

82. Christmas, 1972

Apart from the stylised, airborne herald angel of 1969, the previous three Christmas issues had depicted different versions of the Nativity, so it was perhaps opportune for a change of theme for the three festive stamps issued on 18 October 1972 – three gorgeously-robed angels playing the kind of musical instruments one associates with biblical times: 2½p Trumpet, 3p Lute, and 7½p Harp. The designs, based on early Italian paintings and all attractively coloured, were created by Sally Stiff, and were her first successful venture into the competitive world of stamp design.

Simple musical instruments began to appear early in the history of civilisation. In ancient Greece music was based on a system of modes or scales, while in Europe it was largely the Church which fostered the progress and development of music. Carols, the traditional Christmas music which probably inspired the 'musical angels' theme, were originally dance-songs (not untined with ribaldry), included in festive revelries all the year round. The influence of the medieval Church frowned them into respectability and the course of time restricted them to Christmas rejoicings.

The instruments shown in the designs are of particular interest as they do not correspond exactly to their colloquial names. The trumpet, for example, is a simple, slender horn resembling the posthorn used by postilions in the 18th and early 19th centuries, while the lute is clearly seen to be a close relative, the cittern, which dates back at least to the 13th century and is the ancestor of the guitar

and the zither. The so-called harp appears to be a lyre which was the most important instrument of ancient Greece, and usually had 4, 7 or 10 strings – virtually a small harp. Both the cittern and the lyre were played with a plectrum (quill or spike), but it is doubtful if the angels were thus equipped!

Sally Stiff of Twickenham, London, a graphic designer and illustrator with the Architect's Department of the Greater London Council, aimed for a set of bright, festive stamps to celebrate Christmas. 'Angels', she said, 'are themselves symbols of happiness and beauty'. From pieces of fabric and other material of different textures, she built up a set of reliefs which were then photographed for reproduction on the stamps.

The Christmas stamps were photogravure-printed by Harrison and Sons in sheets of 100 (10 x 10) with the outlines of the angels embossed, on unwatermarked paper with one centre phosphor band (2½p) or two bands (others). A noted printing variety was the broken ribbon and scratch across the Queen's head which also gave her a deformed lip on the 2½p, while there were numerous omissions of colour – gold and deep grey (2½p), red-brown, bright green and bluish violet (3p), and ochre (7½p) – as well as embossing and phosphor omitted on all values.

Quantities sold were: 2½p 323,277,200; 3p 130,877,400; and 7½p 17,086,600; presentation packs, 105,740.

JAMES WATSON

