

# WAKE, AWAKE, FOR NIGHT IS FLYING

Our hymn, “Wake, Awake, For Night is Flying,” and its tune called “Wachet Auf,” were written nearly 400 years ago. It has an interesting history and is thought to be one of the greatest chorales ever written. (A chorale is a special name given to a kind of music very similar to that which we consider a hymn and its tune today. It is pronounced like *corral*, the pen in which horses are sometimes kept.)

This great hymn, or *chorale*, was written by a man who was a Lutheran pastor, a fine poet and an excellent musician. Do you know any man in recent years who combined all of these gifts or similar gifts? I can think of one! Did you ever hear of Dr. Albert Schweitzer? He was a great organist and musician, then decided to study and become an ordained minister; and then, after receiving his ordination as a minister, determined to pursue further study to become a medical doctor. After graduating he spent most of his life doing all these things—being a musician, a pastor and medical missionary in Africa, where he helped heal the sick and injured.

Four hundred years ago, Philipp Nicolai, who wrote our hymn, lived a life much like that. He was a great Lutheran preacher and pastor. During his pastorate in Westphalia, a small country that is now a part of the country of Germany, in a little town called Unna, a great and terrible epidemic, or pestilence, occurred in which hundreds of people sickened and died. It lasted more than half a year. He helped nurse the sick people of the city. To help sustain his congregation, and himself, he wrote several of these great hymns, known as *chorales*.

*Wachet Auf*, the German words which begin the original German text of this great hymn, is now the name of the chorale tune. This tune is often called by church musicians “The King of Chorales.” Philipp Nicolai wrote another great chorale, this is often given the name of “The Queen of Chorales.” It is set to words also written by Philipp Nicolai, “O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright.” Perhaps you have already studied this hymn.

One of the greatest composers of all time, Johann Sebastian Bach, wrote a great choral work called a Cantata using both text and tune of our chorale “Wake, Awake.” Bach wrote many cantatas but some of them were lost or destroyed by unknowing or unthinking individuals after his death. The cantata using our chorale has been given the number of 140. For an easy way of locating and identifying Bach’s many, many works, each was given a specific number.

Ask your choir director to play a recording of Cantata 140 - “Wake, Awake, For Night is Flying.” Bach wrote a very interesting melody that introduces one movement of this cantata. It is played either on the organ or by violins and violas. This is the melody: (see if you can hear it when it is played.)



The parable told by Jesus about the wise and foolish virgins on their way to a wedding is referred to in the words of our hymn. The Bible reference is Matthew 25: 1-13. Other Bible references are found in Isaiah 52: 8 and in Revelation 29: 6-9. Look them up and see how closely the composer stayed with the Bible words.

Did you notice in Bach’s cantata when you heard it that it seemed to have a different pulsation pattern? Our hymn is written in a meter called “rhythmic” while Bach wrote his arrangement in a way called “Iso-rhythmic.” Philipp Nicolai wrote his music so that it met the accent of his words, while Bach changed the original to a steady kind of pulsation with which we are more familiar today. “O Morning Star” the Queen of Chorales is printed in the “iso-rhythmic” style of today with the same number of *beats* in each measure. The “rhythmic” pattern has a varying number of *beats* in each measure according to the accents of the words.