

MORNING
STAR

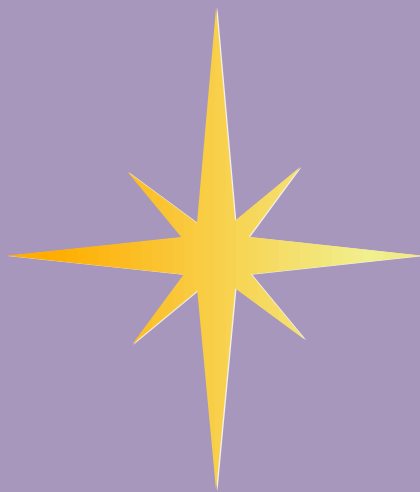
RADIANT
LOVE

THE ST. OLAF
CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL 2025

STUDENT PROGRAM NOTES PROJECT

The student-led Program Notes Project aims to educate students and audience members about the origins and significance of pieces performed at the St. Olaf Christmas Festival. All notes are researched and written by current and former St. Olaf students under the supervision of Dr. Louis Epstein. Any errors are the responsibility of the authors.

Please note that the official concert program, containing choral texts, rosters, and other event information, is available in a separate document.



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IN THE STILL EARLY LIGHT

Steve Danyew

Steve Danyew was born in 1983 and grew up in New England improvising on piano and playing the saxophone. After performing as a saxophonist in the University of Miami Wind Ensemble under the direction of Gary Green, Danyew became inspired to compose for wind bands and received a Bachelor's degree in Composition from the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami.¹ Danyew also obtained a Master's degree in Composition and a Certificate in Arts Leadership from the Eastman School of Music, where he later served as an instructor in the Arts Leadership Program, assisting young musicians with crafting their own music careers.² Danyew's website, Musician&Co, created with his wife, Ashley, focuses on career resources for young and upcoming professional musicians. One of Danyew's most popular works, "Into the Silent Land," was named the winner of the 2019 Walter Beeler Memorial Composition Prize. Additionally, Danyew has received 24 composition awards and honors³ from organizations such as Broadcast Music Inc., the College Band Directors National Association, the American Society of Composers, and various colleges and universities.⁴ This year, Danyew was one of 100 Frost School of Music alumni awarded a centennial medal in celebration of the university's 100th anniversary.⁵

"In the Still Early Light" was commissioned for this year's Christmas Fest by Dr. Chung Park, conductor of the St. Olaf Orchestra. Danyew's piece is loosely based on the traditional carol, "Still, Still, Still," originating in Salzburg around 1819 and depicting the baby Jesus sleeping in the manger surrounded by adoring angels and Mary singing a lullaby.⁶ "In the Still Early Light" begins with a twinkle from the glockenspiel and a faint yet peaceful murmur from the violins as the piano sings the beginning of the Austrian carol and flows into an original melody. The basses, violas, and cellos enter with graceful strength, anticipating the morning sun soon to rise. An oboe rings from a distance, and as its call comes to an end, the reminder of the morning's stillness soon reenters. As the beginning piano melody repeats, it fades into the sound of the flute soaring with splendor and finishing the remaining melody. The glockenspiel chimes in with a countermelody, then the strings return. The clarinets, remaining flutes and oboes, and bassoons join the music for the first time, as if awaking from their slumber and awaiting the light that will soon reach the earth. As these instruments crescendo beside the rumble of the timpani and wash of the suspended cymbal, the sun reveals the vast landscape having been shrouded in darkness for hours beforehand. The orchestra decrescendos and the piano melody returns once more, with eyes adjusted to the newfound yet familiar colors of the natural world.



¹ "Steve Danyew: Composer," Steve Danyew, 2016-2025, <https://www.stevedanyew.com/bio>.

² "Steve Danyew," Wind Repertory Project, 17 September 2024, https://www.windrep.org/Steve_Danyew.

³ "Steve Danyew: Composer," Steve Danyew, 2016-2025, <https://www.stevedanyew.com/bio>.

⁴ "Steve Danyew," Wind Repertory Project, 17 September 2024, https://www.windrep.org/Steve_Danyew.

⁵ "Steve Danyew: Composer," Steve Danyew, 2016-2025, <https://www.stevedanyew.com/bio>.

⁶ William D. Crump "Still, Still, Still," from The Christmas Encyclopedia, 2013, <https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9vaofYdGlibGU6NDIzMjk2>.

WIE SCHÖN LEUCHTET DER MORGENSTERN

Michael Praetorius / ed. James Bobb

“Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern” (“How Brightly Shines the Morning Star”) is a hymn originally written in 1597 by Lutheran pastor and composer Philipp Nicolai. Drawing on imagery from the Psalms, the text unfolds as a mystical wedding song, celebrating divine love and renewal. In the early 17th century, Michael Praetorius created his own arrangement of Nicolai’s hymn. The text evokes themes of beginnings, hope, and light, aligning beautifully with the theme of this year’s Christmas Festival: “O morning star, how fair and bright!” In the modern-day adaptation we’re hearing by Dr. James Bobb, the Renaissance work is reimagined for full orchestra and symphonic choir. The orchestra provides a luminous foundation while the choir divides into callers and responders, creating an exchange between contemplation and rejoicing. The music alternates between interwoven contrapuntal textures and passages of vivid homophony. One group of singers calls out with a balanced, pure tone - its sound ethereal and transparent, like the first sun rays of dawn. The responding group answers with vigor and unity, reinforcing the proclamation of the opening lines.¹



¹ “Britannica Editors. “Michael Praetorius.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 11, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Michael-Praetorius>; Hymnary Editors. “Philipp Nicolai,” 1556-1608. *Hymnary.org*. Accessed November 14, 2025. https://hymnary.org/person/Nicolai_P; Praetorius, Michael. *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*. Edited by Uwe Wolf. Stuttgart: Carus-Verlag, 2016. PDF. Accessed November 8, 2025. <https://www.carusmedia.com/images-intern/medien/10/1002800/1002800x.pdf>.

O COME, O COME EMMANUEL

John Ferguson (ELW 257-2008 version)

John "Ferg" Ferguson (1941-2025) was an American church music scholar, choral conductor, teacher, organist, and composer. He conducted the St. Olaf Cantorei during his tenure as professor of organ and church music at St. Olaf College. He also served as cantor to the student congregation. He was a prolific arranger and composer, particularly of hymns, with more than 100 printed works to his name.¹

The text that serves as the basis for Ferguson's arrangement, "Veni Emmanuel," is an advent hymn drawn from a 15th century French processional.² There is some debate about the origins of the antiphons in the hymn, with some sources saying parts of the text date back to the reign of Charlemagne in the 8th century.³ Whether or not it was originally a hymn for the advent is not clear, but the text has since morphed into a popular basis for Christmas hymns. The Ferguson arrangement was first performed for the 2008 St. Olaf Christmas festival.

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel" begins with gentle strings, introducing the male voices in the choir. They sing of a captive people, explaining the necessity of God's return. After the high voices join them, the choir gradually grows in intensity before the first "rejoice" refrain, but the piece remains in a minor key, creating a somber and contemplative tone. The brass section joins in with a royal entrance at the second repeat of the "rejoice" refrain, emphasizing the majesty of the inevitable return of God. The final refrain is sung confidently, trusting that the son of God will come to save His people. While listening to the piece, take note of how the "rejoice" refrain changes musically.



¹ "In Memory of John Ferguson (1941-2025)." St. Olaf College Music, January 10, 2025. <https://wp.stolaf.edu/music/2025/01/johnferguson/>.

² Stulken, Marilyn Kay. *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*. Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1981, p. 136.

³ Westermeyer, Paul. *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Augsburg Fortress, 2010, p. 24.

THERE SHALL A STAR (CHRISTUS)

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy

When Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy died in November of 1847,¹ he left behind an unfinished oratorio titled *Erde, Hölle und Himmel* (Earth, Hell, and Heaven), shortened to *Christus*.² What remains are three sections from the oratorio: a soprano recitative, a male trio, and a chorus. The chorus, “There Shall a Star From Jacob,” is a prophecy about the coming of a messiah, drawing on the biblical text from Numbers 24:17.³ The work was written and has been interpreted as a Christian work, however, Mendelssohn may nod to his Jewish upbringing by referencing texts from the Torah. The main phrase in the chorus reads: “There shall a star from Jacob rise up, and a scepter from Israel come forth to dash in pieces princes and nations,”⁴ describing the coming of the Messiah. The scepter alludes to the Messiah being a leader, and the phrase “to dash in pieces” describes the final judgement for sin, believed to be fulfilled by Christ.⁵

Mendelssohn was a unique composer during the nineteenth century thanks to his way of combining Classical sounds with the emotions and storytelling of the Romantics.⁶ Mendelssohn’s commitment to the music that came before him is evident in his own compositions, including what is left of *Christus*. The work uses both Classical and Baroque styles, adopting a structure that evokes J.S. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* and G.F. Handel’s *Messiah*; however, the music’s vivid emotional depth and dramatic contrasts are deeply Romantic.

The piece begins with the orchestra supporting the choir as the soft and luminescent central theme travels through each voice. The melody radiates hope and comfort, like a lullaby. Then, with the words “to dash in pieces princes and nations,” a violent change of tone shocks the listener with dissonant chords in both the choir and orchestra. Explosions of sound on the words “dash” and “pieces” conjure images of

¹ Sposato, Jeffrey S. “6 Christus.” In *The Price of Assimilation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195149746.003.0007>. <https://wp.stolaf.edu/music/2025/01/johnferguson/>.

² Sposato, Jeffrey S. “6 Christus.” In *The Price of Assimilation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195149746.003.0007>.

³ Debi Simons, “Mendelssohn’s Farewell--Three Sections from His ‘Christus.’” *Behind the Music*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.debisimons.com/there-shall-a-star-from-christus/>.

⁴ Felix Mendelssohn ed. Olaf C. Christiansen. *There Shall a Star From Jacob*. San Diego, California. Neil A. Kjos Music Company, 1937.

⁵ Debi Simons, “Mendelssohn’s Farewell--Three Sections from His ‘Christus.’” *Behind the Music*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.debisimons.com/there-shall-a-star-from-christus/>.

⁶ Edward Lockspeiser, Felix Mendelssohn. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, September 17, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Felix-Mendelssohn>.

despair and turbulence. The “harmonic drama”⁷ is then immediately displaced by the “peace and luminosity”⁸ of a chorale without the support of the orchestra.

The original translation from German by Olaf C. Christiansen was edited and improved by Robert Scholz around 20 years ago to more clearly reflect the original German text, which is the version that St. Olaf’s ensembles have performed since. The edits reveal the astral qualities of the chorale, evoking the imagery of this year’s St. Olaf Christmas Festival theme: the morning star and its radiant light. The chorale is the perfect place to express this hope, because every voice sings together. As the choir sings “with sudden radiance from afar,” and “with light and comfort glowing,” the collective dispels the darkness and declares the arrival of light and peace. With its emotional contrast and triumphant journey, “There Shall a Star From Jacob” is the perfect anthem to illustrate the triumph of hope over despair.



⁷ Francis Rumsey, “There Shall a Star (from *Christus*) - Felix Mendelssohn.” Viscount Organs, January 9, 2023, <https://viscountorgans.net/there-shall-a-star-felix-mendelssohn/>.

⁸ Francis Rumsey, “There Shall a Star (from *Christus*) - Felix Mendelssohn.” Viscount Organs, January 9, 2023, <https://viscountorgans.net/there-shall-a-star-felix-mendelssohn/>.

LIGHT EVERLASTING

Olaf C. Christiansen

“Light Everlasting” by Olaf C. Christiansen radiates warmth and love, inviting the listener to an intimate conversation with the divine. Olaf C. Christiansen was raised in the St. Olaf College musical tradition, evident in his own compositions. The son of F. Melius Christiansen and the conductor of the St. Olaf Choir from 1941 to 1968,¹ Olaf C. Christiansen continued to develop the music program at St. Olaf College, solidifying the college’s ensembles as some of the nation’s best.² A vocalist trained in opera by baritone Paul Parks, O. Christiansen helped develop the pure vowels and percussive diction that are iconic traits of the choirs at St. Olaf College.³

“When considering the choir’s ability to communicate, Olaf felt that the selections should be based on text rather than music,” writes Christina Armendarez.⁴ O. Christiansen’s compositions seem to be constructed from text rather than from chordal structures, allowing the conductor to mold tempo and volume to accentuate the text. This vivid text painting proves to be true for “Light Everlasting,” composed around 1948. The piece begins by swelling into the word “light,” then surrounding the listener with warmth as the vocalists move forward into the highest pitches of the entire piece: “O, love never failing.” As the piece progresses, the choir splits, echoing each other on the phrases: “Make known to all nations! Thy salvation!” illustrating joyful exclamations of faith. The choir comes together in a monumental moment on the word “peace,” inviting the audience to become agents of everlasting peace. The voices then resound an intimate call for help with the words: “and help us, O Creator, thy temple to be.”⁴ The contrasting thematic material in each phrase of this piece draws on O. Christiansen’s commitment to the text and to how music can portray emotions. Christiansen believed fiercely in music’s ability to call people to action because “as we feel, so we speak, act, and react.”⁵

“Light Everlasting” serves as an impeccable vessel for the theme of St. Olaf’s 2025 Christmas Festival—a compassionate and thoughtful call for peace that envelops the listener in the luminescence of a morning star.



¹ Olaf C. Christiansen. ACDA of Minnesota. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170204111511/http://www.acda-mn.org/olaf-c-christiansen>.

² Johnson, Albert Rykken. “The Christiansen Choral Tradition: F. Melius Christiansen, Olaf C. Christiansen, and Paul J. Christiansen.” ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 1973.

³ Armendarez, Christina Marie. “The Influence of Fredrik Melius Christiansen on Six Minnesota Conductor-Composers.” ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2006.

⁴ Olaf C. Christiansen, *Light Everlasting*. San Diego, California: Neil A. Kjos Music Company, 1948.

⁵ Johnson, Albert Rykken. “The Christiansen Choral Tradition: F. Melius Christiansen, Olaf C. Christiansen, and Paul J. Christiansen.” ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 1973.

NORTH STAR

Joseph Kemper

“North Star” opens with a sound like starlight in a clear night sky: singing handbells played with wooden dowels create a smooth, piercing tone that seems to come from the air itself. The sopranos then enter with a wistful lullaby melody, which will go on to sustain the entire piece. This melody ends each cycle with the words, “Savior of radiant love” sung freely in an arch that touches the heavens with its beauty. This is followed by, “luminous slumbering north star,” with the word “north” suspended for a few extra seconds, insistent and timeless.

“North Star” is a piece which exudes comfort and affection, made all the sweeter by its tender origins. In its first form, North Star was a lullaby, written by Dr. Joseph Kemper and his wife for their daughter, Cecilia, who was born in 2020. At a time when a sense of confusion and darkness reigned, Cecilia was their guiding light. Special to their family from the beginning, “North Star” soon became a source of comfort and light for many. Inspired by Abbie Betinis and the Alfred Burt family tradition, Dr. Kemper and his wife Abby Kemper create an annual Christmas card each December, that includes a newly written carol by Dr. Kemper and original art by Abby. The structure of “North Star” is inspired by the syllabic poetic structure of “Earth and All Stars,” a hymn written by Herb Brokering and set to music by David Johnson for the 90th anniversary of St. Olaf College. In the hymn the word “marvelous” is stretched in a multiple-syllable arch. This feature is present in North Star—at the end of the soprano melody the word “radiant” stretches in the same manner, creating a moment that is expansive and timeless.

The text of “North Star,” too, draws on rich artistic history. In 1942, Benjamin Britten wrote Hymn to St. Cecilia, who is the patron saint of music. The text for the piece is by W.H. Auden, and the refrain reads, “blessed Cecilia appear in visions to all musicians, appear and inspire.” These words became the inspiration for a portion of North Star, when the choir sings, “immortal fire burn and inspire.” In “North Star,” however, these words are not for the patron saint of music, but for Kemper’s own daughter, Cecilia.

Returning to the tradition inspired by Abbie Betinis and the Alfred Burt family, the Kempers’ yearly carol and artwork have, in recent years, been accompanied by a recording of the song, made by Shohei Kobayshi, with whom Dr. Kemper overlapped while doing his doctorate at the University of Michigan. Kobayshi is a multi-faceted musician with extensive experience as a singer-songwriter, ensemble vocalist, and choral conductor. Kemper shared that Kobayshi’s recordings always reveal musical textures and colors that were not necessarily present in the sheet music, and “North Star” was no exception. Now

included in the choral piece are several embellishments and harmonic motifs inspired by Kobayshi's version of "North Star" including the ornamentation on "radiant," and the way the melody note in "north" is suspended for a few extra seconds. The choral version also contains textual alterations which stem from the need to meld the piece into the context of the St. Olaf Christmas Festival. So while the piece is for Cecilia at its heart, a small lyric alteration, "Daughter of radiant light" will be changed to "Savior of radiant love," subtly weaving the song into the Christmas story, and subsequently Christmas Fest, and the 2025 theme, O Morning Star, O Radiant Love.

All the alterations result in a piece appropriate for the rich tradition of the St. Olaf Christmas Festival, yet the sentiment of its origin remains: the tender love and wonder uniquely found in the hearts of parents at the birth of an infant, and the power of children to guide and to inspire.¹²



¹ Judd, Timothy. "Britten's 'Hymn to Saint Cecilia': VOCES8." *The Listeners' Club*, November 21, 2023. <https://thelistenersclub.com/2023/11/22/brittens-hymn-to-saint-cecilia-voces8/>.

² "Featured Artist: Shohei Kobayashi." Resonance Ensemble. Accessed November 16, 2025. <https://www.resonancechoral.org/shohei-kobayashi>.

LET EVERY HEART

Cary Reed Ratcliff

Born in 1953, hailing from the great state of California, Cary Reed Ratcliff has led and continues to lead a sensational career. Based in Rochester, New York, Ratcliff studied composition and piano at Eastman School of Music. Since graduating, Ratcliff has composed many impressive works for choral and orchestral ensembles, also delving into chamber music, art song and opera. Notable compositions of Ratcliff's include his large-scale opera *Eleni*, his *Ode to Common Things*, an oratorio on poems by the late Pablo Neruda, and his Viola Concerto, which won the ASCAP Nissim prize for best new American orchestral work in 1990. In recent years, Ratcliff has served as the Artistic Director of Madrigalia, a renowned chamber choir in Rochester. Since being appointed in 2014, Ratcliff has produced two CD recordings with the ensemble. Madrigalia also contributed to the recording of Ratcliff's *Eleni*.

Ratcliff's "Let Every Heart," originally commissioned for Christ Church in Pittsford, New York, is making its third appearance in the St. Olaf Christmas Festival. Previously performed in 2012 and 2016, "Let Every Heart" is set to the text of the classic hymn "Joy to the World." However, as opposed to hearing "Joy to the world, the Lord is come" as the first phrase, Ratcliff introduces "Let Every Heart" with the words "Let every heart prepare him room and heav'n and nature sing," essentially flip-flopping the text. Ratcliff does this consistently throughout the piece. Acrobatic by nature, "Let Every Heart" moves rather quickly. Following the first verse, the choir exchanges the exclamations "Sing Emmanuel" and "Hallelujah" amongst one another, almost echoing each other. Departing expository material, the tenors and basses grow heavy in their voices, creating a drone effect, while the sopranos and altos carry on in their spritely frenzy. Some time later, the choir circles back to the beginning, once again caught in between a duet of "Hallelujahs" and "Emmanuels." Suddenly, an intense series of "Glorias" fractures the once bouncy and flittery feel, where the choir expands in both volume and intensity. Eventually resolving into a more elegant, legato manner, Ratcliff finally puts the text back in the right order, where the choir at last rejoices, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come; let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare him room and sing."



¹ "Cary Ratcliff," *LumiVoice*, accessed November 6, 2025, <https://lumivoice.org/members/cary-ratcliff>

² Donald Grantham, Shawn Kirchner, Cary Ratcliff, "Pablo Neruda The Poet Sings," 2015, harmonia mundi.

³ "Orchestral Music," Cary Ratcliff, accessed November 6, 2025, <https://caryratcliff.com/orchestral-music>

³ "Our History," *Madrigalia*, accessed November 6, 2025, <https://www.madrigalia.org/history>

⁴ "Staff," *Madrigalia*, accessed November 6, 2025, <https://www.madrigalia.org/staff>

⁵ "The ASCAP Foundation Rudolf Nissim Prize," The ASCAP Foundation, accessed November 6, 2025, <https://www.ascapfoundation.org/programs/awards/award-recipients/nissim>

HE COMES TO US AS ONE UNKNOWN

Sir C. Hubert H. Parry / arr. John Ferguson

English composer and teacher Hubert Parry wrote the oratorio *Judith* between 1887 and 1888, from which the hymn tune Repton originated. With its even, balanced phrases, the tune lends itself nicely to hymn settings and has been used for several texts, including “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.” “He Comes to Us” suits liturgical themes of divine calling, presence, mystery, and quiet contemplation—especially during Communion. Timothy Dudley-Smith’s text portrays the divine arriving quietly and unexpectedly: “He comes to us as one unknown, unseen, unheard; ... a pulse of being stirred.” The second verse continues with a naturalistic tone, finding traces of God in “a falling star,” “the ocean’s fume and foam,” and “the top of the trees.” John Ferguson’s arrangement highlights these qualities vividly. Scored for mixed voices and orchestra, it allows each section of the choir to carry the melody at some point—a signature trait of Ferguson’s arrangements. The volume of the voices rise as phrases begin “He comes in truth when faith is grown; believed, obeyed, adored” then recede gently toward the lines’ completion, “the Christ in all the scriptures shown, as yet unseen but not unknown, our savior and our lord.” The swell in dynamic, referred to as *mesa di voce*, perhaps paints an aural picture of our souls expanding then returning to rest, a breath of life, or the presence and withdrawal from divine inspiration.



¹ “Hymnary.org. “He Comes to Us as One Unknown: A Breath Unseen, Unheard.” Accessed October 27, 2025. https://hymnary.org/text/he_comes_to_us_as_one_unknown_a_breath.

³ The Editors of *Encyclopedia Britannica*. “Sir Hubert Hastings Parry, Baronet.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Last updated October 3, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hubert-Hastings-Parry>.

ANGELS FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY

Henry T. Smart / arr. Charles Forsberg (ELW 275)

The melody for the hymn “Angels from the Realms of Glory” comes from an 18th-century French carol that we know as “Angels We Have Heard on High.” The hymn was originally a poem by James Montgomery, published on Christmas Eve of 1816 in the *Sheffield Iris*, an English newspaper for which Montgomery was editor. In this newspaper, Montgomery published his own writings and the works of others that opposed slavery, child labor, and local homicides. He was arrested once in 1795 and once in 1796 for his political views and publishings.

Montgomery’s poem was put to music by Henry T. Smart in 1867, twelve years before his death. At this time in his life, Smart was blind, and his compositions were recorded on paper by his daughter, Ellen.

In the last stanza, “mercy break your chains” calls attention to the values of justice and action of standing up for others. Listen for the gentle and bright sound of the triangle and triumphant drums and trumpets, which perhaps highlight Montgomery’s belief that worship and community uplift and support others.



GAUDETE

arr. Michael Engelhardt

This piece, arranged by Michael Engelhardt, starts with a strong set of solos that resemble chanting. The lyrics themselves mean “ Rejoice, rejoice! Christ is born of the Virgin Mary, rejoice!” It's a celebratory announcement that the piece's purpose is to spread for all to hear. The percussion enters in, at first slowly, then strikingly grows in intensity and power. The choir follows with a beautiful pattern of unison and harmony that keeps the flow of the piece going. At the end of the section the choir ends in a sudden soft unison that brings the attention back to the choir. They continue to sing in a repetitive round that adds new parts each time and builds the emotion of the piece before they go back into unison and join back in with percussion. The choir matched with the percussion keeps the theme of chanting. They briefly slow down to a mysterious tone and style before finally building to the ending climbing up the staff until ending with a strikingly powerful harmony. The piece was originally composed for higher voice choirs and beautifully combines the lower parts with the higher ones. The piece emulates the strength and importance of the message in a “hear me and listen to the news” fashion. The modern style of the percussion with the traditional text and tune captures audiences' attention and spreads the Good News in a new way.



CONVIDANDO ESTÁ LA NOCHE

Juan Garcia de Zéspedes arr. Eugene Rogers

In the mid 17th century, Spanish colonies in what would be present-day Mexico were experiencing an emergence of new musical styles and traditions. At the time in the fairly young colony of Nueva España (New Spain), church music consisted of genres like motets and cantatas. These were imported straight from the ongoing Baroque movement in Europe, and would have been sung in Latin. Various local music traditions co-existed and often interacted, creating a hybrid musical culture influenced by Europeans, indigenous peoples, and enslaved Africans.

Juan Garcia de Zéspedes (c. 1619-1678) was a composer, violinist, and singer. He was born in Puebla, Mexico, and was employed as a maestro de capilla (chapel master) at the Pueblo Cathedral starting in 1664. The previous maestro, Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla, was a mentor to Zéspedes until the former's death. Padilla was an influential composer well versed in a style of music known as villancico. Villancico was a popular form of Spanish and Latin American music influenced by local dialects and rhythms; it is strongly associated with celebrations like Christmas.

Convidando Está la Noche is Zéspedes' most widely known composition. It is a villancico and was composed for Christmas. The piece begins with a solemn guitar melody accented with strummed chords. The choir sings a juguete (a playful opening section) in harmony and unaccompanied. Then, the piece launches into gear, transitioning to an upbeat section called a guaracha (a form of Afro-Cuban dance music). The instruments burst out in an energetic, syncopated dance rhythm as the tenors call out in a unison refrain. The response comes from the whole choir in harmony. This repeated call and response is another characteristic common to the villancico style.

The piece is vibrant and merry. The text is an invitation to dance and rejoice in celebration of Christ's birth. The lyrics incorporate sacred texts and some cultural idioms from secular sources. Like the diverse musical scene of 17th-century Latin America itself, *Convidando Está la Noche* represents the coming together of cultures and musical traditions. The piece is about bringing people together to celebrate; it is an invitation to unity and joy through music.¹²³⁴⁵⁶⁷



¹ "Latin Music Genres." *Carnegie Hall*. October 9, 2024. Accessed October 25, 2025.

<https://www.carnegiehall.org/Explore/Articles/2024/10/09/Latin-Music-Genres#:~:text=Guaracha%20originated%20in%20Cuba%20in,appearance%20on%20November%2013%2C%202000>

² Dr. Joseph Kemper, interview by Cooper Grant, St Olaf College, October 27, 2025

³ Grases, Cristian. "Is It Really Just Baroque?: An Overview of Latin American Colonial Choral Music." *Choral Journal* 55, no. 2 (September 2014): 24-35.

⁴ Guerrero, Francisco, Juan Vásquez, Anonymous, Francisco Escalada, Gaspar Fernandes, Juan Garcia de Zéspedes, Antonio de Salazar, et al. "NAVIDAD - Christmas Music from Latin America and Spain." Hong Kong: Naxos Digital Services US Inc., 2012.

⁵ Pontvik, Peter, Andrés Flores, Juan García de Zéspedes, Juan de Lianas, Roque Jacinto Chavarría, Santiago de Murcia, Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla, Gaspar Fernandes, and performer Ensemble Villancico. *¡Tambalagumbá!: early world music in Latin America*. Georgsmarienhütte: cpo, 2013.

⁶ Russell, Craig H. "García de Zéspedes [Céspedes], Juan." In *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Accessed October 24, 2025.

⁷ Savino, Richard, Manuel José de Quiroz, Rafael Antonio Castellanos, Sebastián Durón, Antonio de Salazar, Andrea Falconieri, Juan Francés de Iribarren, et al. *Villancicos y Cantadas: Sacred Songs and Dances from Latin America and Spain*. Port Washington, N.Y: Koch International Classics, 2005.

A SPOTLESS ROSE

Herbert Howells

Herbert Howells (1892-1983) was a musically and historically significant Anglican composer and organist. He held a degree in composition from the Royal College of Music, where he was later a professor of composition. Howells was said to be musically inspired by architecture, which serves as the foundation for his signature “strange and wonderful chordal ambiguities.”¹

The text of “A Spotless Rose” originated in western Germany sometime during the 15th century, with the first edition of the text being published in German as “Es ist ein Ros Entsprungen” in 1599.² The carol describes a rose blossoming in the dark of winter. The rose is revealed to be a metaphor for the birth of Jesus in the December cold, with a significant focus placed on Mary as the “purest maid” and mother of Jesus.

Howells said that he wrote the music that accompanies the text while, “[looking] out on iron railings and the main Bristol-Gloucester railway line, with shunting trucks bumping and banging,” emphasizing the piece's contemplative nature.³ He wrote the piece as a group of three carol-anthems, along with his works “Here is the Little Door” and “Sing Lullaby,” sometime between 1918 and 19202. The music was written with his mother in mind, and he dedicated it to her.

The piece begins with a gentle, swaying melody, ebbing and flowing like a pleasant breeze. The tempo slows before introducing the soloist, whose tale of Jesus’ birth is accompanied by the fading voices of the rest of the choir, again mimicking the breeze blowing outside a window. Notice the slight moments of division after the solo, and take note of how musical discord contrasts with contemplative silence in the piece.



¹ Carter, Jeffrey Richard. “Consistency and Change in the Sacred Choral Anthems of Herbert Howells.” *The Choral Journal*, vol. 42, no. 8, 2002, pp. 12. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23554431>.

² Liebergen, Patrick M. *Singer’s Library of Song: Medium Voice, Book & 2 CDs*. Alfred Music Publishing, 2005, p. 122.

³ Spicer, Paul. *Herbert Howells*. Seren Books, 1998, p. 67.

GLORIA (MISA CRIOLLA)

Ariel Ramírez / arr. Padre Jesús Gabriel Segade

Misa Criolla, which translates to Creole Mass, is a Latin American Mass which was written by Ariel Ramirez in 1963¹ just as the Second Vatican Council permitted the celebration of the Catholic Mass in the vernacular.² However, its public premiere was in Stuttgart, Germany on the 9th of March, 1967.³ Ramirez said that after his post-Holocaust visit to Germany, he was compelled to compose “something deep and religious that would revere life and involve people beyond their creeds, race, color or origin.” He added in another interview that the *Misa Criolla* was a tribute to human dignity, courage and freedom, with a distinct message of “Christian love.”⁴ In the *Misa Criolla* Ramirez combined Christian liturgy (sung in the language of the Spanish conquerors) with rhythms and melodies of Creole folk music.⁵

In this arrangement, the piece begins with an enthusiastic piano passage that ushers in the instruments which further establish the rhythm. Thereafter, the choir joins in praising God in call and response, with the first part culminating in the high notes that denote God’s great glory. Then a shift happens, moving towards a solemn sound, a slower tempo, a prayer. A sound that pleads for mercy and atonement with utmost sincerity. After the prayer, the entire choir as well as the instruments reignite the atmosphere of praise to God.



¹ Joe Hardtke Hardtke and Dr. Jonathan Øverby, “The Odyssey Series” (Wisconsin Public Radio , December 27, 2014), *Misa Criolla* ² Adam Bernstein, “Ariel Ramirez Dies; Argentine Composer Wrote ‘Misa Criolla,’” *Washingtonpost.com*, February 21, 2010, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/20/AR2010022003418.html>.

³ Robengart, “Ariel Ramírez (1921-2010) - La Misa Criolla Y Alfonsina,” *Tango Diario - Podcasts about Tango and Folklore Music*, October 17, 2022, <https://tangodiario.com/en/podcast/ariel-ramirez-missa-criolla/>.

⁴ Adam Bernstein, “Ariel Ramirez Dies; Argentine Composer Wrote ‘Misa Criolla,’” *Washingtonpost.com*, February 21, 2010, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/20/AR2010022003418.html>.

⁵ Festwochen der, “Misa Criolla,” *Altemusik.at* (MASSIVE ART WebServices GmbH, 2018), <https://www.altemusik.at/en/events/misa-criolla>.

SPLENDOR (ILLUMINARE)

Elaine Hagenberg

“Splendor” is the opening piece of composer Elaine Hagenberg’s first extended work *Illuminare*, totaling five movements and calling for a chamber orchestra and an SATB choir. Published in 2022, the piece premiered in July of that same year, performed by the Arlington Master Chorale, conducted by Randy Jordan.¹ Elaine Hagenberg (b. 1979) is an award-winning composer, whose vocal compositions have been performed internationally in choirs ranging from high school to professional levels. She has been featured at ACDA conferences, All-State festivals, Carnegie Hall, and other notable concert halls across the globe.

Hagenberg describes “Illuminare” and “Splendor” on her website: “Using lesser-known sacred Latin, Greek, and English texts, the piece takes us through a season of beauty and goodness that has been disrupted by darkness and confusion. But as Light gradually returns, hope is restored, illuminating our future and guiding us in peace.”² The text in this piece is from Saint Ambrose (337-397),³ and was written as a morning hymn asking for help and counsel throughout the day- directed to the Holy Trinity, and especially to Christ as the light of the world.⁴

When asked about “Splendor,” conductor Dr. Therees Hibbard described the piece as opening “from heavenly light, from above, and shining down, no earthly ties. And then it rises upward to the light, slowly spiraling forward...rises, rises and then off we go.” Like a powerful burst of sunshine over a mountain peak, the choir enters with the radiance of a thousand suns. Exclaiming in wonder at God’s glory, the men and women have a playful yet powerful dance and exchange lines throughout the entire piece. The backing orchestra produces an elegance and mysticality to the piece that really elevates the sacred text of the piece.



¹ Elaine Hagenberg. “Elaine Hagenberg,” 2024. <https://www.elainehagenberg.com/compositions/illuminare>.

² Elaine Hagenberg Music. “‘Splendor’ with Chamber Orchestra by Elaine Hagenberg.” Youtu.be, July 15, 2022. https://youtu.be/vlX_ZAwzhiA?si=S9bRgQb8foIA8lX2.

³ www.franciscanmedia.org. “Saint Ambrose | Franciscan Media,” December 7, 2021. <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/saint-ambrose/>.

⁴ Preces-latinae.org. “Splendor Paternae Gloriam,” 2025. <https://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/Splendor.html>.

GLORIES RING

Steven Amundson

Glories Ring was written by Steven Amundson, then conductor of the St. Olaf Orchestra, for the 2007 St. Olaf Christmas Festival. Its premiere by the St. Olaf Orchestra and St. Olaf Handbell Choir was broadcast nationally on PBS television and National Public Radio. One of Amundson's most performed works, *Glories Ring* has been performed around the country by ensembles such as the Alabama and Las Vegas Symphonies, and even as far as Seoul, South Korea.¹

A jubilant piece for orchestra and handbell choir, *Glories Ring* quotes “Ding Dong Merrily on High” amidst full strings and bright ringing brass. Though it is now known as a Christmas carol, the tune was originally a secular French dance tune titled “Branle de l'Official.”² (watch the dance [here](#)). English composer George Ratcliffe Woodward wrote the lyrics to the carol, and drew upon his interest in church bells for inspiration. The song was first published as a carol in 1924 Woodward's *The Cambridge Carol-Book: Fifty-two Songs for Christmas, Easter, And Other Seasons*.³

In *Glories Ring*, the carol tune is first introduced in the upper strings, independently of Amundson's original melody, and is stated again more confidently in the woodwinds. Both melodies are eventually combined in the climactic moment of the piece. Much of the carol melody can also be found in the 5-octave handbell choir, which provides a unique addition rarely seen in standard symphony orchestra repertoire. Combining uplifting melody, exuberant brass fanfares, and beautifully sweeping lyricism in the strings, *Glories Ring* is a joyous celebration of the birth of Christ.



¹ “‘Glories Ring’ for Orchestra and Handbells.” TMR Richard Erickson, Proprietor Northfield, Minnesota, tempomusicresource.com/glories-ring. Accessed 17 Nov. 2025.

² Buja, Maureen. “Dance, Dance, Dance: The Branle.” *Interlude.Hk*, 30 Sept. 2022, interlude.hk/dance-dance-dance-the-branle/.

³ Buja, Maureen. “The History behind the Popular Carol ‘Ding Dong Merrily on High.’” *Interlude.Hk*, 22 Dec. 2023, interlude.hk/from-dance-song-to-carol-ding-dong-merrily-on-high/.

THE FRIENDLY BEASTS

Setting by Robert Scholz

“The Friendly Beasts” is derived from the 12th-century Latin hymn “Orientis partibus”, originally sung during the medieval Donkey Feast, a part of the larger Feast of Fools, in which a false pope or bishop was elected and the hierarchical positions of the clergy would switch. The English lyrics are commonly attributed to American writer Robert Davis, though their true authorship remains debated. When the lyrics first appeared in print, no publisher was listed, and they were not copyrighted until 1949, leaving the question of their origin unresolved.

Dr. Robert Scholz graduated from St. Olaf College in 1961, earning a degree in Music Education before earning his Master’s at the University of Illinois and his doctorate in choral conducting from the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign. He returned to St. Olaf as a conductor in 1968, leading the Viking Chorus and the St. Olaf Chapel Choir, later founding the Campus Choir in 1972--now known as the St. Olaf Cantorei. His SATB arrangement of “The Friendly Beasts” includes an optional keyboard accompaniment.

“The Friendly Beasts” connects the nativity scene with the animals surrounding Jesus at his birth, reminding us to celebrate the gifts of all creatures. Each verse highlights a specific animal and their offerings to the newborn Jesus. The piece opens with soft, gentle harmonies that set a tone of reverence for the piece. Tenors and basses begin the first verse stronger, before the altos join in and the soaring soprano line that evokes the strength and steadfastness of the donkey on the long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, carrying a heavily pregnant Mary. The second verse takes on a reflective tone, opening with soprano and alto voices acknowledging the cow’s generosity in providing a resting place for the newborn child. In the third verse, the melody is contained within the inner voices, with interjections from the sopranos and basses, representing the inner comfort provided by the wool. Finally, a gentle duet between the altos and sopranos in the fourth verse is reminiscent of the cooing song the two doves sang to newborn Jesus. Concluding the piece, is a soft, but clear reminder to celebrate the animals who helped Mary give birth to Jesus and those that gave gifts to Emmanuel.¹²



¹ Music. 2021. “In Memory of Robert Scholz (1939-2021) – Music.” StOlaf.edu. Music. 2021. <https://wp.stolaf.edu/music/2021/02/in-memory-of-robert-scholz/>.

² “The Friendly Beasts.” n.d. Credoreference.com. Accessed October 28, 2025. <https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9vaoFydGJbGU6NDIzMjco>.

IT CAME UPON THE MIDNIGHT CLEAR

Richard S. Willis / arr. Charles Forsberg (ELW 282)

The strings bring in this familiar tune, allowing it to drift and settle into the room before the winds and brass join, deepening the sound and adding a warmth the strings are unable to create alone. The choirs accompany the instrumentalists with the age-old lyrics, creating an aura of Christmas spirit.

Originally crafted as a five-stanza poem in 1849, it is said that the piece was not originally intended to be for Christmas. Rather, it was crafted as Massachusetts pastor Edmund Sear's response to the state of the world in 1849. Sear's phrases reflect his personal sorrowful sentiments during this period in time. The Mexican-American War had only just come to a close and a violent revolution was underway in Europe, painting a picture of the world as full of blood and strife.¹

In 1850, Sear's poem was set to the tune of "Carol" by American composer Richard Stolls Willis, a former student of Felix Mendelssohn. In Europe, however, Sear's same poem was set to the tune "Noel," by Arthur Sullivan.² The poem, in combination with the Carol tune, quickly caught on as a staple in American Christmas repertoire. As you enjoy this piece, I encourage you to listen to the way in which the tune and lyrics provide a light of hope in an imperfect world.



¹ Mark Woods, "It Came upon the Midnight Clear: The Story behind the Hymn," It came upon the midnight clear: The story behind the hymn (Christian Today, December 23, 2015), <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/it-came-upon-the-midnight-clear-the-story-behind-the-hymn/72948.htm>.

² Peter Hughes, "Edmund Hamilton Sears," Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography, April 24, 2002, <https://uudb.org/articles/edmundhamiltonsears.html>.

WAKE, AWAKE

Philipp Nicolai / arr. F. Melius Christiansen

“Wake, Awake” shares a place in many Lutheran hearts. Written over 400 years ago in 1599, this simple hymn lives on today, connecting people through hope and excitement. Originally the piece was titled *Wachet Auf*, and was written by a 16th century pastor named Philipp Nicolai. It is said that he wrote this piece after surviving the plague, using text from several bible passages to express his gratitude and hope. These same themes are expressed even more so in F. Melius Christiansen’s choral arrangement, “Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying.” ([Click here to hear the piece.](#))

“Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying” was first notably performed on the 1913 St. Olaf Lutheran Choir tour to Norway, just one year after the official establishment of the choir. However, the piece would not be published until nearly a decade later, after Christiansen's completion of the St. Olaf Choir Series in 1925. As with many of Christiansen’s compositions in the series, “Wake, Awake” was set for unaccompanied voice. Christiansen, as both a director and composer, felt that a cappella was the best way to showcase the vocal integrity of a choir. By his convention, Christiansen begins most phrases of this piece with the steady homophonic setting of the original hymn, as to ground the listener into the original composition before expanding upon it. You may also hear this in “Beautiful Savior.” Additionally Christiansen’s use of text painting is particularly notable, embodying hope and excitement as Nicolai likely intended. In measure 8, listen to the sopranos soar on the word “Arise!” This is the first time in the piece when it is said, and it seems intentional that it would be so pronounced in the context of the piece thus far. It is awakening, calling us to be alert for all that is to come. Likewise, take note of the writing beginning at the pick-up to measure 59. Here Christiansen layers in each voice part to mimic the swelling as written in the text, “we stand, and swell the voice.” The dynamic markings intensify, all leading to a beautifully chaotic polyphony of “Hallelujah”’s - a true declaration of hope and praise.¹²³⁴⁵⁶⁷



¹ "Cantata BWV 140." The Bach Choir of Bethlehem. Accessed October 18, 2018. <https://bach.org/education/cantata-bwv-140/>.

² Christiansen, F. M. (n. d.). *Choir director's guide*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

³ Christiansen, F. Melius, *Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying*, St. Olaf Choir Series vol. VI no. 102 Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1936.

⁴ "F. Melius Christiansen." *MNopedia*. Accessed October 18, 2018. <http://www.mnopedia.org/multimedia/f-melius-christiansen>.

⁵ Johnson, Albert Rykken. "The Christiansen Choral Tradition : F. Melius Christiansen, Olaf C. Christiansen and Paul J. Christiansen." Thesis, 1973.

⁶ Olson, Oscar E. F. Melius Christiansen. 1946.

⁷ Schmidt, Paul G. *My Years at St. Olaf: With Particular Emphasis on My Lifelong Association with My Friend F. Melius Christiansen and the St. Olaf Lutheran Choir*. Northfield, Minn.: St. Olaf College, 1967.

AND GOD SAID (KING DAVID)

Arther Honegger

This piece is from *The Death of David*, the last movement of *Le Roi David*, or, *King David*, a symphonic psalm by Arther Honegger. Premiered in 1921 at the Theatre de Jorat in Mezieres, a small village in Switzerland, the success of *Le Roi David* brought twenty-eight-year-old Honegger fame.

Oscar Arthur Honegger (1892-1954) was a Swiss composer and violinist known for his significant influence on French music, blend of French and German styles, and love of trains. Honegger studied at the Zurich and Paris Conservatories and spent most of his life living in Paris. As a member of the Les Six—a group of six composers who sought to return to classical composition—Honegger experimented with new artistic forms and abandonment of the established tonal system. Honegger composed over two hundred works across many genres, including theatre, ballet, radio, film, chamber, choral, symphonic, concert hall and opera.

Le Roi David is a three part stage play by René Morax that follows the life of biblical king David. The play begins with the anointing of young David as the King of Israel and ends with his death. Lyrical melodies, abrupt tonal shifts, and the exciting nature of the music reflect the chaos of David's reign, full of war and rebellion, and his long-standing relationship with God. Full of hope for the future, the last movement follows the death of king David, highlighting God's promise that David's kingdom and legacy will continue.

While *Le Roi David* began as music for a biblical drama, performed by a small choir and limited number of instrumentalists, its popularity prompted Honegger to rework the music for a full orchestra. The version for full symphony was written in 1923 and is the most common version of the work performed today. Honegger's adoration for Bach and his Protestant upbringing are considerable influences in this work, as evidenced by the piece's neo-Baroque style, evocations of Gregorian chant, and allusions to Bach.¹²³⁴



¹ <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/biography/arthur-honegger>

² <https://arthur-honegger.com/en/biography/>

³ <https://www.kennedy-center.org/artists/h/ho-hz/arthur-honegger/>

⁴ <https://holocaustmusic.ort.org/politics-and-propaganda/arthur-honegger/>

HARK THE HERALD ANGELS SING

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy / arr. John Ferguson

This Christmas classic was brought into creation in a roundabout way over more than a century. The text of the piece originates from the Bible verse of Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors," where a chorus of angels sang God's praises. Charles Wesley originally penned the text of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" as "Hark! How All the Welkin Rings" in 1739. Wesley was an English hymn writer and Methodist leader who wrote over 6,000 hymns. The text passed through at least two other writers: George Whitefield in 1753 and then in 1760 Martin Madan. Whitefield was a student of Wesley's who eventually worked alongside him and adapted the hymn text into what it is today. Whitefield's most known change was the addition of the phrase "newborn King."

The hymn's music comes from a piece called "Festgesang," an 1840 composition by Felix Mendelssohn that celebrates the 400th anniversary of Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. Mendelssohn was born on February 3, 1809 in Germany and was a very prominent figure of the early Romantic era. Mendelssohn's most well known works include *Overture to a Midsummer Night's Dream* of 1826, *Italian Symphony* of 1833, the oratorio *Elijah* of 1846, among many others. He started composing at a young age and continued to produce timeless works until the tragic death of his sister which was soon followed by his own death in 1847.

William Hayman Cummings brought together the words of Wesley and Whitefield with the music from the second movement of Mendelssohn's piece in 1855 at a performance by Waltham Abbey's choir with Cummings on the organ. John Ferguson, the arranger for this version, was a well known organist, composer, author, and conductor from Ohio who worked here at St. Olaf for 29 years as a church and organ music professor and who also served as the conductor for the St. Olaf Cantorei. "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" is a joyous hymn that depicts the good news of Jesus' birth on Christmas day. It is a Christmas classic that spreads joy and good spirits each year through joyous lyrics of celebration.¹²³⁴⁵



¹ Hawn, C Michael. "History of Hymns: 'Hark! the Herald Angels Sing.'" *Discipleship Ministries*, 10 Dec. 2014, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-hark-the-herald-angels-sing>.

² Lockspeiser, Edward. "Felix Mendelssohn". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 31 Oct. 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Felix-Mendelssohn>.

³ Longanecker, Josh. "Story behind: Hark the Herald Angels Sing - Christmas Carols." JRC, 20 Dec. 2017, <https://jamesriver.church/blog/story-behind-hark-herald-angels-sing>.

⁴ McLean, Hugh J. "Cummings, W(illiam) H(ayman)." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University Press.

<<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000006945>>
Pepper, J.W. and Son. "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." Hark! The Herald Angels Sing by Felix Mendelssohn | J.W. Pepper Sheet Music, 2022, <https://www.jwpepper.com/Hark%21-The-Herald-Angels-Sing/10795174.item#.Y2xczC-B2WZ>. Proctor, Nathan, and John Ferguson. "John Ferguson - an Interview." STAR OF THE NORTH, 29 Sept. 2016, <https://starofthenorth.net/magazine/john-ferguson-an-interview/>.

⁵ Todd, R. Larry. "Mendelssohn(-Bartholdy), (Jacob Ludwig) Felix." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University Press.

<<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000051795>>

SONG OF SIMEON

Christopher Aspaas

In the story of the birth of Jesus Christ, Simeon is barely more than a footnote. We meet Simeon first when Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple for purification rites, and in 10 verses we learn everything we will ever learn about him and say goodbye forever. Simeon, as it turns out, is at a crossroads. The Holy Spirit had told him that he would meet the Messiah before he dies, and he knows that Jesus is the Messiah.¹ To some, this is a happy moment, as Simeon receives a gift many of us dream of: the gift of fulfilling one's life purpose. To others, it is a story of bittersweet heartbreak, as Simeon wrestles with his impending death.² It is in this mental state that Simeon blesses the baby Jesus, and prays to the Lord:

“Lord, let the now thy servant depart in peace according to thy will”³

Through Song of Simeon, former conductor of Viking Chorus and Chapel choir Christopher Aspaas⁴ encapsulates the complex feelings that accompany that moment. Starting with a simple, reflective melody, the voices quickly blossom into complex harmonies that spiral through a barrage of emotions: the hope for the future, the yearning for the messiah, and the bittersweet sense of completion.



¹ “Bible Gateway Passage: Luke 2 - New International Version.” Bible Gateway, www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+2&version=NIV. Accessed 17 Nov. 2025.

² Simeon | Hebrew Tribe, Patriarch, Jacob's Son | Britannica, www.britannica.com/topic/Simeon-Hebrew-tribe. Accessed 17 Nov. 2025.

³ “Bible Gateway Passage: Luke 2 - New International Version.” Bible Gateway, www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+2&version=NIV. Accessed 17 Nov. 2025.

⁴ “Christopher Aspaas.” Christopher Aspaas | Chorus America, chorusamerica.org/conf2012/christopher-aspaas. Accessed 17 Nov. 2025.

BEAUTIFUL SAVIOR

F. Melius Christiansen

Performing “Beautiful Savior” is a decades-long tradition for the St. Olaf Choir. The melody is a Silesian folk song that was arranged by F. Melius Christiansen in 1910.¹ F.M. Christiansen originally set the tune to Norwegian text and later published it in English for the St. Olaf Choral Series. The hymn became a staple of the choir as an encore number beginning in 1920s, but it did not become a consistent final piece until the 1950s, under Olaf C. Christiansen. Since its establishment as a tradition, it has been performed in various ways and in many parts of the world. In this way, “Beautiful Savior” has come to be regarded as “practically synonymous” with the St. Olaf Choir.²

“Beautiful Savior” is familiar across the U.S., and wherever we take this piece, it will evoke emotions among our audience members. To different people, this song can have different messages. Decades ago, under F. Melius Christiansen, the choir sang this piece in a hospital lawn in Rochester. Windows opened, and patients wheeled out onto the balconies to hear the music. Beautiful Savior was a form of healing for these people. For us, it may be a song of togetherness. As Dr. Armstrong said in an interview, the piece provides “a wonderful bonding for everyone.” Beautiful Savior is a unique opportunity for us, as choristers, to reflect on the music we just made and the gift we gave to those listening.



¹ <https://wp.stolaf.edu/stolaf-choir/frequently-asked-questions/>

² IMAGE: Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1930 (The St. Olaf Choir’s first tour to the South)

