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Notes

THE JO-MICHAEL SCHEIBE SACRED CHORAL SERIES

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Tonight in Bethlehem

Arranged by
Nathaniel J. Fryml



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COMPOSER'S NOTES

“O Little Town of Bethlehem...” For most of my young life, I had relegated this carol, with its simple yet quirky Victorian charm, to the category of “quaint American holiday traditions.” But it was not until I actually read the poem outside of its typical context that my head and heart became truly engaged with the material. My hope is that this choral resetting helps to bring a popular carol’s stirring images and claims out of the realm of holiday pleasantries and into the reality of a broken world in desperate need of healing and hope.

The captivating central image of the poem, a bright and eternal light shining in dark and dreamless streets, harkens back to an ancient Old Testament prophecy of a Star and Scepter arising out of Israel (Num. 24:17). No less intriguing is the interplay of oblivious sleep (stanza 1), awed silence (stanza 3), and joyful proclamation amongst stars, angels, and mortals as they witness divine activity (stanzas 2 and 4). But perhaps the most challenging element is the poem’s assertion that “the hopes and fears of all the years are met” (i.e. *reconciled*) in a geographical location at a literal point in history. This statement--and perhaps the entire poem--would seem rather overblown or even irrelevant if not for the poem’s recurrent reference to the enduring mystery of incarnation, encompassed by the name Emmanuel in the final stanza.

The decision to incorporate the original melody into the setting led first to a necessary “reconciliation” of duple and triple meter, which can be seen working itself out at various points. There somewhat naturally followed the similar but more complicated endeavor of weaving in melodic excerpts from no fewer than 17 other Christmas carols and hymns in the manner of a *quodlibet*, metaphorical of the threads of human and divine history converging in a tiny town in ancient Judea. The observer should be aware that, whereas pitch relationships are kept intact, considerable freedom is taken with regards to rhythm, making certain excerpts more difficult to spot than others. While some amusement may be derived from approaching this piece as a musical puzzle, one may wish to look deeper at the implied (unsung) text associated with each identified quotation, typically the first or last line of a carol’s opening stanza or refrain. In several instances, a fascinating commentary emerges.

Tonight in Bethlehem may be satisfactorily performed without violin accompaniment. However, the string part does contain several important quotations that, in addition to adding color, help to communicate a subtext of heavenly embrace. The pervasive “Silent Night,” for example, finds its full statement in the violin part only.

PERFORMANCE NOTES

The third stanza (bars 94 – 109) should relate in tempo to the rest of the piece by a ratio of approximately 2:3, as though the quarter notes in bar 94 and following were noted as dotted quarters. The *poco rall.* in bar 93 may be used to lead smoothly into this new but related tempo.

The downbeat of bar 95 should be handled very gently. The well-tuned chord should have a feeling of breathless amazement as it suddenly dissipates. The triplet quarter rest may be slightly lengthened for effect, but care should be taken to ensure that the pickup triplet quarter note is shorter and lighter than the stable quarters that follow (bars 94 – 95 are rhythmically analogous to bars 147 – 148). The new quarter pulse, once established, may be subjected to slight *rubato* moving forward.

From bars 95 (with pickup) through 109, the piano should be used for rehearsal only. If needed for support or tuning in performance, use of the *una corda* pedal is advised in order to keep the piano well beneath the voices.

In bars 170 – 174, consonants should be clearly enunciated, except those in [brackets], which are not sung.

To allow for greater flexibility, a transition is provided below that facilitates an optional cut of stanza three.

Tonight in Bethlehem

piano transition

(to be used in conjunction with optional cut, m. 87 - 120)

[from bar 85]

The first system of the musical score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. It begins with a piano (*mp*) dynamic and a *dolce* marking. The right hand features a melodic line with a *cresc. poco a poco* instruction. The left hand provides a simple harmonic accompaniment. The system concludes with an *8va* (octave) marking and a dashed line indicating the continuation of the piece.

The second system continues the piano transition. It starts with a *mf* dynamic and a *sempre cresc.* instruction. The right hand has a more complex texture with chords and moving lines. The left hand continues with a steady accompaniment. The system ends with an *8vb* (octave down) marking and a dashed line.

[to bar 122]

NATHANIEL FRYML



Nathaniel Fryml was recently appointed Director of Choral Activities at Amarillo College (Texas). Having recently completed doctoral coursework at the University of Southern California (DMA Candidate, Choral Music), he is currently engaged in dissertation research on the music of Antonín Dvořák. Mr. Fryml has served as assistant conductor of the Angeles Chorale, the Los Angeles Zimriyah Chorale, and the USC Thornton Concert Choir.

Born in Montreal, Quebec, of Czech and Dutch descent, Mr. Fryml was raised and educated in the United States, the first of his family to pursue a professional career in music. With degrees from Furman University (BM, Piano Performance and Music Theory) and the Cleveland Institute of Music (MM, Piano Performance), he has taught piano both in private studio as well as in pre-college programs at Furman University and Presbyterian College. He has worked as an accompanist at various institutions, including Clemson University, Presbyterian College, and Interlochen Center for the Arts.

Mr. Fryml has studied conducting with Jo-Michael Scheibe, Nick Strimple, Cristian Grases, Sharon Lavery, and Harold Farberman. His doctoral studies in music theory with Robert Moore were focused primarily on the Schenkerian method of analysis, and his varied success as a composer/arranger owes much to his studies with Mark

Kilstofte and Morten Lauridsen.

Passionate about music ministry, Mr. Fryml has also served as a church music director, band leader, and keyboardist. He and his wife Joanne are loving every moment of their daily adventure trying to keep up with their giggly son Isaac.