

The Music of Christmas

READINGS: Apocalypse Explained 326; Psalm 98; Luke 2:8-20

“And suddenly, there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing: Glory to God! And on Earth, peace, goodwill towards men!”

Wow, what must that song have sounded like!

The wonder of Christmas is difficult to express; it touches something deeper than the intellect, higher than verbal vessels can convey. Christmas magic hides within colorful gifts of human love, it shines in shimmering lights that cheer wintry streets; it touches us in living evergreen fragrance filling our homes.

Most poignantly, the spirit of Christmas is heard in the strains of bow and horn, as choirs raise the familiar refrains which cause our hearts, and the very air to quiver. The power of sacred music to express the essence of Christmas—peace, joy, hope, awe, and of course love—is witnessed in the family of hymns sung each December. What other collection of well-worn songs includes works from across the better part of a millennium: *Good Christian Men Rejoice* of the 13th century, *Lo How a Rose* from the 16th and *Mary Did You Know* from the 20th? Some of our favorites weave the heartfelt expressions of the deep past with those more current, such as Gustav Holst’s modern arrangement of the ancient, *Personent Hodie*; and the recent lyrics *What Child Is This* set to the 16th century tune *Greensleeves*.

What about these songs is so timeless? No doubt, it is the eternal message of which sings through them: “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us...For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son...that the world might be saved through Him” We know that the Son is Divine Truth from and about Divine Love, Father. When the true Light that is the Life of the Lord, Jesus Christ, penetrates the clouds of doubt, fear, sorrow and self, the human heart cannot help but leap like the flock on that holy night, and sing aloud with the heavenly host.

Time crumbles in the face of eternal salvation, in the face of a tiny Infant. Born in time in Palestine, 2000 years ago, He bore all time into His eternal embrace of pure Divine Love. “Nothing was made that was made except by Him.” He is the Creator and the Savior; the First and the Last; the Alpha and the Omega, the Root and the Branch. This is why we sing. This is what animates a multitude of musicians each Christmas to lift the bow, blow the horn, and dance their hands along rows of black and white keys.

Apocalypse Explained records that when we arrive at heartfelt comprehension that the Lord—the Divine Human—“has all power in the heavens and on

the earth, it pours itself forth in singing, the joy of the heart itself through the sound of the singing, and the joy of the consequent thought, through the song” (AE 326); “A human being cannot do otherwise than praise and glorify the Lord when he acknowledges in heart that there is nothing good in himself, and that he can do nothing from himself, and on the other hand that all good is from the Lord, and that the Lord can do all things” (AE 1210)

We don’t sing the songs, the Song of the Lord sings into us and through us. The Lord sings us into being. Many composers report music overshadowing them and bringing itself forth in song through their pen. George Frederick Handel wrote his two- and half-hour masterpiece, “Messiah” in an astonishing 24 days. At the writing of the Hallelujah chorus, his assistant found him in tears saying: “I did think I saw heaven open, and saw the very face of God.”¹ This occurred in 1741—just eight years before *Arcana Coelestia* was written. Was this the musical prelude preparing the hearts of earth to receive her coming King?

It isn’t always easy to access this overflowing joy because we aren’t always overcome with perception of the magnitude of God’s love. It is against all of our natural instincts to realize and acknowledge that of ourselves we are nothing, and contrary to all earthly rationality that God of the universe incarnated as a baby.

We’ve likely had the experience of singing a hymn as either mere duty, or an exercise in music, when not in touch with a sense of the Lord’s love. On the other hand, we’ve likely all sung a carol, or heard a chorus or aria from *Messiah* and been deeply moved with the truth of the music: that all salvation comes from the Lord, and that He was born onto this earth to effect this Work. Though the music remains the same, the experience is utterly incomparable. To feel the music’s true power, we must arrive at the heartfelt realization that of ourselves we are nothing, and that the Lord is the All of all life.

Unlike ourselves, angels are almost always in joyful awareness that self is nothing and the Lord of Love is All. Heaven is therefore full of singing and music. The Third Testament gives voice to the experience of those there:

“Every morning, we hear the most charming singing of young women and girls coming from the houses around the public squares, filling the whole city with its sound. Each morning they express some particular affection of spiritual love in song...the affection is perceived in the singing as though the singing were the affection itself. The sound infuses itself into the souls of its hearers and stirs them to a corresponding state. Such is the nature of heavenly song (Conjugal Love 17).

¹ “Handel’s Messiah— the Story behind the Classic”; <https://www.beliefnet.com>

Singing in heaven is exquisite beyond earthly expression (Arcana Coelestia 3893). Yet, music can elevate us here on earth to the mountaintop of magnificent joy because of “the holy and blissful influence from heaven” (Arcana Coelestia 3893). Sacred music can so move us, that like Handel, we are caught up into heaven (Arcana Coelestia 8261). A professional musician of high standing named Clive Wearing was struck with fever and permanently lost all but seven seconds of short-term memory. He lives fettered by the frustration of inability to perceive any continuity or meaning beyond the immediate present; yet, when he plays piano, he is visibly transported, comforted for a few precious moments in the cradle of angelic peace.

When we sing or hear sacred music it actually enters and stirs the hearts of angels (Arcana Coelestia 8261). Sacred songs do this, we read, because “they inspire[] gladness of heart, which then burst[s] from within, right out into the outermost fibers of the body, making them quiver with a glad, and at the same time holy feeling...” (Arcana Coelestia 8261) What’s wonderful is that the text is unclear whether this quivering joy refers to angels in heaven, or we of earth! Yet, that’s the point: music is a sacred cord binding the hearts of angels in heaven to our own, here on earth. First sang the angles good news to the shepherds; then sang the shepherds good news to all they met. Heaven sings, and earth can’t help but echo back:

"Glory to God!" the lofty strain, the realm of ether fills;
How sweeps the song of solemn joy o'er Judah's sacred hills!"²

What’s wonderful, heavenly music possesses the power to subdue self-orientation and replace it with love for others and for the Lord. The Lord sends angels to sing us up out of temptation, to sing us comfort (Arcana Coelestia 4627). The Third Testament describes spiraling choirs of heaven by which new spirits are gradually liberated from self-orientation into joyful harmony and oneness of love with those around them (Arcana Coelestia 2595). Other spiraling choirs, are described in this way:

The wonder of it was although there were very many angels they all nevertheless thought and spoke as one, and in so doing represented as one. They did so because nobody wished to do anything by himself, let alone direct the rest and so lead the choir. Anyone who does this of himself is instantly severed from the choir. But all *did* allow themselves to be led by one another, and so they were all, individually and collectively, led by the

² CALM ON THE LISTENING EAR OF NIGHT (John Bacchus Dykes, 1866 / Edmund Hamilton Sears, 1834)

Lord. Into such harmonious relationships all good persons are introduced who enter the next life (Arcana Coelestia 3350).

The text goes on to say that all of heaven is able to sing as a single choir “which consists of myriads upon myriads acting as one - through the mutual love reigning there, for thus they allow themselves to be led by the Lord” (Arcana Coelestia 3350).

If you have sung in a choir or played in an orchestra, you may have experienced that part of the delight is in the reduction of self, arising from working in concert with others as one. Music has the power to quiet selfishness and so unite us. Christmas music especially has this power because of the spirit that animates it and animates us. This is revealed no more powerfully than in 1914, World War I:

...on Christmas Eve, many German and British troops sang Christmas carols to each other across the lines, and at certain points the Allied soldiers even heard brass bands joining the Germans in their joyous singing. At the first light of dawn on Christmas Day, some German soldiers emerged from their trenches and approached the Allied lines across no-man’s-land, calling out “Merry Christmas” in their enemies’ native tongues... seeing the Germans unarmed [the Allied troops] climbed out of their trenches and shook hands with the enemy soldiers. The men exchanged presents of cigarettes and plum puddings and sang carols and songs. There was even a documented case of soldiers from opposing sides playing a good-natured game of soccer.³

Music is the language of love, and Christmas music that of Divine Love born on earth and into our hearts, the Love that binds us to one another, to the heavens, and to the Lord Himself.

The Lord’s lips and very life sang the first refrain of this eternal love over 2000 years ago into the natural realm; a song that rippled out first to the disciples, continuing from heart to heart, ever increasing outward through time and space; a song that catches us, and draws us up into its simple, sweet melody, and enfolds us into its boundless, intricate harmonies; a song that causes the world to vibrate and quiver with exaltation; causes humanity to join the swell of endless joy—the joy that we are, all, infinitely loved by the Lord of love. This is the message of our carols. And so we are made strong and bold to love one another. What is there to fear?

“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth, peace, goodwill towards humankind!”

³ Christmas Truce of 1914, <https://www.history.com>