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VOX HUMANA: Tryste Noël

The Ox is host in Judah stall
And Host of more than onelie one.
For close she gathereth withal
Our Lorde her littel Sonne.
Glad Hinde and King
Their Gyfte may bring,
But wo'd to-night my Teares were there,

Amen, Amen:

Between her Bosom and His hayre!

- Louise Imogen Guiney

Editorialists, preachers, and social commentators have made much of the bittersweet themes of Christmas, for there is little as poignant as the tales of those who must labor so that others may celebrate, revel, observe a solemn feast, reunite, eat and drink merrily, or merely enjoy a long winter's nap. In almost any city of some size, media report with regularity stories of non-Christian public servants and other essential workers who pitch in for extra shifts so that their Christian colleagues can take pleasure in the holiday. It goes without saying too that a measurable share of readers here, for at least a day or two in late December, can be termed "essential."

Working on significant holidays – July Fourth, Thanksgiving, Christmas – can be depressing. Even for us musicians, the rhythm of secular culture can conspire to dull any sense of celebration, or observance, or warmth. Gathering with a small group of liturgical musicians some years ago, we looked at our plight and mused, "who ministers to the ministers?" Few it would seem, at least in this world. Christmas can be a lonely place.

Look at how Advent has shrunken to a stump of its already diminutive self. It is hard enough to make a season of but four weeks, but impossible when those scant days are smeared with impatient anticipations of the gala to follow. More and more of us put our greatest efforts into Christmas music-making long before the great "O" antiphons of yore have begun their admonitions to "rejoice, O Israel." So the opening of the real Christmas feast has become for us not only that day on which we cannot gather with family and loved ones, but a musical anticlimax to wit. Colleagues confess that choirs have virtually disbanded by the morning of December 25 itself and that efforts of Christmas Eve, however impressive by comparison, have also begun to pale. Our singers, it would seem, also spend time with friends and family. We are a mobile society. Folks travel at Christmas.

Is there a loneliness quite as throbbing as that of an empty choir loft on that bleak midwinter's early service of Christmas morn? Is there a vacuum quite as blank as that short night between the services on the Eve and that early-grey light of morning, often spent in fleeting exhausted sleep with the unbearable absence of those we love. How this howls in stark relief to the picture-perfect rituals of trees, lights, gifts, warmth, and joy, those images in which we are supposed to take pleasure and find life's ultimate fulfillment?

Our Christmas is, often, the antithesis of the world's Christmas. When those preachers swell with eloquence about "the poor and helpless, the cold, the hungry, and the oppressed, the sick and them that mourn, the lonely and the unloved, the aged and the little children," do they ever slip a glance at that shadowed organ loft?

I do not imply that no one has hope of a "traditional family life," a life outlined in conformist Currier and Ives terms. Yet even for those who live out such conventions in the company of partners, spouses, children, or extended family, liturgical obligations can deliver a knockout punch. The organist/family person still risks missing the Kodak moments, is unable or too tired to cook the requisite elaborate feast, lies slumped in weariness. And for many, maybe most, this whole formula just does not apply. Single life, life with blended, redefined families, challenges the fulfillment we all seek and are owed at Christmas. Maybe the best hope is, after all, those sweet days following the holiday, an on-time flight on the morning of St. Stephen's, a calm visit at the ancestral homestead, a jolly New Year, or a warm January escape.

If the world little knows or cares what we do year round, who we are, or what we play, then for certain it cannot comprehend the substance of our hearts on the biggest day of the year, or the price we willingly offer on that day when there is no sleep and no one who can step in to render the kindness of substitute duty.

Ended here, though, it would be a bleak, self-serving story. What good would come from this selfless population of musicians? There is a high purpose and calling to what we do – anytime – but never does that calling assume greater value than at those pinnacle moments. We might disagree on the definition of pinnacle, but by whatever tradition, or common expectation, or just the twisted values of retail-driven marketing, there is that anticipation of performance on that day shortly after the Solstice. And perform we will, even as our tears may fall "between her bosom and His hair."

- Haig Mardirosian