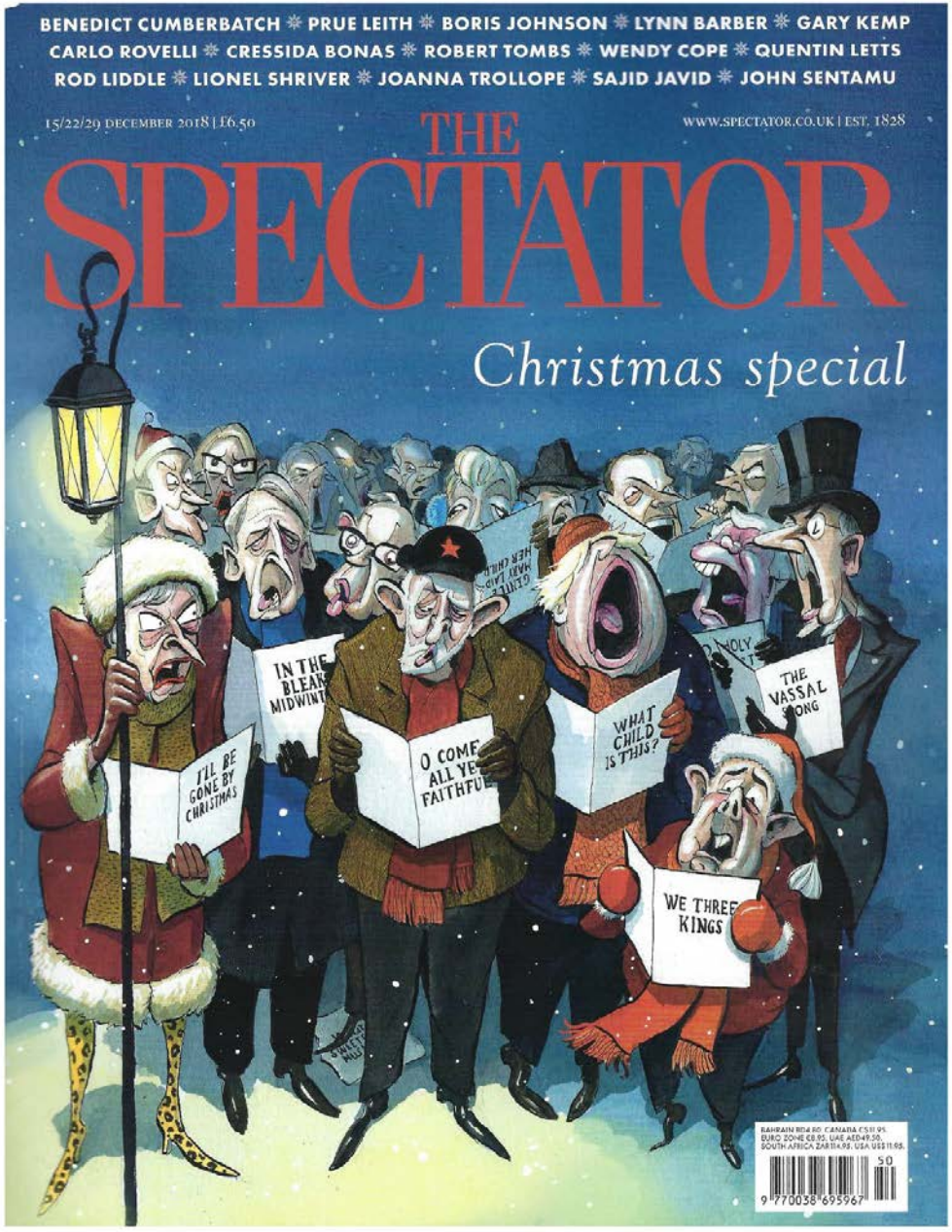
BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH ✻ PRUE LEITH ✻ BORIS JOHNSON ✻ LYNN BARBER ✻ GARY KEMP
CARLO ROVELLI ✻ CRESSIDA BONAS ✻ ROBERT TOMBS ✻ WENDY COPE ✻ QUENTIN LETTS
ROD LIDDLE ✻ LIONEL SHRIVER ✻ JOANNA TROLLOPE ✻ SAJID JAVID ✻ JOHN SENTAMU
15/22/29 DECEMBER 2018 | £6.50
WWW.SPECTATOR.CO.UK | EST. 1828
THE SPECTATOR
Christmas special
I'LL BE GONE BY CHRISTMAS
O COME ALL YE FAITHFUL
WHAT CHILD IS THIS?
THE VASSAL SONG
WE THREE KINGS

THE SPECTATOR

The Spectator (UK)
December 2018

The empress of art

The widow of the Shah of Iran was painted by Warhol and assembled the greatest collection of art outside of Europe. *Will Heaven* meets her

PHOTO BY JACK GAROFALO/PARIS MATCH VIA GETTY IMAGES

Portrait of a lost world: Farah Pahlavi and her mother on the day of her 1967 coronation as Empress of Iran, wearing an imperial crown made up of 3,380 diamonds, five emeralds, two sapphires and 368 pearls

Somewhere in the bowels of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art is a portrait from a lost world. Its subject is a beautiful young woman: Her Imperial Majesty, Empress Farah Pahlavi of Iran. The condition of the work, however, a luminous print by Andy Warhol from 1977, is so bad that it could be a metaphor for Iran itself. Fundamentalist vandals have slashed at it with knives.

The Empress — forced into exile when the Iranian Revolution overthrew her husband, the Shah, two years after the portrait was completed — discovered this upsetting news while watching French TV in her Paris apartment. 'Seeing that, I said, "They are stupid",' she tells me. 'Instead of tearing it they could have sold it!'

One day, she hopes to see it on display again. 'I hope this regime will not stay and this will be part of a collection to show what sort of people they are. What they have done to Iran is much more than tearing my portrait. But that will be part of the history — an example.'

We meet in a library above a swanky bookshop on Piccadilly, where the Empress-in-exile is being fussed over by an entourage of fashionable young women. She is the tallest person in the room — or seems it — and looks much younger than her 80 years, wearing a chic-looking navy blue power suit, with immaculately styled blonde hair identical to photographs of her from the time of the revolution.

A new book, *Iran Modern: the Empress of Art*, is being launched at an evening reception — and its two co-authors, Viola Raikhel-Bolot and Miranda Darling, are trying to coax her into signing copies. A vast, £650 volume (for those with a certain kind of coffee table), it tells the story of the Warhol portrait, the collection it belonged to and the part she, the Shah of Iran's widow, played in establishing that collection. Now mostly deemed 'un-Islamic' and hidden in vaults beneath the Tehran museum — Renoir's 'Gabrielle with Open Blouse' was never going to pass the regime's censors — it is 'the greatest collection of foreign art outside of Europe', she tells me, with works by Van Gogh, Picasso, Bacon, Rothko and de Kooning. And, of course, Warhol.

She spent the evening following Warhol from one room to another, only to find out he was avoiding her

The Empress first met him on a visit to Washington: 'It was at the White House during President Ford's time.' She spent the evening following the artist from one room to another, only to find out that he was avoiding her because he thought she wanted to dance. Eventually, she arranged for him to visit Tehran. 'I was very happy and very proud,' the Empress smiles, '…Andy Warhol doing my portrait.' She recalls him writing a 'very nice article' about it afterwards and the cuttings prove her right. 'I had the best time,' he said. 'It was just so up there. So *glamorous*. She was really, really kind and so beautiful.'

This is a glimpse of the Iran so fondly remembered, through rose-tinted spectacles, by members of the Persian diaspora. There was something cool about Iran in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when a certain class of Iranian woman could be found playing volleyball on the shores of the Caspian Sea in a bikini — a world away from today's enforced shawl-wearing. It was the era when the Empress, or the Shahbanu to give her Persian title, would appear on magazine covers next

to Jackie Kennedy. 'Farah chez Jackie: Un duel d'élégance' was one *Paris Match* headline about an earlier visit to the United States.

And it was a golden age for Iran's cultural scene. For a decade, the biggest names in avant-garde art, music and theatre would gather at the Shiraz Arts Festival, founded and run by the Empress. 'That was a very important festival from 1967 to 1977,' she says, 'and it was bringing East and West together… Yehudi Menuhin and so many great artists in music and ballet and theatre. Bijan, Robert Wilson, Peter Brook.' Stockhausen, Xenakis and Cage were some of the composers who appeared.

It was then that the Empress, with encouragement from the Persian painter Iran Darroudi, began to assemble and commission an astonishing collection of modern and contemporary art from Iran and elsewhere, with help from Western curators. This was not a cheap exercise — the collection is now said to be worth $3 billion — but, she explains, 'there was a period where the price of oil augmented'. This gave Iran 'the means' to show off its history and thirst for culture with new museums. 'I started with the Carpet Museum of Iran,' says the Empress, which opened in 1976. The next year saw the inauguration of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, designed by the architect Kamran Diba — her cousin, as it happens.

The biggest names in avant-garde art, music and theatre would gather at the Shiraz Arts Festival

Critics of the Shah's regime will say that's a telling detail. But she dismisses any controversy surrounding the collection — the fortune spent on it and some of the artists involved, with their shockingly Western lifestyles. 'Those who were against, the communists and — what are they called? — the mujahedin or the fanatics, they were against whatever we did,' she says. The Empress recalls a moment at the Shiraz Arts Festival when an Iranian communist complained to the Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski that Iran wasn't free. Grotowski replied: 'If you were telling me the truth you could not have said this now in front of me. You would have been in the mountains, with a Kalashnikov on your shoulder.'

Only the fanatics would argue that Iran is more free today. But nearly four decades after the revolution, the Empress is hopeful that one day 'light will overcome the darkness'. In the meantime, she is proud of her artistic legacy, damaged though it is. 'The seeds you plant and love never perish,' she says. 'When I meet young Iranian boys and girls outside of Iran… they come to me and they kiss me, they hug me and it gives me a lot of courage. People have not forgotten.'

Iran Modern: the Empress of Art *is out now, published by Assouline.*

Music

High and mighty

Ysenda Maxtone Graham

In this 200th anniversary of the birth of Mrs C.F. Alexander, author of 'Once in Royal David's City', all of us for whom Christmas properly begins when we hear the treble solo of verse one on Christmas Eve should remember her and be thankful.

She was born Cecil Frances Humphreys, 'Fanny', to a successful land agent in Dublin in 1818, and she seems to have been genuinely mild, obedient, good as He. From an early age she had an instinctive liking for vicars, rectors, deans, bishops and archbishops, although she was shy and at her most relaxed with children and dogs. She eventually married a Church of Ireland rector of her own, William Alexander, who later became a bishop, and they lived a long, happy life of parenthood and charitable works.

She wrote her book of *Hymns for Little Children* in 1848, before her marriage, hoping that the simple poetry would be helpful in fixing the understanding of Christian beliefs in children's minds. One of her heroes, the High Anglican priest and poet John Keble, wrote, in his introduction to the book: 'Children, and those interested in children, will feel at once whether it suits them or not.'

Well, it certainly did suit them. Mrs Alexander's hymns express with such unpretentious clarity and perfect scansion the essence of Christianity that anyone who sang them in childhood has the words going round in their head all through adulthood. We see the imagery in our minds and cling to it as the comforting could-be truth. 'And his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall.' We name our moment of reaching maturity as the day when it dawned on us that the line 'without a city wall', from her hymn 'There Is a Green Hill Far Away', doesn't mean that the green hill didn't have a city wall.

The only blot on Mrs Alexander's career, to the modern sensibility, was that she wrote the lines, in 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', 'The rich man in his castle,/ The poor man at his gate,/ God made them, high or lowly,/ He ordered their estate.' We were still singing that verse at my school in the early 1970s but it started being omitted in 1975. Her supporters claim that the comma between 'them' and 'high' is all-important. It wasn't that God made them high or lowly, but that he made them, whether they were high or lowly. I'm not so sure, because she then makes it quite clear that He ordered their estate.

The tune of 'Once in Royal' (the hymn is so well known that we call it by half its first line — a meaningless first half of a subordinate clause) wasn't written till a year after the lyrics. The composer was Henry J. Gauntlett, a stout organist, friend of Mendelssohn, and composer of more than 1,000 hymn tunes, most of them now forgotten. But 'Irby', as it's called, has rightly survived.

Gauntlett's harmony was four-square and Victorian. It needed a moment of inspiration from Arthur 'Daddy' Mann, director of music at King's College, Cambridge, from 1876 to 1929, who came up with the stunningly understated opening chords of verse two, which, for some of the 180 million listeners to the King's Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols across the globe, are even more spine-tingling than the solo first verse. 'He came down to Earth from heaven…' The hymn breaks out into harmony. It blossoms. It was about the only thing Mann composed in his 53 years at King's — but it was worth waiting for.

Are today's children singing Mrs Alexander's hymns? The awful thing is, too many of them are not. At today's school carol services or concerts, children wearing tinsel hairbands and reindeer jumpers are singing their hearts out to 'Have you noticed the Christmas trees?/ The mistletoe and the holly wreaths?' Or 'Five mince pies in the baker's shop/ Warm and spicy with sugar on top.' Or 'Who's got a beard that's long and white?/ Santa's got a beard that's long and white.' On balmy British winter afternoons they're singing about sleighs with jingle bells, 'snowin' and blowin' up bushels of fun'. If only!

When you banish the Christmas story from Christmas songs, all you're left with are the tawdry props

When you banish the Christmas story from 'Christmas songs', as they're called, all you're left with are the props: the crackers, the presents, the sleighs, the snowman and Santa's hat. Very tawdry they all look.

What worries me is not only that children are missing out on the spiritual, poetic and musical nourishment of the great hymns, but that the art of children singing high will die out. At the moment, this art is being kept alive by our nation's 1,400 or so choristers, plus pupils doing classical singing exam grades, who are still being trained to explore their high register. When children are belting out 'Have you put on your Christmas hat,/Pulled a cracker and said How's that?', they're singing with their speaking register, or 'music theatre' register: a much more earthy sound.

In fact, we're all losing the ability to sing high. 'Once in Royal' has come down a tone, from its original key of G to F, in modern hymn books. Thank goodness for David Willcocks's arrangement that includes a descant for the final verse, which all children love, and which challenges them to sing high. The descant soars up to a top G at the end, the glorious musical effect redeeming what is perhaps the most anticlimactic final line of any hymn, 'All in white shall wait around.'