

Music Notes for December 31, 2023

Today is the second Sunday of Christmas, but at St. A's we will be celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany. The service music is the same as we used during the recent Christmas services, and you can listen to the [Sanctus](#) and [Fraction Anthem](#). The Presentation Hymn today is the fourth stanza of the hymn, "In the bleak midwinter" – "What shall I give him, poor as I am. You can listen to a version of that sung by the choir of Kings College, Cambridge, [here](#) (starting at timestamp 2 minutes 55 seconds).

The prelude is a selection of six carol settings. The first two date from 1937 and are by the British composer Gordon Phillips (1908-1991). As organist of All Hallows-by-the-Tower in London he gave more than 3,200 lunchtime recital and was also senior professor of organ and harpsichord at the London College of Music. The first piece is a setting of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and the second is a sprightly version of "The Holly and the Ivy." The remaining four prelude carols are by Richard Purvis (music director of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco from 1947-1971. The selections are excerpts from a larger work entitled, "An American Organ Mass." The four carols are "Resonant in laudibus" (Joseph dearest, Joseph mine), "He smiles within his cradle," "From heaven above to earth I come," and "Here betwixt ass and oxen mild." The postlude is also from this collection and is a variation on today's Sequence Hymn ("What star is this that beams so bright.")

The Entrance Hymn today is one of the most popular Epiphany Hymns, "Brightest and best of the stars of the morning." The hymn has a bit of a controversial history, as some have thought it to be too focused on the star, almost to the point of worshipping it. Nevertheless, the hymn is widely used and has imagery of both the visiting Magi and our response to the revealing of Christ.

The closing hymn is another great Epiphany hymn, "As with gladness men of old." The version sung today has an updated gender-inclusive text, appropriately replacing "men of old" with "sages bold." The hymn is sung to the tune, "Dix," arranged by William H. Monk from a longer tune composed in Stuttgart by Conrad Kocher in the 1850s. The tune name comes from the writer of the hymn text, W. Chatterton Dix. Dix regretted the use of Kocher's tune for his text, but the pairing of tune and text has stood the test of time, and the hymn is the most popular of the Epiphany hymns.