

## **Perspectives on Church Music**

By Carl Schalk

### **MAKING CONNECTIONS: THE ALPHA & OMEGA**

Surprising connections among elements of the church's liturgy or hymnody often appear when we least expect. Sometimes they may lie buried beneath translations of original texts that have missed the point of the original. Sometimes we miss them because of inattention to what the texts themselves say.

#### **THE ALPHA**

So it is with that most familiar of all Christmas carols, "In dulci jubilo," a carol—both text and tune—at least as old as the 14th century. It is found in most all the early Lutheran collections beginning with the Klug hymnal of 1535 and the Babst hymnal of 1545. The text is macaronic, alternating Latin phrases with German vernacular phrases. The first stanza is as follows:

In dulci jubilo!  
Nun singet und seid froh!  
Unser herzens Wonne

Leit in praesepio,  
Und leuchtet als die Sonne  
Matris in gremio.  
Alpha es et O!  
Alpha es et O!

Two references. “In dulci jubilo” might be translated as “With sweetest jubilation” and “Alpha es et O” (“He is Alpha and Omega”) refers to the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and refers to Christ, the first, and last, the beginning and the end.

The final stanza of this Christmas carol poses the question “Ubi sunt gaudia?” (“Oh. where can joy be found?”) and the answer is “Where but on heav'nly ground?” with the concluding response: “Oh, that we were there!” The “sweet jubilation” surrounding the infant in the manger reaches its culmination in the heavenly song at the marriage feast of the Lamb where Christ the Bridegroom is joined with his Bride, the Church, for eternity.

#### THE OMEGA

Now fast forward some two hundred years to Philip Nicolai's great End of the Church Year hymn “Wake, Awake for Night Is Flying.” It is the story of the Wise and Foolish Virgins as they await and prepare for the coming of the Bridegroom. The final stanza in Catherine Winkworth's familiar translation describes the scene:

Therefore will we  
Eternally  
Sing hymns of praise and joy to Thee.

But Nicolai's original text, and we can be certain that he knew well the 14th-century carol, describes the scene as follows:

Das sind wir froh,  
i-o, i-o,  
Ewig *in dulci jubilo!*

So the Incarnation reaches its ultimate fulfillment at the marriage feast of the Lamb as it is accompanied with the “sweet jubilation” of an eternal “in dulci jubilo!” That Nicolai should draw on a reference to the 14th-century carol in his “King of Chorales” can hardly be anything but deliberate. Nicolai undoubtedly knew the carol since it was both popular and its use widespread. The connection is clear. The “sweet jubilation” accompanying the birth of the Savior is the same “jubilation” which accompanies the coming of the Bridegroom to claim his Bride, the Church, at the consummation of all things. That is worth pointing out, whether celebrating the Incarnation or the Day of Judgment when Christ returns to reconcile all things to himself.

Is there a translation that helps make this connection clear? Someone somewhere, sometime will surely take up the challenge. A fresh translation

that would make this connection clearer to the modern singer and hearer  
would do the church a great service.

Any takers?