



O Sing a Song of Bethlehem (KINGSFOLD)

TUNE – INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This tune that we commonly call KINGSFOLD has roots all over the British Isles. In one of its earliest appearances — as early as the sixteenth century — it serves as the melody for a folk-hymn/carol that narrates the Bible story about the rich man, traditionally named Dives or Divies, and the poor man, named in the Bible as Lazarus, who begged at his gate.

Though not integral to this hymn study, this much background information might be desirable if you introduce this tune by playing a recording of Vaughan Williams' "Five Variants of Dives and Lazarus." (Many recordings are available including Naxos # 8.550823, Chandos #9593 & #9775, Nimbus #1754, Uni.Decca #460357.) The tune is most prominent in the opening and closing sections, but there are no real clear breaks between the five variants.

Whether or not you use Vaughan Williams' "Five Variants" in introducing and teaching this tune, you will want to refer to him for his importance to this tune in other ways. Other hymn studies in previous issues of *The Chorister* have discussed various aspects of Vaughan Williams (October 1999). Here are some important highlights:

- His first name, Ralph, is pronounced "Rafe."
- His last name is "Vaughan Williams" not just "Williams."
- His dates are 1872-1958, and he lived his entire life in England.
- He is considered one of the greatest of all twentieth century composers and one of the greatest English composers of all time, writing symphonies, chamber music, songs, operas, piano pieces,

organ preludes, and choral music. Though he claimed to be an atheist, he wrote many sacred works including a mass, numerous anthems, and several hymn tunes. He is not just an English composer because he was born there; he was very proud of his heritage and did much studying, collecting, arranging, publishing, and performing of English folk tunes. Even much of his original music sounds like it is based on folk melodies. "Every composer...may reasonably expect to have a special message for his own people," he once wrote.

- He served as music editor of *The English Hymnal* of 1906, a collection famous for its inclusion of numerous folk melodies. Though most hymnals now contain numerous folk songs from around the world, this was not the case before *The English Hymnal*. This book is the origin of KINGSFOLD as a hymn tune and for Vaughan Williams' arrangement that is found in most hymnals.
- Vaughan Williams felt that many folk tunes make good hymn tunes because they are "congregational" (able to be sung by unrehearsed, amateur groups), because they are refreshing in their unconventional rhythm and tonality, and because they foster national pride and appreciation of one's heritage. Experience has taught us that we can appreciate folk music even if it is not from our own heritage.

TEXT – INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND INFORMATION

"O Sing a Song of Bethlehem" is written in the style of a ballad (or ballade), a type of poem whose roots go back to pre-history. A ballad is usually sung and narrates a story that captivates us and carries us away with its vivid imagery, tense drama, and surpris-

ing ending.

Louis F. Benson decided that the ballad style was well suited for telling the story he wanted to put into song. Here are some important facts about Benson:

- He was an American who lived most of his life (1855-1930) in and around Philadelphia PA.
- He was a lawyer before he went to Princeton Seminary to become a Presbyterian minister.
- He is also known as a hymnologist – one who seriously studies hymns and becomes an expert on them (and, yes, the “n” is pronounced in “hymnologist”). He had a personal collection of 9,000 different hymnals, wrote several books about hymns, served as editor for hymnals, and wrote many hymns of his own.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES - MELODY

Have the students discover the form of the tune (A A' B A''). Does the layout of lines on your hymnal page correspond to the phrases of the tune? (Clarify what you mean by “line” if not.) Which of the four lines are the same? Which are similar? Which is completely different? Use A, A' and A'' to identify the three slightly different versions of that phrase. Why is it more effective to have the second phrase (A') end on a different note than the first (A)? What is effective about the variance in the fourth phrase (A'')? Why is it important to have a B phrase? (Play or sing the melody as A A'' A A'' and see how they respond.) A combination of unity and variety makes things interesting, strong, and effective. (Use examples such as patterns in the fabric of their clothing, in the architecture of the room, or in the liturgy.) Point out how the melody of the A sections outlines the minor triad, and the melody of the B section outlines the major.

Sing the tune without words at first. Try different vowels and consonants to see what best suits the tune. (“Deet-deet-deet” should sound too harsh and percussive; “loo-loo-loo” should sound more suitable.) Try

it at different speeds. What hand or body movements are helpful in catching the mood of this tune? Where is the tune’s high point? What pitch is it? Do we sing that pitch more than once each stanza?

TEACHING ACTIVITIES - TEXT

This text is constructed with many parallels. Point out how each stanza begins with the same words but then takes us to a different location. You might want to use a Holy Land map to find Bethlehem, Nazareth, Galilee, and Calvary (using a city map of old Jerusalem). Where, later in the hymn, are these places listed again? The first half of each stanza talks about past events; the second half talks about the present. You might use the image of a time machine that zooms us between the halves of this hymn.

You may wish to have the choristers find scripture references for the places and events about which they are singing. The well-known story from Luke 2 tells of shepherds and angels and how “the glory of the Lord shone around them.” The Matthew 2:1-12 passage tells more vividly of “the light that shone on Bethlehem,” guiding the Wise Men. Luke 2:39-40, 51-52 focuses on Jesus’ youth in Nazareth, the setting for stanza two. Jesus walking on water and calming storms can be found in several accounts. Matthew 14:22-33, Mark 4:35-41 and 6:45-52, Luke 8:22-25, and John 6:16-21 all are bases for stanza three. Likewise, all four gospels contain passion and resurrection accounts for stanza four.

Make the most of the hymn’s imagery, customizing it to the age. Younger children should focus on more concrete images; older ones should not be denied the concrete images but should also be challenged to see the more abstract applications. In stanza one, we can focus on the bright Bethlehem star. Can we also imagine a light that shone so brightly 2000 years ago that it still “fills all the world today?” In stanza two, we can see and even smell the flowers of Nazareth. Can we also appreciate that what Jesus did so long ago in his earthly life is still impacting us? In stanza three, we can share the serious and scary nature of a storm.

Can we also understand our own problems as “dark seas of trouble” and that Jesus still has power to bring peace? In stanza four, we can experience the sadness of death and contrast it with the joy of life. Can we also come to grips that life and death are always related, that one has no meaning without the other? Who in our congregation might need to hear this wonderful story? Anyone outside our walls?

WHEN TO USE THIS HYMN

Because of its first line this text often gets categorized as a Christmas hymn. This should not be overlooked; we need texts that let the baby grow up. Many of the Sundays and holy days that fall during the twelve days of Christmas focus on the few known events of Jesus’ childhood. The lessons for the Epiphany season (or those first Sundays in Ordinary Time) continue to tell of Jesus’ introduction to the world and vice versa. Because the fourth stanza completes the salvation story, we should also consider this text for the Easter season (not on Easter Sunday, but on one of the six Sundays that follow and perhaps even at Easter Vigil).

Because this hymn seems to resist an obvious specific liturgical day, it can be considered “general” and used at many times as a hymn of praise or commitment. Outside of worship, it would be useful for hymn-sings and programs. I have often taken my children’s choir “on the road” each spring, singing at nursing homes. Our programs are usually made up of worship repertoire from the previous year, and through words and music we walk through the church year and life of Christ. “O Sing a Song of Bethlehem” can tie it all together by singing a single stanza as an introduction to each section of songs.

RECENT HYMNALS THAT CONTAIN THIS HYMN

The United Methodist Hymnal, Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989 (#179)

The New Century Hymnal, Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995 (#51)

The Baptist Hymnal, Nashville: Convention Press, 1991 (#120)

The Worshiping Church, Carol Stream IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1990 (#192)

INSTRUMENTAL SETTINGS OF KINGSFOLD

Organ

Charles Callahan, *Partita on Kingsfold*, Concordia Publishing House #97-6692.

Timothy Albrecht, *Grace Notes, Volume VI*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers #11-10825.

Ennis Fruhauf, *Ralph Vaughan Williams and the English School*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers #11-10826.

David Cherwien, *Rejoice in God’s Saints*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers #11-10713.

Robert J. Powell, *Sing We to Our God Above*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers #11-10230.

Piano

Laura E. Wasson, *A Piano Tapestry*, Volume 2, Augsburg Fortress Publishers #11-10978.

Mark Albrecht, *Timeless Hymns of Faith for Piano*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers #11-10863.

Handbells

Hal H. Hopson, *Variants on Kingsfold*, (3 or 5 octaves) Augsburg Fortress Publishers #11-10703.

Barbara Kinyon, *O Sing a song of Bethlehem*, (3 octaves) Alfred Publishing Company #1995075.

Choral Settings

John Purifoy, *O Sing a Song of Bethlehem*, (SATB) Lorenz Publishing Company #10/1886T.

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