

Counterpoint on Music for Sunday



John Wall, Music Director 12/10/18

Lessons and Carols a plan to enliven the spiritual richness of Christmas began 90 years ago at King's College, Cambridge. Lessons and Carols first became part of my life at Gustavus Adolphus College in 1966. Each Advent the chapel choir led the college's Christmas music celebration in Christ Chapel used this format. We were introduced to the splendor of the British choral tradition including cathedral settings of the Magnificat. Each of my three years at Gustavus was a deep exploration of the beauty of the Holy Scriptures and the Songs of the Church. It was beautiful but not what I expected at Lutheran college chapel. (At that time, we were happy to have St. Olaf, Augsburg, and many other Lutheran denomination schools cover the great Lutheran hymn and choral tradition with ever-increasing pomp and circumstance. Thanks to Dr. Paul Allwardt my professor, adviser, and friend who was an Anglophile even to the tea he served, pointed me towards the Episcopal Church. In 1969, I graduated from my Lutheran life into the Episcopal Seabury Western Seminary and began a lifelong appreciation of the Anglican Tradition. After my little peripatetic wanderings –from seminary– to a summer 1970 at St. Nicholas as seminarian –to a Lutheran congregation as organist, I became Music Director/organist at Good Samaritan United Methodist in Edina. Surprise! Nine Lessons and Carols was the Christmas Eve Service.

In 1976, I became organist-choirmaster at St. Stephen's in Edina where I could explore alternative readings for our annual lessons and carols including things like poetry by T. S. Eliot or a contemporary reflection on whether the angels might wear tennis shoes. From this specific reading came the improvisatory introduction and verse accompaniments for "Angels we have heard on high" which is what you will get again this week.

Over the years, I regularly attended the splendid Lessons and Carols at St. Mark's Cathedral. When I wanted to stay in St. Paul, I would attend Lesson and Carols at St. Clement's Episcopal where I was a member and our musician was a King's College graduate and personal friend of Sir David Willcocks. I could also walk down a mile further to St. John the Evangelist to get my Lessons and Carols "fix". Then MPR began live broadcasts from "King's" itself so I could sit in jammies and robe with my own cup of tea and join the whole world. I've heard that some Brits try to have all the set up and cleaning surrounding Christmas festivities done before for the first notes of "Once in Royal David's City" because it marks the beginning the season of comfort and joy.

Now we celebrate Lessons and Carols modified to include Eucharist and some scripture readings for the Advent Lesson and Carols Service. The choir and band join forces. You will sing many favorite Christmas carols in specific contexts and out of respect for time not include every stanza. You will even sing one song from memory, but trust me; you can and willingly shall do it. Keep your eye out; you may spot old St. Nick.