

‘Everyone Wants to Hear’ This One Chord in a Christmas Carol

A moment in “O Come, All Ye Faithful” is so popular, it’s printed on T-shirts. But it’s also symbolic, and important to music history.

By Hugh Morris

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Of all the music heard around Christmas, few passages rival the awe and mystery of one chord, known as the [“Word of the Father” chord](#).

It’s a rare instance of powerful drama in holiday liturgical music, more akin to Edward Elgar’s depiction of God in “The Dream of Gerontius,” or the opening of the fifth door in the Bartok opera “Bluebeard’s Castle”: a moment of total release, embracing the unknown.

In British choral circles, this moment is referred to simply as “The Chord.” It comes halfway through the final verse of the popular Christmas carol “O Come, All Ye Faithful” (or “Adeste Fideles”), in a mid-20th century arrangement by David Willcocks, an original editor of the widely used “Carols for Choirs” series and a former director of music at King’s College, Cambridge. Willcocks, following a rising figure full of anticipation, places an explosive, half-diminished seventh chord under the text “Word,” resolving it elaborately over the next few measures.

“It’s a startling moment,” David Hill, the musical director of the [Bach Choir](#), said in a telephone interview. “I remember being a boy of 10 playing it in my church in Carlisle, and loving every moment of it, thinking: ‘What is this? This is outrageous!’”

There’s a youthful glee in the way the popularity of “The Chord” has grown; today, the discerning church musician can get it [printed](#) on pretty much anything, including T-shirts and tree ornaments. It’s a moment, Hill said, that “everyone wants to hear. It puts a great big smile on your face.”

Willcocks’s arrangement of “O Come, All Ye Faithful” appeared in Carols for Choirs 1, published by Oxford University Press in 1961. The idea behind the anthology — conceived by the press’s head of music, Christopher Morris — was to create a practical, codified resource for choral societies at Christmas.

But what followed was far from a utilitarian compilation, with a series of florid descants, and elaborate arrangements of traditional carols like “God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,” and “The First Nowell.” “What were ordinary carols for people to sing up to this point were, by and large, very ordinary,” Hill said. With the new Carols for Choirs hymn arrangements, he added, “you had a whole new approach to carols, which was post-Holst and Vaughan Williams.”

Estimates of how many copies were sold differ, but they are measured in the millions. A sixth volume, with a more international outlook, is due for publication in 2023, edited by Hill and a fellow choral director, Bob Chilcott. Of particular acclaim in the first volume was the arrangement of “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” but not necessarily because of “The Chord.” Instead, it was the descant of the sixth verse, with its swirling setting of “Glory to God” (borrowing from “Ding Dong Merrily on High”), that drew more attention.

Other musicians have their own favorite corners: a juicy chord here, an archaic lyric there, or a moment in which standard congregational hymns can be spiced up with a touch of chromatic alteration. Dr. Martin Clarke, the head of music and a senior lecturer at the Open University, said, “There are interesting moments in Willcocks’s other arrangements too; towards the end of ‘Hark! The Herald Angels Sing’ is pretty satisfying to sing and play.” But that moment in “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” he said, “goes just a bit further.”

The words set in the final verse refer to the prologue from the Gospel of John, a reading usually reserved for Christmas morning. The opening lines, “Yea, Lord we greet thee, born this happy morning,” confirm that; with some helpful amendments of tense, though, the verse has become more of a fixture at Advent services. Within its fleeting presence, “The Chord” nods to centuries of tradition: moments from Bach’s “St. John Passion,” the personal predilections of previous King’s College organists and the wider history of final-verse reharmonizations within the Anglican worship tradition.

In addition, the progression that follows bears a striking resemblance to music by the English composer John Stainer, who used the same dramatic chord and elegant escape in his setting of “O Come, All Ye Faithful” — which concluded his Epiphany anthem “I Desired Wisdom,” published in 1876. But the crucial difference in Willcocks’s more famous setting is the matching of harmony with subject. Where Stainer opts to add a diminished chord to “Glory,” Willcocks instead chooses the more symbolically rich “Word.”

The passage from John referenced in the final verse — “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God” — departs from the poetic images of angels, shepherds and Magi usually referenced at Christmastime. “John gets the greater sense of divine mystery and the complex significance of what he’s trying to communicate here,” Clarke said. “To line it up with that chord not just reinforces the mystery of the text; it grabs you, makes you concentrate, and makes you confront it.”

“I don’t think the resonance of those words and what they refer to in the Christian tradition would really come across as strongly without that harmonization, without that chord,” he added. “It exemplifies confronting that mystery.”

That power is compounded by Willcocks’s arrangement. Following the pageantry and grandeur of the sixth verse, the seventh follows in meaty unison. “It feels completely different,” Clarke said. “The great power comes from the feeling of difference that comes to everybody — not just the choristers, soloists, choir. Absolutely everybody in the congregation can get that feeling of being part of that sound. You’re right in the middle of that chord, whoever you are.”

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