

Performance notes for
This Advent moon

by

Charles H. Giffen

Advent

by

Christina Rossetti (1839-1894)

This Advent moon shines cold and clear,
 These Advent nights are long;
Our lamps have burned year after year
 And still their flame is strong.
'Watchman, what of the night?' we cry,
 Heart-sick with hope deferred:
'No speaking signs are in the sky,'
 Is still the watchman's word.

The Porter watches at the gate,
 The servants watch within;
The watch is long betimes and late,
 The prize is slow to win.
'Watchman, what of the night?' But still
 His answer sounds the same:
'No daybreak tops the utmost hill,
 Nor pale our lamps of flame.'

One to another hear them speak
 The patient virgins wise:
'Surely He is not far to seek' –
 'All night we watch and rise.'
'The days are evil looking back,
 The coming days are dim;
Yet count we not His promise slack,
 But watch and wait for Him.'

One with another, soul with soul,
 They kindle fire from fire:
'Friends watch us who have touched the goal.'
 'They urge us, come up higher.'
'With them shall rest our waysore feet,
 With them is built our home,
With Christ.' – 'They sweet, but He most sweet,
 Sweeter than honeycomb.'

There no more parting, no more pain,
 The distant ones brought near,
The lost so long are found again,
 Long lost but longer dear:
Eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard,
 Nor heart conceived that rest,
With them our good things long deferred,
 With Jesus Christ our Best.

We weep because the night is long,
 We laugh for day shall rise,
We sing a slow contented song
 And knock at Paradise.
Weeping we hold Him fast Who wept
 For us, we hold Him fast;
And will not let Him go except
 He bless us first or last.

Weeping we hold Him fast to-night;
 We will not let Him go
Till daybreak smite our wearied sight
 And summer smite the snow:
Then figs shall bud, and dove with dove
 Shall coo the livelong day;
Then He shall say, 'Arise, My love,
 My fair one, come away.'

Charles H. Giffen composed *This Advent moon* for his wife Patricia in the three weeks following the untimely death of her father, Dennis Miller, on September 15, 2009. The text comprises the first three stanzas of the poem *Advent* (1858) by the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) – who is perhaps best known for the text of the Christmas carol *In the bleak midwinter*.

The selected text conveys aspects of anticipation – watching and waiting – that are characteristic of the season of Advent and seen, for example, in the German chorale *Wachet auf! ruft uns die Stimme* (“Wake, awake! the voice is calling”). The metaphor is that of long awaited expectation for the promised arrival of the Bridegroom (Christ), with the wise young women keeping their lamps lit throughout night after night, listening always with patient, unrealized hope for word from the Watchman. As an Advent text, this refers to preparation and waiting for the birth of Christ, but as a text just preceding Advent in the liturgical year, it is also one of awaiting the second coming of Christ, speaking just as well to the living faithful that they will meet Christ for eternity at the end of the trials and tribulations of their earthly lives.

In setting this text, the second half of the third stanza (III.5–8) of *Advent* has been split in two, with lines 5–6 placed at the beginning and lines 7–8 placed at the end, so that these lines form a kind of “frame” around the rest of the work, which is made up of stanzas one, two, and the first half of stanza three. Except for the treatment of cadences, the music for the first part of this frame (III.5–6) appears in strict chromatic inversion as the music for the closing part of the frame (III.7–8). Similarly, the music for the first half of the first stanza (I.1–4) is repeated in strict chromatic inversion as the second half of the second stanza (II.5–8), followed by a recapitulation of its original (non-inverted) form as the first half of the third stanza (III.1–4) – again with altered cadences. The melodic theme of the second half of the first stanza (I.5–8), which appears in the lowest voice, is a strict chromatic inversion of the choral melody *Wachet auf! ruft uns die Stimme*. This is followed by the first half of the second stanza (II.1–4) cast as a recitative for soprano. After the phrase “All night we watch and rise,” the musical texture opens up into glorious 8-part repetitions of the word “Rise!” – an exhortation to the listener to realize that “Yet we count not His promise slack, but watch and wait for Him.” – set in a calm mood of hope and anticipation to close the piece.

The sung text appears below with thematic indications illustrating these features in the left margin, according to the key: V = first form, Λ = second (inverted) form, W = “Wachet auf” (inverted), R = recitative.

V1 "The days are evil looking back,
V2 The coming days are dim:"

V3 This Advent moon shines cold and clear,
V4 These Advent nights are long;
V5 Our lamps have burned year after year
V6 And still their flame is strong.

W. "Watchman, what of the night?" we cry,
W. Heart-sick with hope deferred:
W. "No speaking signs are in the sky,"
W. Is still the watchman's word.

R. The Porter watches at the gate,
R. The servants watch within;
R. The watch is long betimes and late,
R. The prize is slow to win.

Λ3 "Watchman, what of the night?" But still
Λ4 His answer sounds the same:
Λ5 "No daybreak tops the utmost hill,
Λ6 Nor pale our lamps of flame."

V3 One to another hear them speak
V4 The patient virgins wise:
V5 "Surely He is not far to seek –
V6 All night we watch and rise."

Λ1 "Yet count we not His promise slack,
Λ2 But watch and wait for Him."