



To hear the angels sing

An antiphonal setting of Latin and English verses,
based on the Nativity carol *It came upon the midnight clear*,
for eight-part chorus (ATRB/TTBB) *a cappella*

Eric Banks

Composed for ÆDONIS and the *Seattle Men's Chorus* in September 2004
first performed in December 2004.

For Dennis

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About this work

One of my favorite holiday carols has always been *It came upon the midnight clear*. The reason eludes me to this day, but I think it must have something to do with combination of the tune, the meter, and image of angels singing above us all. In the first verse of the carol, the primary focus is not so much on the Nativity, but the angels' nocturnal song and collective wish for peace for all people on earth. With a universal text such as this, I wanted to set the carol's text only through the penultimate line, saving the final line of the verse, unsung, to serve as the piece's title. Musically, this is my attempt to capture the stillness of humankind as it pauses to hear the eternal voices of divinity.

For the text of the angels' song (to be performed by a small ensemble), I chose to set the strophes that were sung by the angels in the Latin Nativity story. These are the same phrases that begin the *Gloria* of the Latin mass, and are paraphrased in the fifth line of this carol. To these strophes, I added my own Latin translation of the carol's sixth line. (I hope that you and your audience will see the similarity between the English carol and the Latin verses.) In order to create an "eternal" effect, I set the angels' Latin text as a *perpetuum mobile*, a sequence of phrases that repeat seamlessly without ceasing. The harmonies of this sequence do not always correspond to the harmonies of the original carol. Instead, they color the tune with a slight diatonic clash. (After all, the angels are surely not always in agreement with humankind, are they?)

In addition, the distinction between the human and divine in this arrangement is made metrical: the angels sing eternal counterpoint in 6/8, while humankind chants its carol in 3/4 time. Near the carol's end, when the larger ensemble sustains pedal tones during the phrase "in solemn stillness," the smaller ensemble returns to the textural forefront of the piece. Then, as the pedal tones of the larger chorus ('humanity') are sustained, the smaller ensemble repeats its Latin sequence *ad infinitum*. While doing so, these 'angels' turn and leave the performance space, slowly and solemnly, singing the whole while until off stage. The acoustical effect should sound as if the pedal tone has overtaken the distant *diminuendo* of the angelic ensemble, and the "stillness" of this final sonority should be prolonged as a meditation, remain as still in sonority, and as constant in timbre as is comfortable and possible for the singers. It should be followed by a sizable silence.

Texts and translations

The choral carol:

To be sung by the chorus

It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth,
To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to men,
From heav'n's all-gracious king,"
The world in solemn stillness lay...

The song of the angels:

To be sung by the small ensemble

Gloria in excelsis Deo

"Glory to God in the highest,

Et in terra pax

And peace on earth;

Hominibus bonae voluntatis

To men of good will,

Regis caelorum omnibus gratiosi,"

From heaven's all-gracious king,"

Angeli cantabant.

The angels sang.

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Ebulliently $\text{♩} = 69$

1 *mp*

A T *semichorus:* Glo-ri-a in ex-cel - sis De - o et in ter - ra pax ho - mi-ni-bus bo - nae

R B *semichorus:* Glo-ri-a in ex-cel - sis De - o et in ter - ra pax ho - mi-ni-bus

T B *full men's chorus:* It came up -

8

A T vo-lun-ta - tis re - gis cae - lo - rum om-ni-bus gra - ti - o - si an-ge-li can - ta - bant

R B bo - nae vo-lun-ta - tis re - gis cae - lo - rum om-ni-bus gra - ti - o - si an-ge-li

T B on the mid - night clear, that glo - rious song of old, from

15

A T glo-ri-a in ex-cel - sis De - o et in ter - ra pax ho - mi-ni-bus bo - nae

R B can - ta - bant glo-ri-a in ex-cel - sis De - o et in ter - ra pax ho - mi-ni-bus

T B an - gels ben - ding near the earth to touch their harps of gold:

22

A T vo-lun-ta - tis re - gis cae - lo - rum om-ni-bus gra - ti - o - si an-ge-li can - ta - bant

R B bo - nae vo-lun-ta - tis re - gis cae - lo - rum om-ni-bus gra - ti - o - si an-ge-li

T B "Peace on the earth, good - will to men from heav'n's all - gra - cious

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INCOMPLETE.**

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