

THE KING AND QUEEN OF CHORALES

A Masterpiece of Hymnody

*Wake, awake, for night is flying:
The watchmen on the heights are crying,
 Awake, Jerusalem, arise!
Midnight's solemn hour is tolling,
His chariot wheels are nearer rolling,
 He comes; prepare, ye virgins wise.
Rise up with willing feet,
Go forth, the Bridegroom meet:
 Alleluia!
Bear through the night your well trimmed light,
Speed forth to join the marriage rite.*

*Zion hears the watchmen singing,
And all her heart with joy is springing,
 She wakes, she rises from her gloom;
Forth her Bridegroom comes, all-glorious,
The strong in grace, in truth victorious;
 Her Star is risen, her Light is come!
All hail, Thou precious One!
Lord Jesus, God's dear Son!
 Alleluia!
The joyful call we answer all,
And follow to the nuptial hall.*

*Lamb of God, the heavens adore Thee,
And men and angels sing before Thee,
 With harp and cymbal's clearest tone.
By the pearly gates in wonder
We stand, and swell the voice of thunder,
 That echoes round Thy dazzling throne.
To mortal eyes and ears
What glory now appears!
 Alleluia!
We raise the song, we swell the throng,
To praise Thee ages all along.*

PHILIPP NICOLAI, 1599.

At rare intervals in the history of Christian hymnody, we meet with a genius who not only possesses the gift of writing sublime poetry but also reveals talent as a composer of music. During the stirring days of the Reformation such geniuses were revealed in the persons of Martin Luther and Nicolaus Decius. We now encounter another, Philipp Nicolai, the writer of the glorious hymn, "Wachet auf."

Nicolai's name would have been gratefully remembered by posterity had he merely written the words of this hymn; but, when we learn that he also composed the magnificent chorale to which it is sung, we are led to marvel. It has been called the "King of Chorales," and well does it deserve the title.

But Nicolai was also the composer of the "Queen of Chorales." That is the name often given to the tune of his other famous hymn, "Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern."

Both of Nicolai's great tunes have been frequently appropriated for other hymns. The "King of Chorales" has lent inspiration to "Holy Majesty, before Thee," while the "Queen of Chorales" has helped to glorify such hymns as "All hail to thee, O blessed morn," "Now Israel's hope in triumph ends," and "O Holy Spirit, enter in."

Some of the world's greatest composers have recognized the beauty and majesty of Nicolai's inspiring themes and have seized upon his chorales to weave them into a number of famous musical masterpieces. The strains of the seventh and eighth lines of "Wachet auf" may be heard in the passage, "The kingdoms of this world," of Handel's "Hallelujah chorus." Mendelssohn introduces the air in his overture to "St. Paul," and the entire chorale occurs in his "Hymn of Praise." The latter composer has also made use of the "Wie schon" theme in the first chorus of his unpublished oratorio, "Christus."

The circumstances that called forth Nicolai's two great hymns and the classic chorales to which he wedded them are tragic in nature. A dreadful pestilence was raging in Westphalia. At Unna, where Nicolai was pastor, 1,300 villagers died of the plague between July, 1597, and January, 1598. During a single week in the month of August no less than 170 victims were claimed by the messenger of death.

From the parsonage which overlooked the churchyard, Nicolai was a sad witness of the burials. On one day thirty graves were dug. In the midst of these days of distress the gifted Lutheran pastor wrote a series of meditations to which he gave the title, "Freuden Spiegel," or "Mirror of Joy." His purpose, as he explains in his preface, dated August 10, 1598, was "to leave it behind me (if God should call me from this world) as the 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."

"There seemed to me," he writes in the same preface, "nothing more sweet, delightful and agreeable, than the contemplation of the noble, sublime doctrine of Eternal Life obtained

through the Blood of Christ. This I allowed to dwell in my heart day and night, and searched the Scriptures as to what they revealed on this matter, read also the sweet treatise of the ancient doctor Saint Augustine ("The City of God") ... Then day by day I wrote out my meditations, found myself, thank God! wonderfully well, comforted in heart, joyful in spirit, and truly content."

Both of Nicolai's classic hymns appeared for the first time in his "Mirror of Joy." As a title to "Wachet auf" Nicolai wrote, "Of the voice at Midnight, and the Wise Virgins who meet their Heavenly Bridegroom. Mt. 25." The title to "Wie schon" reads, "A spiritual bridal song of the believing soul concerning Jesus Christ, her Heavenly Bride groom, founded on the 45th Psalm of the prophet David."

It is said that the melody to "Wie schon" became so popular that numerous church chimes were set to it.

Nicolai's life was filled with stirring events. He was born at Mengerinhausen, August 10, 1556. His father was a Lutheran pastor. After completing studies at the Universities of Erfurt and Wittenberg, he too was ordained to the ministry in 1583. His first charge was at Herdecke, but since the town council was composed of Roman Catholic members, he soon was compelled to leave that place. Later he served at Niederwildungen and Altwildungen, and in 1596 he became pastor at Unna. After the dreadful pestilence of 1597 there came an invasion of Spaniards in 1598, and Nicolai was forced to flee.

In 1601 he was chosen chief pastor of St. Katherine's church in Hamburg. Here he gained fame as a preacher, being hailed as a "second Chrysostom." Throughout a long and bitter controversy with the Calvinists regarding the nature of the Lord's Supper, Nicolai was looked upon as the "pillar" of the Lutheran Church, and the guardian of its doctrines. He died October 26, 1608.