

Now The Green Blade Riseth*

French Carol

Ideas by John Horman

“Now the Green Blade Riseth” is a hymn that results in the wedding of an Easter text by J. M. C. Crum to the charming traditional French carol, “Noel nouvelet.” It first appeared in the *Oxford Book of Carols*, 1928, and was first introduced in a USA hymnal in 1964. Certainly, this hymn is one of the most versatile in any hymnal. The tune, FRENCH CAROL, is set both to a Christmas text, “Sing We Now of Christmas” and an Easter text, “Now the Green Blade Riseth.” Once children have sung this hymn for the Christmas and Epiphany seasons, they can easily repeat the tune during the season of Eastertide, adding the new resurrection text.

The stately, yet sprightly nature of this tune, cues us to consider it as a children’s processional. Led by two handbell players and other percussion instruments, children can proceed with dignity to their singing positions while a flute or the organ plays the tune. Once in place, “Now the Green Blade Riseth” can be sung in hymn format or as an anthem. The six note range of the tune (a once sung low note extends the range to just an octave) assures success with children of elementary age. This light, prancing tune is child-like in its simplicity and form also making it a natural for young singers.

Anytime I suggest that choir directors not waste money on hymn arrangements, but instead create their own, I get a look of disbelief and usually the comment, “That’s easy for you to say. You are a composer!” I really do believe that the tune, if looked at carefully, gives many hints as to what you can do to easily transform it into an anthem.

The tune includes occasional sixteenth notes, and so a steady repeating hand drum part spins off nicely to drive the internal rhythm forward. Here is one possible idea.

Hand drum

Repeat as needed

*Found in these hymnals: LBW, Hymnal 82, Chalice, New Century, United Methodist.

Care must be taken to not overload the arrangement with too much instrumental accompaniment. Two contrasting percussion instruments can act as punctuation to the tune — perhaps a lightly played tambourine and a triangle or finger cymbal. Play the finger cymbal or triangle at the end of the textual phrase to mark its ending. Use a lightly played tambourine to mark the strong beats. That’s really all it needs.

An accurate gauge as to whether you have the right amount of instrumentation is your own inner question, “Can I still understand and appreciate the text and tune of this arrangement?” Nothing should interfere with the transmission of the text and tune. Remember, “when in doubt, leave it out!” Placing solos on the second and third verses also will add interest and assist in refocusing the listener’s attention on the message of the text.

The derivation of the tune, “Noel nouvelet,” takes us back to medieval France. In keeping with that, the before mentioned handbells are meant to simulate the drone of bagpipes — a simple bourdon alternating between the lower and higher octave.

Handbells

Repeat as needed

The text of “Now the Green Blade Riseth” draws vivid analogies between life and death: dormant seed and newly sprouted grain. Sheaves of wheat can be bought fairly inexpensively at many craft shops. Carried in baskets by one or two choir members, these stalks of grain can be passed to people in the congregation as the choir recesses after singing the anthem. Congregations enjoy and respond so well to visuals, it would be a shame not to utilize this possibility.

Children and adults alike will enjoy this hymn tune and all that it brings textually and historically to singers and listeners. It can be a source of rich musical and spiritual experiences, providing an opportunity to try one’s hand at arranging and spinning spiritual experiences from a tune that is both well loved and long lasting.

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