

Christmas Cantata (2002)

SATB a/c in 3 movements

Difficulty rating: 3+

Duration: 11'00"

Commissioned by The Greenwich Village Singers, Music Director Mark Mangini

Premiere: NYC, 12/13/02

I was a member of the tenor section of The Greenwich Village Singers for nearly ten years and became the group's Composer-in-Residence shortly after writing this work for them. In the first two performances of the work each movement was preceded by an "optional" organ prelude. The preludes have since become less optional, i.e., deleted.

The 3 texts for my **Christmas Cantata** are drawn from medieval chant, Shakespeare, and a U.S. Poet Laureate. Presented in reverse chronological order, they follow a general progression from night to dawn, and are all largely concerned with Christ's manifestation in nature.

Richard Wilbur's *A Christmas Hymn* hails the constancy and the miracle of Jesus through diverse moods and situations. The verses, generally in 6/8 time, travel from light to dark to light, each illuminated by the more solemn refrain ("And every stone shall cry"). In a contrasting 4/4 time, the refrain, slightly altered at each appearance, anchors the verses in their journey from pastoral to anguished to triumphant.

The "Bird of Dawning" is spoken at the end of the first act of Hamlet, after the officers have seen the ghost. A solo soprano vocalise begins the movement over a men's drone. Fairies and witches are summarily dispersed in more contrapuntal music, before we are returned to the "hallowed" strains of the opening.

O oriens ("O dayspring" or "O dawn") is one of the 3 "O" antiphons written for Advent. The original Gregorian chant, heard first in the altos, is passed around through every part at some point in the movement. It is surrounded by freely set, at times distinctively non-archaic sounding music, with rich counterpoint and contrastingly bouncy rhythms. Following a fugato on a syncopated subject, the movement returns to the opening music, then hurtles towards a glorious close on "sol justitiae" ("sun of justice").

I. A Christmas Hymn

A stable-lamp is lighted
Whose glow shall wake the sky;
The stars shall bend their voices,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry,
And straw like gold shall shine;
A barn shall harbor heaven,
A stall become a shrine.

This child through David's city
Shall ride in triumph by;
The palm shall strew its branches,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry,
Though heavy, dull, and dumb,
And lie within the roadway
To pave his kingdom come.

Yet he shall be forsaken,
And yielded up to die;
The sky shall groan and darken,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry
For stony hearts of men:
God's blood upon the spearhead,
God's love refused again.

But now, as at the ending,
The low is lifted high;
The stars shall bend their voices,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry
In praises of the child
By whose descent among us
The worlds are reconciled.

--Richard Wilbur

II. "Bird of Dawning"

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm
So hallow'd and so gracious is that time.

--From Act One, Scene One, Hamlet by William Shakespeare

III. O Oriens

O Oriens,
splendor lucis aeternae,
et sol justitiae:
veni, et illumina
sedentes in tenebris,
et umbra mortis.

*O Dawn,
splendor of eternal light,
and sun of justice,
come, and shine on those,
seated in darkness,
and in the shadow of death.*