

In the Darkness Shines the Splendour

Bernadette Gasslein and
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A few summers ago, I was teaching a course on the Advent-Christmas season in sweltering 33°C heat in Ottawa, Canada's capital city. Since in the Roman Catholic tradition, the Christmas season begins on December 25 and ends three weeks later with the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, one of my goals was to help students understand how they might mark the unity of the season. Normally a hymn that is sung throughout the season is one way of doing this. While in other seasons it's fairly easy to find those pieces that can be sung all season long, I was struck that this is not true for the Christmas season. Since so much of the music hovers around the narrative of the birth of Christ, it's difficult to sing these texts scant days later, when Valetine's Day has already invaded the malls. Yet the other manifestations of Christ that have traditionally made up the Christmas season are isolated to the feast of the Epiphany. In short, the season loses its coherence.

It was with these concerns in mind that I set out to write a new text for the Christmas season. In it, I wanted to capture the breadth of the season, which plays out for us various aspects of the mystery of the incarnation: birth, family, suffering, limitation, manifestation, revelation, glory, divinisation. Out of these concerns, "In

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the Darkness Shines the Splendour" was born. I chose to set it to IRBY because in my own Roman Catholic tradition, it is associated with Christmas, but not well known. Like Matthew's infancy narrative, the text draws together the various aspects of the mystery of Christ, including his passage through death to new life, but sets them in a Christmas context.

The traditional text to IRBY, "Once in Royal David's City" was not meant as a Christmas hymn, but rather as a way of teaching the creed to children. In our musical minds, however, the tune is inextricably connected with the sublime sound of a single boy's voice at King's College, Cambridge. Heavenly though that effect may be, we must find a new way to perform the tune if we are to make it our own.

A sensitive accompanist will first examine the text for clues as to the musical structure of the hymn. The first three verses are somewhat introspective, all pointing toward the final verse, with its invitation to "sing in jubilation." The accompaniment therefore should be strong but not loud or harsh. The tempo should be moderate, not too fast, in order to give people time to digest the new words. Organ principals 8-4-2 would provide an accompaniment which would support the singing and at the same time be audible above the voices. A verse without pedals would give a feeling of lightness, but be aware that the men in the congregation will be starting on the C below middle C; let the organ pitch begin there with them, rather than an octave above. If you leave the pedals out for a verse, you don't want the men in the congregation to feel exposed, as though they were singing all alone.

IRBY is a tune which is characterized by the forward motion of the melody and the harmony. In practicing the hymn, work out the repeated notes in every voice, and make sure to repeat them all, rather than tie them over. This is an essential element in communicating the rhythm to the congregation. Make legato notes

smooth and melodic, and use the clear repetition of repeated notes to let "light" into your playing. For the upward eighth-note passages toward the end of the hymn, do yourself a favour and write the fingering and pedaling in your hymnal. In the actual performance of the hymn in worship, you'll be glad to have written down what you worked out in rehearsal. ■

Hymn Performance

In the darkness shines the splendour
Of the Word who took our flesh,
Welcoming, in love's surrender,
Death's dark shadow at his crèche.
Bearing ev'ry human story,
Word made flesh reveals his glory.

Light of nations, veiled in hist'ry,
Born of woman's flesh and blood,
Calling to the depths of myst'ry
Restless hearts that seek the good.
Healing ev'ry human story,
Word made flesh reveals his glory.

Broken bread, sustaining us in sorrow,
Wine poured out to toast our joy;
Exodus and new tomorrow,
Life's full promise to enjoy!
Gladd'ning ev'ry human story,
Word made flesh reveals his glory.

All God's people, sing in jubilation
Of the birth that sets us free,
Telling of the revelation:
Jesus, God's epiphany.
Celebrate the human story!
Word made flesh reveals our glory.

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