025), a collection of Spanish and Latin American song that received deserved applause from critics. *Gramophone* praised Rayo's "warm, sweet tone and silky-smooth legato," while *Textura* singled out the "warmth, lustre, and smoothness" of her voice and the authority of her interpretations. *Sacred Joy* extends that partnership into devotional territory, and the rapport built over years of collaboration, nurtured through LIEDER ALIVE! under Founder/Director Maxine Bernstein, is audible throughout.

This project also reflects LIEDER ALIVE!'s mission to invest in the future of vocal chamber music by producing high-calibre recordings that preserve and elevate the legacy of Lieder performance. With Esther Rayo's luminous voice and Peter Grünberg's distinguished pianism, the resulting album serves as both an artistic milestone and an invitation for broader audiences to connect with the spiritual and emotional resonance of this repertoire. Through this recording, LIEDER ALIVE! aims to share a profound moment of musical connection and to continue fostering the kind of deep artistic relationships that lie at the heart of the organization's work.







Soprano **Esther Rayo** is most recognized for her passionate expression of Classical Spanish Repertoire, though her artistry spans Opera, Baroque, Oratorio, Sacred Music, and Art Song. A dedicated and versatile performer, she has been featured in performances with Circa1600, Sonoma Bach, and as a soloist with the Stanford Symphony Orchestra. Ms. Rayo made her Herbst Theatre debut representing Lieder Alive! at InterMusic SF's Music Day and is celebrated for her collaborations with *LaMusArt*, supporting underserved Latino youth in East Los Angeles.

Ms. Rayo earned her Bachelor of Arts in Vocal Performance from Sonoma State University, studying under David Burnakus and Ruth Ann Swenson, and her Master of Music in Vocal Performance from DePaul University, where she debuted the title role in *Suor Angelica* to critical acclaim. She made her European debut at Teatro della Fortuna in Fano, Italy, singing Puccini's *Tosca* and Mimi in *La Bohème*.

Esther has received numerous awards and scholarships, including honors from the Jarvis Conservatory, NATS Vocal Competitions (Redwood Empire, San Francisco Bay Area), East Bay Opera League, DePaul University Kleinman Competition, San Miguel Institute of Bel Canto, and *Musica nelle Marche* in Italy.

Following the critical success of her debut album *Estrellita* — also with the masterful pianist Peter Grünberg, Ms. Rayo's recent and upcoming engagements include the San Francisco International Piano Festival, a return to San Francisco Music Day representing Lieder Alive! at Herbst Theatre, a Spanish language concert at Mission Dolores San Francisco, her recital debut at Rossmoor, Walnut Creek and an appearance as featured soloist in Fanny Mendelssohn's *Hero und Leander* with Sonoma County Philharmonic. Upcoming in 2027 Esther will be performing Schubert, Granados, Turina, Lieberson *Neruda Songs* and Puccini with Peter Grünberg for Lieder Alive!







Sydney-born musician **Peter Grünberg** has led a multifaceted career that spans several countries. For fifteen seasons, he was Musical Assistant to Michael Tilson Thomas at the San Francisco Symphony. During that time he worked on several Grammy-winning recordings, honed the performances of the SFS Chorus and many visiting soloists, and gave hundreds of pre-concert lectures. His performances as a piano soloist with the Symphony have often featured American music, from Gershwin and Copland to Ives and Adams.

He was appointed head coach at the Grand Théâtre de Genève at age 21. A few years later, as a result of preparing the first Australian performances of Berg's *Lulu*, he was appointed Resident Conductor with the Sydney Symphony. In the 1990's, he held the position of head of music staff at San Francisco Opera. During that period he conducted at Moscow Conservatory and at the Grand Théâtre de Genève, and led the San Francisco Symphony in a concert of opera excerpts. He performed at the festivals of Aix-en-Provence, Salzburg, and also at Tanglewood with Frederica von Stade and the flutist Matthieu Dufour.

He has a long history of presenting and performing song recitals, having collaborated with such artists as Tatiana Troyanos, Deborah Voigt, Laura Claycomb and Quinn Kelsey. Instrumental chamber music is also close to Mr. Grünberg's heart: He has performed Beethoven and Mozart in Japan with members of the Vienna Philharmonic; with Peter Henderson at Sun Valley Summer Symphony he performed John Adams's two-piano extravaganza *Hallelujah Junction*. With the New Century Chamber Orchestra he recently arranged music from Berlin in the 1930's for a performance with Thomas Hampson and Daniel Hope.

Peter retains a connection with both the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and the San Francisco Opera, and is currently developing future collaborations with other young artist programs around the world. Grünberg continues to maintain an active life as a recitalist and chamber musician.





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Recorded live at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, California on December 20, 2025.

Engineered and mastered by Matt Carr

Esther Rayo photography by Kristin Cofer

Artwork by James Cardell-Oliver

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A superb collection of sensuous classical Spanish language songs for voice and piano, from the sublime musical partnership of lyric soprano Esther Rayo and renowned pianist and conductor Peter Grünberg. This program of works was first heard in a series of concerts given by the San Francisco based teaching and performance organization LIEDER ALIVE!

The songs are by early 20th century composers: Fernando Obradors, Manuel de Falla, Enrique Granados, Alberto Ginastera, Xavier Montsalvatge, Consuelo Velázquez and Manuel Ponce. Drawing from Spanish classical poetry and regional folk melodies, these vibrant song cycles offer appeal to art song aficionados and first-time listeners alike.

Gramophone

"Rayo's warm, sweet tone and silky-smooth legato is especially successful in tender, lyrical songs... while in faster songs...she dances nimbly through the syncopated rhythms. ... a joy throughout... surprisingly affecting." —Andrew Farach-Colton

Mundoclasico

"Esther Rayo invites you to this experience, as unforeseen as it is captivating, and she does it with the infinite warmth and sweetness of her timbre. Peter Grünberg, with a very well articulated interpretation and sober in its exquisiteness, greatly delights listening.... Rayo and Grünberg offer dazzling performances here." —Juan Carlos Tellechea