

FROM HEAVEN ABOVE TO EARTH I COME  
(Vom Himmel hoch)

It was on Christmas Eve that Martin Luther, a German pastor who lived about two hundred years before Bach, gave his family the gift of his new Christmas hymn. In those days, family members weren't always rushing off in all directions to different activities, so no one groaned when Luther told them the hymn had 15 stanzas in all! Besides, all the children knew how well their father could tell stories, and they were already familiar with the tune of the popular game-song that had given him the idea for his hymn.

In the game, a young man or boy would cry out:

Good news from far abroad I bring,  
Glad tidings for you all I sing.  
I bring so much you'd like to know,  
Much more than I shall tell you though.

Then he would recite a riddle to one of the girls in the circle. If she failed to give the correct answer, she had to present him with a wreath or garland.

At first, Luther's hymn was sung to the folk-tune used in this game, but by 1539 Luther himself had written the new tune that became known as Vom Himmel hoch. Before long, the tune appeared in numerous hymnals, Catholic as well as Lutheran. Johann Sebastian Bach liked the tune so much that he used it in his "Christmas Oratorio" and as the basis for several organ pieces (eleven canons, four preludes, and a short prelude to introduce the hymn in his "Orgelbuchlein" or "Little Organ Book.") Here is the way Bach arranged and harmonized the tune:

Vom Himmel hoch, da komm' ich her.

This text of "From Heaven Above" is a fresh version of the translation Catherine Winkworth did in the 1850's. Take time to study all the stanzas. They tell us the wonderful news of the love God has shown to us in Christ and suggest the kind of response we should make. Perhaps you will want to use this stanza as your Christmas prayer:

O dearest Jesus, holy child,  
Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled,  
A holy shrine, within my heart,  
That you and I need never part. AMEN!

Since this is such a long hymn, try having soloists sing (or read) the odd-numbered stanzas, and alternate men's voices, treble voices, and unison voices on the even-numbered stanzas.

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