

# *Love Came Down at Christmas*

**Performed December 13/14, 2002**

*What Tidings Bringest Thou, Messenger?* is a 15th century English carol heard here in a transcription by Sir John Stainer. The carol is in the form of a dialog, with the refrain asking the question which is answered in the verses. In an unusual touch, the refrain is not only sung between the verses but actually interrupts the verses as well, as if the questioners were unable to restrain their impatience. Stainer's name should also be familiar at this time of year. He was a prolific composer, taught at Oxford and for sixteen years served as organist at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, but he is probably best remembered for his 1871 *Christmas Carols Old and New*, one of the first serious compilations of that genre. The carol settings and harmonizations he supplied have become the standards which are still in use today.

*O Come, O Come Emmanuel* is one of the oldest Advent hymns, dating back at least to the 12th century. The text is taken from the *O Antiphons* that were traditionally chanted at the vespers services in the week before Christmas. There are seven verses altogether, one for each day and each beginning with a different title for the Messiah taken from Isaiah's prophecies: *O Sapientia* (Wisdom), *O Adonai* (Lord), *O Radix Jesse* (Root of Jesse), *O Clavis David* (Key of David), *O Oriens* (Dayspring), *O Rex gentium* (King of the nations), *O Emmanuel* (God is with us.) In a typical Medieval wordplay, the first letters, taken backwards, make an acrostic for *ero cras*, I will be here tomorrow, a message revealed when the last antiphon was chanted on Christmas Eve.

*O Come All Ye Faithful* sounds like an ancient Latin hymn and was often misidentified as such. In fact it was written about 1741 by John Francis Wade, a music engraver who had emigrated to an English Catholic community in Douay, France. The English translation was provided about a century later by Frederick Oakley, an Anglican minister who converted to Catholicism and maintained an extensive mission to London's poor.



**Zoltán Kodály** (1882-1967) grew up in rural Hungary where his father held positions as railroad stationmaster in a series of small towns. It was in that environment that the young Kodály became acquainted with the rich tradition of Hungarian folk music which was to play such an important part in his musical life. He had little formal music training as a boy but still managed to learn the piano, violin, viola and cello and to sing in the choir school. When he entered Budapest University to study Hungarian and German, he also enrolled at the Hungarian Academy of Music and studied composition. It was there that he met Bela Bartók, who became a lifelong friend and collaborator. Kodály had written his doctoral thesis on the structure of Hungarian folksong, and he and Bartók began a serious effort to collect and archive Hungarian folksong. Their first

collection, published in 1906, was an unexpected scholarly success and helped validate the fledgling discipline of ethnomusicology.

Kodály's success as a composer took somewhat longer to achieve. His first major success came with the premiere in 1923 of *Psalmus hungaricus*, an oratorio based on a 16th century Hungarian translation of Psalm 55. This was followed in 1926 by his singspiel *Háry János*, dealing with the tall tales recounted by a colorful folkloric character. The orchestral suite he drew from *Háry János* received international acclaim and Kodály himself was soon conducting his own music in Amsterdam, Cambridge and London. Numerous choral works, including many settings of Hungarian folksongs, soon followed.

The influences on Kodály's musical palette were quite eclectic. In addition to folksong, he was profoundly influenced by the music of Debussy (he studied for a short time in Paris following his graduation from the Academy), but he also assimilated Renaissance polyphony, Gregorian chant, and the Classical styles of Mozart and Haydn. His music is highly rhythmic and, while fundamentally tonal, is liberally seasoned with dissonance and unusual modulations.

Kodály was at the height of his popularity during the war years. In honor of his 60th birthday and retirement from the Academy, 1942 had been designated a 'Kodály Year.' In 1943 he was awarded the Hungarian Order of Merit and elected to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Despite his popularity, Kodály ran afoul of the existing pro-Nazi regime, which he had long opposed, by continuing to help save people from persecution, and he was forced to take refuge in the cellar of a Benedictine convent. It was while he was in hiding that he composed the *Missa brevis*, reworking an existing organ mass. When Germany occupied Hungary in 1944 and the Russians subsequently invaded, he took shelter in the opera house in Budapest, where the mass was premiered in a makeshift auditorium created out of the cloakroom.

The *Missa brevis* is a virtuoso choral work which spans nearly a four-octave vocal range and requires a great deal of agility. It opens with an instrumental *Introitus* which presents some of the musical material which will be developed throughout the work, most notably an arch-like phrase which reappears in various guises in subsequent movements. It immediately reappears as the principal theme of the *Kyrie*, presented as a canon. A trio of women's voices takes the *Christe eleison* text, soaring over the chorus before the music returns to the *Kyrie* theme.

The *Gloria* opens with a solo voice intoning the first line in plainsong chant, as it would be done for liturgical use. As in a Haydn mass, the *Gloria* develops through several contrasting sections: a rather martial-sounding opening, a more introspective section set for alto, tenor and bass soli, and a brilliant conclusion. As with the *Gloria*, the *Credo* also opens with a chant intonation. It is even more episodic in nature, and Kodály takes the opportunity for some exquisite color painting to match the underlying text: a misterioso opening which abruptly modulates to the brilliance of *Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine* (God of Gods and light of lights); the anguished setting of the *crucifixus* text (he was

crucified); the long ascending line for *et resurrexit tertia die* (And He rose on the third day and ascended into Heaven.)

The *Sanctus* is quite restrained, opening with a polyphonic section that adds voices to build intensity. It reaches an impressive climax at the hosannas, but fades away rather quickly, as if we are given only a fleeting glimpse of the glory of heaven. The *Benedictus* features a beautiful melody but is equally restrained at the hosanna text. The *Agnus Dei* reprises thematic material from the *Gloria* and the *Kyrie*. While most of the mass proceeds without any repetition of the text, the *Agnus* ends with an extended repetition of the words *dona nobis pacem* (grant us peace), a very understandable touch considering the circumstance surrounding the work's composition. Kodály had originally intended to complete the symmetry of the *Missa brevis* by setting the *Ite missa est* for organ only, but then provided an alternate choral setting. Again he deviates from the strict liturgical text, appending the repeated plea *da pacem* (give us peace).

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Mendelssohn Club composer-in-residence **Donald St. Pierre** has been on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music since 1990. He has served as principal keyboard player for the Milwaukee Symphony and was music director of the Skylight Music Theater in Milwaukee from 1978-1990, where he directed over 50 productions and composed three chamber operas. He is one of the contributing composers to the *AIDS Quilt Songbook*, published by Boosey & Hawkes and recorded on the Harmonia Mundi label. From 1987-1994 he was head coach of the voice department at the Chautauqua Institution. Since 1995 he has held the same position at the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival in Brunswick, Maine. As a recital accompanist, Mr. St. Pierre has appeared at such venues as New York's Lincoln Center, London's Wigmore Hall and the Almeida Theatre, Paris' Théâtre du Chatelet as well as at the Tanglewood, Santa Fe Chamber Music, Bowdoin, Bard and Grand Teton Music Festivals. *Love Came Down at Christmas* is Mr. St. Pierre's fifth commission by Mendelssohn Club.

*Love Came Down at Christmas* is based on poems by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894). The composer has provided the following notes:

"A Hope Carol is an Advent text. The tune is built on a motive of an interlocking fourth and a minor third. A Christmas Carol is developed out of a scale with two four-note whole tone segments (D-E-F#-G#-A-B-C#-D#). *Herself a Rose* is a study in thick chords.

"According to poet and scholar Guy Davenport, 'The masterwork on Shaker music is Daniel Patterson's *The Shaker Spiritual* (1979). It is also one of the best histories of Shaker life, as well as the best book ever written on American music of any sort.' Movements IV (A Shaker Dance) and V (Step Tune No. 9) are adapted from Shaker tunes found in this volume. A Shaker Dance lost its words, while Step Tune No. 9 gained some.

"Christmastide was the seed text for the whole cycle, the poem that drew me to read through Rossetti and to choose the other verses."

*A Hope Carol* is a duet between children's voices and the low brass instruments, highlighting the contrasting timbres. *A Christmas Carol* is a very austere, spare setting featuring unison vocal lines in a close two-part canon and two trumpets with their own two-part canon. It very effectively mirrors the bleak and austere scene set by the poetry. *Herself a Rose* provides an immediate contrast with its thickly harmonized texture. *A Shaker Dance* is a quick dance sung with nonsense syllables. *A Step Tune* is a slow dance featuring walking and shuffling. Dancing was of course integral to the Shaker religious experience but also ties indirectly into the Christmas tradition. Carols were originally dancing songs and even the word *carol* means to dance in a circle or ring. *Christmastide* begins with a chorale before breaking into a joyous gallop that moves through a canon to a unison statement with children's voices adding a descant.

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The tune for *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* was taken from a Felix Mendelssohn cantata celebrating Johann Gutenberg, inventor of the printing press. It was the hymnist William Cummings who set Charles Wesley's text to it in 1855. The often misheard "Sun of Righteousness" is one of the most ancient titles given to Jesus, dating from the third century. The Roman emperor Aurelian had embraced worship of the Persian sun-god Mithra, proclaiming it the state religion. The feast of Mithra's annual rebirth, *Solis Invicti*, the Unconquerable Sun, was celebrated on the winter solstice, December 25 in the Julian calendar. The widespread cult of Mithra seems to have not only inspired the appellation "Sun of Righteousness" in response, but also contributed to fixing the commemoration of Jesus' birth on December 25.

*Intonent hodie* is a 14th century Bohemian hymn whose text celebrates one of the many miracles attributed to St. Nicholas. It may have been the inspiration for the later Renaissance hymn *Personent hodie* and is being sung to that melody. *Personent hodie* was probably originally written to be sung at the Feast of the Holy Innocents, December 28, which commemorates the young boys slain by Herod in his vain attempt to kill the baby Jesus. The feast was celebrated with a role reversal in which the boy choristers, under the leadership of a boy bishop, displaced the senior clergy from the choir stalls and led the service. The text and melody are found in the *Piæ Cantiones*, a 16th century compilation of Latin hymns.

**George Frideric Handel** (1685-1759) was a German composer whose main interest was Italian opera and yet achieved his greatest success with English oratorio. He had had a successful career as an opera composer and impresario in London, but when popular tastes changed he turned to oratorio, which he conceived of as a sacred drama complete with costumes and sets. The initial public performance of his first oratorio, *Esther*, featured a chorus drawn from Chapel Choir in London. The Bishop of London forbade their appearance in a staged production, so the oratorio was given in concert format, to very great success. Ever the pragmatist, Handel adopted that format for his subsequent

oratorios and a new musical form had been born. *Messiah*, written in just two weeks, has been his most popular oratorio since its premiere in 1743. *And the glory of the Lord* displays both his consummate skill at setting text and his ability to provide distinctive and contrasting music for each phrase of text. *Sing unto God* is a jubilant fanfare from *Judas Maccabaeus*. This oratorio was written in 1746 to celebrate the victory of the forces of King George II over Prince Charles Edward, scion of the deposed Stuart line, who had made one final attempt to seize the throne. The historical Judas Maccabaeus lived in the second century B.C.E. and led a popular uprising against the Assyrian King Antiochus IV, who had forbidden the Jewish people from practicing their religion and customs, desecrated the temple in Jerusalem and erected altars for pagan gods. Judas succeeded in driving the Assyrians out of Jerusalem, where he purified and reconsecrated the temple, an event commemorated in the festival of Hannukah. Popular tradition has it that there was only sufficient consecrated oil to keep the sacred lamp burning for one day, but the lamp miraculously stayed lit for eight days until new oil could be consecrated.

The text for *Joy to the World* is a paraphrase of Psalm 98, written in 1719 by hymnist Isaac Watts. The music is often misattributed to Handel, but it was the American hymnist Lowell Mason who in 1836 provided the setting in use today, adapting an earlier English hymn tune. *A Birthday Greeting* is Kodály's 1931 setting of a traditional Hungarian folksong. The *First Nowell* is thought to date from the 13th or 14th century, but only appeared in print for the first time in William Sandys' 1833 *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern*. It is heard here in a wonderful arrangement by Sir David Willcocks, longtime director of the Bach Choir of London. *Silent Night* is perhaps the most beloved of all Christmas carols. It was written in 1818 for the Midnight Mass celebration by Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber, assistant pastor and organist, respectively, of St. Nicholas Church in the little Austrian village of Oberndorf. It was an instant hit, and although Mohr and Gruber never published the music, it rapidly spread throughout the region and entered the repertoire of several touring folk groups. It is in the form of a ländler, a traditional Austrian folkdance, and it was often erroneously passed off as a Tyrolean folk carol. *Silent Night* was indeed originally written for guitar accompaniment, but the story that this was because the church organ had broken and could not be repaired in time for the Christmas service is charming but apocryphal.

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