



NICK ALEXANDER

I've begun to witness the beginning stages of our coming Christmas season. Stores have set aside space for outdoor electronic reindeer and nativity displays. Several catalogs for Christmas music and books have arrived in my mailbox ...

Soon enough, I can expect another year of the same: radio stations dedicated to "Holiday Music." Television channels will be replaying favorite movie classics; sometimes, the same movie lasts a whole day. Watchdog groups will take account of which superstores wish their customers a "Merry Christmas" or not. News stations will focus on which city governments decided to create Christmas displays ... or inter-religious "Holiday displays" ... or no displays at all... without infuriating a vocal segment of the population.

In the midst of this cacophony, I ponder... what happened to Advent?

There was a time, not long ago, when the four weeks before Christmas represented a time of anticipation, of longing, of hope. It was a time to take heed of John the Baptist's words, "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord." It was a time where we lit the Advent wreath, reciting "A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

We were waiting for Jesus to come, not only as an infant in the manger, but also in the Second Coming. Advent is a gift from the Church to remind us of Jesus' promise to return.

And yet, while it seems we can recite our favorite Christmas carols off the

top of our heads, we have a deficiency of Advent-oriented music. The one exception appears to be "O Come O Come Emmanuel," a wonderful staple. As the verses correspond to the antiphon texts, it is often used. And yet, there is a wonderful treasure-trove of beautiful Advent hymns and songs, ancient and current, often neglected by our mass-packaged, muzak'd culture.

We need to re-acquaint ourselves with our Advent heritage. We need to relearn these songs, and integrate these into our Christmas preparations. The great thing about the internet is that you can listen to these songs in advance, purchase them individually, and burn your own Advent CD to take with you in your car. As you are inundated with barking dogs and the umpteenth-millionth rendition of the travails of Rudolph and Frosty, you can remind yourself that Christmas hasn't arrived yet, and you can still prepare your heart.

What follows are a list of twenty Advent songs that you must know. Half of them are classic hymns that should be a part of every Christian's vocabulary. The other half are contemporary songs, some of which are from praise and worship circles, corresponding with the themes and the Scripture passages of Advent. These songs are all incredible in their diverse ways, and I cannot recommend these songs highly enough.

1. Wake, O Wake And Sleep No Longer (Wachet Auf) – This variation of Isaiah 60 contains what is my favorite melody in the Advent season. At turns anticipatory and yearning, it perfectly encapsulates the living hope we have inside us.

2. Creator of the Stars of Night (Conditor Alme Siderum - Mode IV Chant) – Usually sung a cappella,

this easy-to-sing hymn is absolutely stunning and sparse. I particularly admire how the final note of each stanza, by not ending on its natural key, enhances the themes of longing... that the final note has yet to be played.

3. Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life (THE CALL, Ralph Vaughan Williams) – This hymn has a kicker of a fourth melodic line, where the scales of a single word stretches longer than the Gloria in "Angels We Have Heard on High." But the beauty of this minor-key masterpiece will compel congregations to aim for it anyway.

4. Alma Redemptoris Mater (Mode V Chant, Hermanus Contractus) – The Advent season is a perfect time to learn a Latin chant—even if you are not a musician. This short chant (meaning "Loving Mother of our Savior") is a very beautiful, solemn prayer to Our Lady. It is short enough to chant in Latin first, and then English afterwards.

5. Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates! (TRURO) – This is one of the most joyful melodies one can incorporate in a liturgy, a perfect union of lyrics and melody.

Five more traditional hymns to sing:

6. Come, O Long-Expected Jesus (Stuttgart)

7. Come Now Almighty King (Italian Hymn)

8. O Come Divine Messiah (Venez, Divin Messie)

9. Savior of the Nations, Come (Nun Komm, Der Heiden Heiland)

10. Lo! He Comes, With Clouds Descending (Tantum Ergo)

Here are ten exceptional contemporary songs with Advent themes.

continued on the next page

continued from the previous page

11. Even So Come (Kevin Prosch) – One of my all-time favorites. It contains the most delicate, vivid imagery I’ve ever heard in a praise and worship song. In the original recording (off of the album with the same name) Kevin Prosch actually breaks down and weeps mid-performance. You will, too. (Crystal Lewis’ version is currently available via iTunes).

12. Hope In the Lord (Robert Filoramo, Jr) – Passionate and powerful, this is the best rendering of Isaiah 40:28-31 ever put to melody. Martin Doman covered this on “Praying Twice,” available via iTunes.

13. To You, O Lord (Graham Kendrick) – Psalm 25 is one of the seminal Psalms for the Advent season, and this rendition (off of Kendrick’s “What Grace”) is the best interpretation, by far. Reverent and hopeful, and as infectious as anything

you’ll ever hear.

14. Prepare the Way (Charlie Hall / Louis Giglio) – The simplest song on the list—it can be taught orally without reprinting any lyrics. The original version (on Passion’s “Our Love Is Loud”) demonstrates its flexibility and emotion. Admittedly, there is a point in the original recording that, in my opinion, shoots beyond the average music minister, but the beauty of the song is that it is flexible enough that the song need not go there.

15. Advent Suite (John Michael and Terry Talbot) – This is the most entertainment-oriented song on the list, but is an absolute stunner. I must’ve listened to this song (from The Painter) hundreds of times, but it never fails to be fresh each time I hear it. Packed to the gills with incredible Biblical imagery, it comes out swinging with two guitars, tremendous harmonies, and the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

Five more exceptional contemporary-writ Advent songs:

16. Jesus, Hope of the World (Paul A. Tate and Deanna Light)

17. We Shall Prepare (Janet Vogt)

18. Come, Lord Jesus Come (Steve Angrisano / Tom Tomaszek)

19. Jesus, Come To Us (David Haas)

20. Come Emmanuel (Twila Paris)

I cannot encourage the use of these songs highly enough. If you do not know these songs, learn them. Download them from iTunes or from the publisher’s website. Burn them onto a CD and add to your annual holiday mix.

Because, ultimately, the songs from the Advent season will make you appreciate Christmas—when it comes—all the more. †

(Editors Note: be sure and also check out the review of Jaime Cortez’ Adviento on page 25 which contains wonderful new Advent music.)

Celebrate Advent. Then get this for Christmas.



I Wanna Be Debated available thru www.catholicmusicnetwork.com.