

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night

arranged for SSAATTBB Choir and Chamber Orchestra

by Douglas Mears

Notes

“While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night” is one of the most well-known Christmas carols in the English language. Originally titled “Song of the Angels”, it recounts the familiar passage from the Gospel of Luke, describing how an angel of the Lord visited lowly shepherds to announce the birth of Christ. Unlike many traditional Christmas carols whose authors are unknown, this carol was almost certainly written by Nahum Tate (1652-1715), who became Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom in 1692; it was published in Tate and Nicholas Brady’s 1700 supplement to their *New Version of the Psalms of David* in 1696.

Interestingly, “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night” was the only Christmas hymn authorized to be sung by the Anglican Church; before 1700 only the Psalms of David were permitted. As a result, this beloved text is one of the first “official” Christmas carols in English literature and is the only one of the sixteen works in the 1700 supplement still sung today.

Over the years, the carol has been sung to a variety of tunes. For this arrangement by Douglas Mears, scored for SSAATTBB choir and chamber orchestra, a new tune has been chosen. It is a traditional English folk melody titled “Van Diemen’s Land.” Widely published during the nineteenth century in broadsides (single sheets of inexpensive paper printed only on one side), this folk song was collected from traditional singers in England during the twentieth century. Vaughan Williams, who sought to organically weave elements of his native British music into his compositions, included “Van Diemen’s Land” in *Six Studies in English Folk Song*. His aim in setting these songs, as he explained it, was for them to be “treated with love.”

Instrumentation

Flute
Alto Flute
Oboe
English Horn
Clarinet in B^b
Bassoon
2 Horns in F
Timpani
Percussion
Suspended Cymbal, Glockenspiel
Celesta
Harp
SSAATTBB Choir
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello
Contrabass

Text

While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
all seated on the ground,
an angel of the Lord came down,
and glory shone around.
“Fear not,” said he, for mighty dread
had seized their troubled mind,
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring
to you and all mankind.”

“To you in Bethlehem this day
is born, of David’s line,
a Savior who is Christ the Lord;
and this shall be the sign:
The heavenly babe you there shall find
to human view displayed,
all humbly wrapped in swaddling clothes
and in a manger laid.”

The angel spoke and suddenly
appeared a shining throng
of angels praising God, who thus
ad-dressed their joyful song:
“All glory be to God on high,
and to the earth be peace;
to those on whom his favor rests
good-will shall never cease.”