



**THE FRENCH CONNECTION**  
WRINGTON TWINNING ASSOCIATION  
The John Locke Room, Silver Street, Wrington BS40 5QE

**NEWSLETTER November 2021**  
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*Star Christmas Tree* by Tom Yendell, a Christmas card from Mouth and Foot Painting Artists

Welcome to your December newsletter. Please find all the December dates for your diary. For those of you with some free time over the festive season to spend on YouTube, there is an article from Tony on French music. There is some information about Christmas in Villeneuve les Béziers, and an article about the differences between French and English Christmas, in preparation for our chat with VLB on 6 December. Finally, a provocation: **subs are overdue!** See below for a more detailed encouragement to pay.

Subscriptions were due on October 1st. At the time of writing, less than half of our members have paid their subscription. Your subs are an important part of our economy, as well as a signal of commitment from our members. Last year no subs were charged, even though activities did continue online. Next year the subs will be raised to £10, so why not enjoy as much as possible of this year at the current rate of £5 per person, £10 per couple/family? Could you be persuaded to pay even as you are reading this? To facilitate this immediacy, the bank details are: A/C Wrington Twinning Association Bank: Santander Sort Code 09-01-27 Account No. 88663595. Or send a cheque made out to Wrington Twinning Association to: The Treasurer, c/o The John Locke Room, Silver Street, Wrington BS40 5QE

**The season of good cheer** approaches, and we reflect on the contrast between Christmas in France and Christmas on this sceptred isle. It's all about timing. I'm afraid that, compared with the elegance of the French festive season, ours seems greedy, flabby, forward and an anti-climax when it finally appears at the end of a three-month shopping season. The French prefer a perfectly coutured celebration, for which shopping does not begin before Advent, and the celebrations themselves begin on December 24<sup>th</sup> and end on December 25<sup>th</sup>, to make way for *Bonne Année*.

*Le Calendrier d'Avent* is enjoyed, as here, but probably not as a pre-Christmas choco-fest. Letters to *Père Noël* are legally bound to receive a reply, in the form of a postcard, which keeps children happy and postmen busy, and presumably involves additional *entente cordiale* with the authorities in Lapland. The Christmas *crèche* (crib) is a very important part of the Christmas visual landscape, and can be elaborate, involving all sorts of cameos and extras as well as the usual *dramatis personae*. Another great difference from English tradition is that the *crèche* remains in place until February 2<sup>nd</sup>, *Chandeleur*, or Candlemas.

French children leave their shoes by the fire for *Père Noël*, not their stockings, and they don't leave snacks out for him, confident that any self-respecting bringer of toys and gifts through the snowy night will have had the foresight to pack a picnic. I've been unable to ascertain whether *Père Noël* receives a legally required thank you note. He is no longer, due to changes in parenting guidelines, accompanied by his alter ego, the spanking *Père Fouettard*. In a good cop/bad cop double act, PF would spank the children who had been naughty, who, having atoned for their sins, could then receive a present from PN.

When it comes to the feast itself, here the French are a little impatient, beginning their Christmas dinner at midnight on Christmas Eve, so as to begin the heaven of Christmas Day at the very first moment of its birth. *Le Réveillon de Noël* involves very similar food to our own, with some additional luxuries: roast turkey with chestnuts, roast goose, oysters, foie gras, lobster, venison and cheeses (*sans Stilton*). The table is beautifully laid with three candles, symbolizing the Trinity. Christmas pudding is not a tradition in France. Instead they might have *bûche de Noël*, or chocolate log. In Provence there is a tradition that 13 different desserts are eaten, symbolizing Jesus and the 12 disciples, which makes Christmas pudding, even with brandy butter, seem restrained.

Increasingly, the French are conforming more to our own tradition of eating their Christmas meal on Christmas Day, for the sake of convenience and digestion. They don't reach out for our menu, however. English mince pies, of course, were traditionally a meat pie, with spices, apple and raisins, the only remnant of which is now the suet which goes into the mincemeat. Turkey is not traditional here, that is an adoption from the American feast of Thanksgiving. It depends how far back you want to go, but beef, especially spiced beef, is probably the oldest Christmas meat in our tradition, varied in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by goose and duck.

The French don't celebrate Boxing Day, but in some regions there is a public holiday for St Stephen's Day on 26<sup>th</sup>.

Our twelve days of Christmas are outdated now, probably exhausted by the 120 days of shopping that precede the event. We let Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, pass unregarded, and most Christmas decorations have been returned to the loft in advance of Twelfth Night. France celebrates Epiphany with a *Galette des Rois*, in which a small porcelain token (or choking hazard) is hidden. If it turns up in your mouthful, *Vivat Rex/Regina*, you are king (or queen) for the day.

*The differences between our two countries' celebrations will be the subject of our next Zoom conversation with Villeneuve les Béziers on December 6<sup>th</sup> at 6pm. It should be fun! See you there.*  
Lindsey Shaw-Miller

## **A Brief History of French Music**

French music history goes back to the 12th century, when plainsong evolved with composers such as Léonin and Pérotin founding the School of Notre Dame, developing an early polyphonic music that might claim to have been the origin of modern choral music. A little later there developed a style of lyrical folk music practised by the travelling troubadours.

There were a number of French Baroque composers, including Jean-Baptiste Lully and Jean-Philippe Rameau, both of whom brought opera as a form of music to France, developing it from the Italian operatic style of Monteverdi and others.

A giant of French early 19<sup>th</sup> century music was Hector Berlioz, who composed 3 operas, a requiem, and 4 symphonies, the most unique and extravagant of which is the *Symphonie Fantastique*. His style was grand and expansive, often requiring large orchestras—and he was very particular about how the orchestra was composed and arranged—and massive choirs, as in his *Grande Messe des Morts*.

Another well-remembered composer of 19<sup>th</sup> century orchestral music was Camille Saint-Saëns, one of whose best-remembered works today is his *Carnival of the Animals*, a humorous suite of fourteen movements devoted to different members of the animal world. The highlights of French classical music in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were perhaps the operas composed by Bizet, Gounod, Massenet and others. Operatic styles were evolving and had to be compared with works of the Italian and German masters such as Verdi and Wagner. Bizet's wonderful *Carmen* is said to be the most performed opera ever. Another great French operatic composer was Offenbach, some of whose music shares characteristics with his contemporaries Johann Strauss and England's Gilbert and Sullivan.

Closer to the end of the century came Claude Debussy, a composer who formed a bridge between 19<sup>th</sup>-century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century music. He is often called an 'impressionist' composer, and his use of the whole-tone scale was hugely influential.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Maurice Ravel and Gabriel Fauré were regarded as France's greatest living composers. Later came Francis Poulenc, who composed songs, piano works, chamber and choral music, operas, ballets and orchestral music, and Olivier Messiaen, who was the organist at Ste Trinité in Paris for the whole of his life, where he improvised and composed music for organ and orchestra. All four were deeply influenced by Debussy. The conductor and avant-garde composer Pierre Boulez also championed Debussy's work throughout his career.

Turning to more popular music, France has long been associated with jazz. In the early post-war years, the jazz cellars of Paris were where one went to listen to traditional jazz. One of the best-known French jazz musicians was Django Reinhardt, a guitarist and composer of gypsy origins who was one of Europe's first major jazz talents. With violinist Stéphane Grappelli he formed the Paris-based **Hot Club de France**.

In the 1950s and '60s France produced several performers of the popular songs that became known worldwide, each with their own distinctive style, for example Maurice Chevalier, Jean Sablon, Charles Aznavour, Yves Montand, Charles Trenet and the unique Edith Piaf. The pianist and composer Jacques Loussier studied classical music, and turned to arranging and

playing jazz interpretations of the works of Bach. He founded the *Jacques Loussier Trio*, which played more than 3,000 concerts and sold more than 7 million recordings.

Another extremely popular French performer, whose reputation did not spread abroad, was Georges Brassens, who composed his own, usually irreverent songs, and accompanied them beautifully on his guitar. His work was to some extent a satirical look at modern society. He originated in Sète, a small town close to VLB, where the primary school is named after him.

Finally, we must mention Didier Lockwood, who owed his family name to a Scottish grandfather who emigrated to Calais. Lockwood was a violin virtuoso whose musical interests spanned the worlds of jazz, classical music, opera, progressive rock and folk music from around the globe. He became known for his use of electric amplification and experimentation with different sounds on the electric violin.

For those who are interested, much of this wonderful French music is easily available on YouTube.

*Anthony Hancock*

## **News from France**

Lionel Messi has won football's Ballon D'Or for the seventh time.

France is still trying to persuade us to do the decent, compassionate thing and open a proper immigration route for people trying to cross the channel and find a better life in the UK, rather than let them drown while the people-traffickers still pick up their life savings.

Minister for Overseas Territories Sebastien Lecornu is in the Carribean, trying to restore calm among those residents of Guadeloupe and Martinique who have noticed that their populations are significantly underfunded compared with those of France. They are also keen to point out, with quite violent demonstrations, that compulsory vaccinations do not go down well in the more laid-back Carribean. An impetus towards greater autonomy for these Carribean remnants of empire may be on the horizon ...

The second-hand bookstalls that have lined the Seine in Paris for 450 years have fallen on slack times during the pandemic and the consequent loss of tourism. The City of Paris is so worried about this loss of *bouquinistes* that it has launched a special appeal for new blood to take on some of the empty spaces. The stalls are not only a tourist attraction, they are regarded as an essential lifeblood of the city, and their presence has led to the Seine being dubbed as the only river to run between two bookshelves.

In spite of Brexit, some wonderful Anglophile French people are still living in the UK.

## **Noël à VLB**

A full suite of Christmas festivities is available in VLB. There are illuminations 4–23 December, a Christmas market, concerts, and a grand parade on 23 December. It looks charming, exciting, and well-organized. There are also competitions, already under way, to be judged on December 15<sup>th</sup>, for the most beautiful Christmas tree, best illuminations, best drawing of Père Noël and most beautiful crib assemblage. ('holy village').

DU 4 AU 23 DÉCEMBRE

# NOËL

À VILLENEUVE-LÈS-BÉZIERS



ILLUMINATIONS - ANIMATIONS  
MARCHÉ - CONCERT - PARADE



## Conversations with our friends in VLB

There was no conversation in November, but please join us on **6 December at 6pm** for a fun chat about Christmas. The mood is very convivial and both French and English are spoken with a wide range of competence. The conversation lasts about an hour. If you would like to join in, please contact Jane Finn ([jane finn20@hotmail.com](mailto:jane finn20@hotmail.com)). The universal Zoom invitation and links are given below.

## French Conversation in Langford and on Zoom

*The Langford inn is a delightful venue for a cup of tea or coffee and a chat in French. This month we are celebrating with a Christmas lunch for those who attend regularly, and we welcome those with an interest in attending next year. If you would like to come to Christmas lunch on December 16<sup>th</sup>, please let Margaret Hancock ([hancock.divonne@gmail.com](mailto:hancock.divonne@gmail.com)) know by December 9<sup>th</sup> to secure your booking. You would be most welcome!*

10 December	5pm	Zoom
16 December	12.30	Langford Inn, Christmas lunch

*If you would like to attend the Zoom meetings, just drop Margaret Hancock a line ([hancock.divonne@gmail.com](mailto:hancock.divonne@gmail.com)). It is a recurring meeting, so the universal protocols apply (see below).*

## Cinéphiles de Wrington

The next meeting will be on **7<sup>th</sup> December at 5pm**, on Zoom, when we shall discuss *Le Havre* (2011), written and directed by the Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki (available on Amazon to rent or buy). He envisaged it as the first in a trilogy of films set in port cities. It is about a shoe-shine man who tries to save a young immigrant boy, so there are contemporary resonances. It stars André Wilms, Kati Outinen, Jean-Pierre Darroussin and Blondin Miguel. It was Kaurismäki's second French-language film and won the FIPRESKI price at Cannes in 2011. He has subsequently made only one other port-set film, in Helsinki, *The Other Side of Hope*. The discussion will be led by John Adams. Please use the universal joining instructions below.

Going forwards into 2022, our next films, all available on Amazon to rent or buy, will be:

4 January	<i>L'Intouchables</i>
1 February	<i>Deux Jours, Une Nuit</i>
1 March	<i>Etre et Avoir</i>

***Please note the universal log-in for all French Connection and Wrington Twinning Association Zoom meetings, whether committee, conversation or Cinéphiles:***

The French Connection & Wrington Twinning Association is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: The French Connection Universal Invite! Use for ALL TFC groups : -) Time: This is a recurring meeting Meet anytime.

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://zoom.us/j/4933115546?pwd=bmhLSnZrSkIPRHZhRjhQaFFNczJHZz09>

Meeting ID: 493 311 5546

Passcode: 610359

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203 901 7895 United Kingdom +44 208 080 6591 United Kingdom

Meeting ID: 493 311 5546

Passcode: 610359

Find your local number: <https://zoom.us/u/azUkSh7IX>

## Recipe of the month

If you are a small gathering this Christmas, even just two of you, I would strongly recommend Elizabeth David's **L'Estouffat de Boeuf** as an alternative to over-priced Christmas poultry. It is a traditional Gascon dish eaten at Christmas Eve, simple but luxurious, and no trouble at all— emblematic of her style. She recommends that it is best cooked in an oval, earthenware casserole, but I'm sure enamelled cast iron would work very well. I have halved the quantities she suggests, so if you do have a larger party but still want to make this dish, just double up.

**L'Estouffat de Boeuf** (From *French Country Cooking* by Elizabeth David)



3/4 lb fresh rind of pork (or a pig's foot)

4 shallots

1 large onion cut into four

1 or 2 carrots

3 lb topside of beef in one piece tied into a sausage shape

1 claret glass of Armagnac or brandy

¼ bottle 'sound red wine'

Fresh herbs as you can find: rosemary, thyme, parsley

You can make this dish the day before, and then reheat it gently, or leave it to cook all day and eat it in the evening.

Put the pork rind or pig's foot at the bottom of the casserole.

Season the outside of the beef and place on top of the pork.

Arrange the vegetables and herbs all around and pour over the Armagnac or brandy.

Warm the red wine to blood heat and pour over the beef. It should just cover the meat.

Cover the casserole with greaseproof paper so that it is completely sealed and put on the lid.

Cook it over a slow fire for 1.5 hours, then leave it in a very slow oven for the rest of the day.

An hour before serving, take it out and leave to cool sufficiently that the fat may be skimmed off the top. If making a day in advance, this is very much easier as the fat will be solid.

Reheat gently and serve with pieces of the pork rind cut up and served with slices of the beef.

For the vegans and vegetarians among us, I suggest another classic, the **Crank's Nut Roast**, the best recipe for this delicious dish (in spite of the cliché) that I have found.

**Crank's Nut Roast** (from *The Cranks Recipe Book*, 1982, reprinted 1993)



1 medium-sized onion

1oz/25g butter or margarine

8oz/225g any combination mixed nuts: peanuts, cashews, walnuts, hazels, brazils, almonds

4oz/115g wholemeal bread

½ pt/300ml vegetable stock (Marigold is a good powdered one)

2 tsp/10ml yeast extract (Marmite is fine)

1tsp/5ml mixed herbs

Salt and pepper to taste

Extra onion rings for garnish, if liked.

Oven: 180 degrees/gas 4

Chop the onions and sauté in the butter/margarine until transparent.

Grind the nuts and bread together in a liquidizer or coffee grinder until fine.

Heat the stock and yeast extract to boiling point.

Combine all the ingredients and mix well, the mixture should be quite slack.

Turn into a greased, shallow baking dish and level the surface.

Sprinkle with a few breadcrumbs and bake at 180 degrees (mark 4) until golden (30–40 minutes).



Garnish with fried onion rings, if you like.

With roasted potatoes and an array of fresh vegetables, I think this is a fine and tasty dish on its own, but there are endless variations. A few examples:

1. Substitute some of the nuts with chestnuts, softened in a little milk and chopped.
2. Top with a combination of yoghurt, grated carrot and cheese towards the end of cooking, say the last ten minutes.
3. Serve with a fresh tomato sauce.
4. Top with some crumbled blue cheese for the last ten minutes of cooking.
5. Make a tomato layer by putting half the mixture into the dish, laying two large, sliced tomatoes on this and about 2oz/55g grated cheese, then cover with the remaining half of the mixture. Bake as usual. This is especially good cold.

### Wine of the Month

**Champagne** is the go-to wine for Christmas morning, and I'm not going to argue with that. However, I would put in a word for an alternative, that is not the over-worked and frequently underwhelming Prosecco. My recommendation is Crémant, probably from the Loire, although there is also very good Alsatian Crémant out there. Two suggestions would be:

**Gratien and Meyer Brut Millésimé**, Chardonnay 53%, Chenin Blanc 36%, Pinot Noir 11%, totally reliable with peachy overtones and under £10 per bottle. It's tricky to get hold of in the UK, however. Tesco and Slurp sell a version of it, but it's not the Millésimé, and the blend is Chenin Blanc, Chardonnay and Cabernet Franc. If anyone tries it and likes it, please let the editor know! The Wine Society's **Celebration Crémant de Loire**, also ratified by G&M, is a



blend of all four grapes, currently on offer with a case of 6 for £59.50.

For a little more character to your Crémant, you might try **Crémant d'Alsace**, a combination of Riesling, Pinot Blanc and Auxerrois. This has a little more spice, and, for the adventurous but thrifty, Lidl are selling a *brut* for £8.99 which gets 87/100 in the Decanter write-up. It's hard to write this, but I think this may be a better buy than the Wine Society's version, by Julien Dopff, which is disappointingly sugary.



**Le mot juste** in December is **Noël**, which comes from Old French *naël* and later *noel*, and has its origins in the Latin word *natalis*. As an adjective, *natalis* means of or relating to birth, like the English word *natal* (and also *native*, a person who was born in that place), but as a noun it has *dies* implicit within its meaning, so 'birthday'. (Spanish has the Christmas word closest to the Latin root: *Navidad*.) Noël has been in use since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, especially as a chant in Christmas music, and also as a Christian name, that was probably given to boys who were born or baptized on Christmas Day. From its use in Christmas music as a shout of joy at Jesus' birth, it became used as a general shout of joy in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In *The Franklin's Tale* Chaucer describes a scene of wine and good food being enjoyed And "**Nowel**" crieth every lusty man. Finally, the word appears in a popular French weather prediction: *Noël au balcon, Pâques au tison*, Christmas on the balcony, Easter by the fire (*au tison* = literally, 'with the poker'). In other words, a warm Christmas means a cold Easter. We shall see! Joyeux Noël!

Lindsey Shaw-Miller, Newsletter Editor, Wrington Twinning Association and The French Connection.