

LEANING INTO A SIMPLER SOUND

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The seasons of Advent, Christmas, and one of my favorites, Epiphany, are upon us, and they bring with them the annual promise of hope in Christ. This has been a year like no other, and we will have to honor our traditions in very different ways this time around. Yet these very practices remind us that the cycle of the church continues, regardless of COVID-19 or any of the other unprecedented challenges the world has faced recently. As I think about the role that singing plays in all of my celebrations, especially during the holiday season, I must admit that my heart trembles for fear of being unable to make my usual connection with the Spirit. We have lost so many of our choral experiences during Covidide already. What will Christmas mean without carols, descants, and the communal joy of seasonal music?

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Many of our most beloved carols date back many years, and they have been around far longer than any of us. I find genuine comfort in the thought that we are participating in a tradition that spans centuries. If we carry these musical traditions faithfully during our lives, the music will continue to enrich hearts and souls far into the future. Some of the first hymns associated with Christmas, such as *“Jesus Refulsit Omnium”* (“Jesus, Light of All the Nations”), and *“Corde natus ex Parentis”* (“Of the Father’s Love Begotten”) date all the way back to the fourth century. I have always loved the older carols best, especially *“Est in ein Ros’ entsprungen”* (anonymous text, music by Michael Praetorius), which was first published in 1599. Singing these simple ancient hymns at home by candlelight provides a meaningful counterpart to the louder celebrations of a typical December. This year we can focus on the quiet joy of this intimate, timeless music while singing at home for ourselves and our loved ones.

As we prepare for Advent this year, we should plan to sing these contemplative hymns with a restrained sound. We know that loud singing can present a greater risk of viral transmission, so I suggest that we lean into the simplicity of singing for an audience of one. Soft singing requires fast air as well as lots of space in which the air will spin, compensating for the removal of chest resonance from the sound. Practice humming first with as much space inside as possible, taking care not to close your teeth together.

When you reintroduce the text, use the voiced consonants to help you connect your voice horizontally throughout each phrase. Challenge yourself to sustain long legato lines while you make your most beautiful, magical sound within the framework of the ancient tunes.

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Advent brings new hope into our lives at this same time every year. We look forward to celebrating the birth of Christ, and we are comforted by the permanence of the church year. But this season everything seems to be in doubt. We don’t know when we will be able to join our voices in song again, and we cannot yet see the end of the pandemic. This year we must internalize the undeniable truth that the cycle of the church year rolls forward without regard to our human fears. I plan to decorate my tree with the simplest round ornaments this season. The round shape of so many Christmas ornaments reminds me that our cycle comes full circle every year, no matter what is happening in the world. I pray that we will be able to raise our voices in full-throated descants next Christmas. Until then, let us pray for the Church and for the world with our innermost voices, because the quietest voices often convey the most powerful prayers. •