



THE KING AND QUEEN OF CHORALES, AND THEIR COMPOSER

Sally Messner

Philipp Nicolai is commemorated along with two other hymn writers, Paul Gerhardt and Johann Heermann, in the Lutheran calendar of saints on October 26. The date this year marked the 400th anniversary of Nicolai's death. Though the quantity of his output is small, the quality of his chorales makes him one of the greatest Lutheran hymnwriters, worthy of commemoration alongside his companions.

Philipp Nicolai was born on August 10, 1556, in Mengershausen in Waldeck. His father was the town pastor. Philipp studied at the University of Erfurt and of Wittenberg, graduating from the latter in 1579. He eventually earned the doctor of divinity degree from Wittenberg in 1594, its conferral delayed by the Crypto-Calvinist controversy. Nicolai served the church at Mengershausen with his father until 1583, when he was appointed pastor at Herdecke near Dortmund. When the Spanish invaded Herdecke in 1586, the Roman Catholic town council reinstated the Latin mass, and Nicolai left.

After leading secret services in Cologne and serving as deacon and pastor at Niederwildungen, Nicolai was appointed pastor at Altwildungen in 1588. He also served as *Hofprediger* (court preacher) to Countess Margaretha of Waldeck and tutor to her son, Wilhelm Ernst, count and lord of Waldeck. Nicolai's new position allowed him the scope to disagree openly with and challenge the Crypto-Calvinists. By his efforts the clergy of Waldeck adopted the Formula of Concord in 1593.

Nicolai moved to Unna in Westphalia in 1596. He had been the pastor there only a few months when the plague struck the town. As pastor, Nicolai buried over thirteen hundred parishioners, and his view of the churchyard from the parsonage window was a constant reminder of devastation. In response he wrote *Frewden-Spiegel dess ewigen Lebens* in 1599. *Frewden-Spiegel*, or *Mirror of Joy*, was a book of meditations "to leave behind me (if God should call me from this world) as a token of my peaceful, joyful, Christian departure, or (if God should spare me in health) to comfort other sufferers whom He should also visit with the pestilence." Two familiar hymns—*Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* and *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*—for which

Nicolai composed both tune and text are included in this devotional book.

Nicolai left Unna in 1598, again because of a Spanish invasion, though he was able to return in 1599. In 1601 he moved to Hamburg to serve as pastor of St. Katherine's Church, where he earned the name "the second Chrysostom" for his eloquent preaching. He remained at St. Katherine's until his death in 1608.

Wachet auf, known to us as "Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying," is called the king of chorales. Its full title, "Of the Voice at Midnight and the Wise Virgins who Meet the Heavenly Bridegroom," gives the reader some scriptural context for the complete three-stanza hymn. The chorale text is based on several parts of Scripture, including passages from Isaiah, Ezekiel, Matthew, 1 Corinthians, and Revelation. The stanzas form an acrostic in the original German: the letters w, z, and g, which open stanzas 1, 2, and 3 respectively, are the initials of Wilhelm Ernst's title reversed (Graf zu Waldeck, or Count of Waldeck). Nicolai's student had died during the plague of 1598–1599. The tune for this chorale is probably based on *Silberweise* by Hans Sachs, the sixteenth-century poet and *Meistersinger* from Nuremberg. (Sachs was a cobbler, playwright, poet, composer, follower of Luther, and is the principal character in Richard Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.)

The use of *Wachet auf* in worship is not limited to Lutherans. The chorale also appears in Anglican and Roman Catholic hymnals. J. S. Bach's Cantata 140 is based on the chorale's text and tune, and his well-known organ chorale (in the *Schübler Chorales*) is an arrangement of the fourth movement of this cantata. Felix Mendelssohn used the tune of *Wachet auf* in his oratorio *St. Paul*, and G. F. Händel quoted it in the *Messiah*.

Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern ("How Brightly Shines the Morning Star") was called "a spiritual bridal song of the believing soul concerning Jesus Christ, her heavenly Bridegroom, founded on the 45th Psalm of the prophet David." The so-called queen of chorales was also composed as an acrostic in honor of Nicolai's former student. Each of the seven stanzas begin with the letters w, e, g, u, h, z, and w respectively for Wilhelm's full name and title. A similar

tune appears in Wolff Köpffel's *Psalter*, which was published in 1538, so it is possible that Nicolai adapted his tune from Köpffel's.

J. S. Bach based Cantata 1 on *Wie schön leuchtet* and also used the tune in Cantatas 36, 37, 49, 61, and 172. Bach included a harmonization of the tune in his *Choralgesänge* and wrote an organ prelude based on it. At present, *Wie schön leuchtet* is a popular tune for church chimes.

The point that Nicolai may have based these tunes on preexisting melodies does not diminish his brilliance as a hymnwriter, for borrowing melodic

lines was a common practice in his time. Numerous tunes became and continue to be part of the church's collective memory, as is evidenced by the number of melodies we sing that are ascribed to anonymous composers. Both of Nicolai's tunes appear in rounded bar form in contemporary hymnals. Stanzas in bar form follow an AAB pattern. These two chorales are considered to be in rounded bar form because the end of the B section repeats the end of the A section.

"There seemed to me nothing more sweet, delightful, and agreeable than the contemplation of the noble, sub-

lime doctrine of eternal life obtained through the blood of Christ," wrote Nicolai in his preface to *Frewden-Spiegel*. More than four hundred years ago, during the most painful years of his life, this pastor penned two hymns of incomparable worth to the Lutheran tradition. Only through the promise of the gospel could such beauty and timelessness arise out of death and destruction. *LF*

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