



Now Sing We, Now Rejoice

Text: Unknown, 14th century

Tune: Unknown, 15th century

Outside of the Latin hymnody of the early Church, one of our oldest Christmas hymns is *In dulci jubilo*, “Now Sing We, Now Rejoice.” As recently as 2008 this hymn was ranked as the second most popular choral work of the Christmas season. Though the most faithful translation of the text is what we have as “Now Sing We, Now Rejoice,” John Mason Neale made an adaptation of the text and created what we know as “Good Christian Men, Rejoice.” Many hesitate to count this version as a translation, since Neale freely altered both text and tune to create his version, a surprising move for Neale, who is generally regarded as one of the best translators of Latin hymnody. One British historian, H.J. Massé, is the most vocal critic of Neale’s “Good Christian Men, Rejoice,” calling it an example of “musical wrong-doing...involving the mutilation of the rhythm of that grand tune IN DULCI JUBILO to the English words ‘Good Christian Men, Rejoice.’ It is inconceivable that anyone of any real musical culture should have lent himself to tinkering with a perfect tune for the sake of fitting it perforce to works of inferior merit.”

The history of this hymn, both in text and tune, is unclear. The best we can do is approximate its age. It is thought to have been written by the German monk Heinrich Seuse around the year 1328. In his autobiography he claims, “Now this same angel came up to the servant brightly and said that God had sent him down to him, to bring him heavenly joys amid his sufferings; adding that he must cast off all his sorrows from his mind and bear them company, and that he must also dance with them in heavenly fashion. Then they drew the servant by the hand into the dance, and the youth began a

joyous song about the infant Jesus, *in dulci jubilo, nu singet und seyt fro...*” What he then quotes is the four stanza hymn we know today. It was originally composed as a *macaronic*, a poem of mixed languages. In this case, it alternated between Latin and medieval German. This text has always been wedded to the tune we know. It is first found in a manuscript in the Leipzig University library, dating to about 1400, though many think it is older than that, being a popular tune across Europe. The Lutherans were the first to find this hymn and bring it into wide use. Its first hymnal appearance was Joseph Klug’s 1533 *Geistliche Lieder*. Soon after the Latin was translated into German, producing a single language version. It is upon this version that our translation was made.

The original first stanza and a literal translation are as follows (the Latin text is set in italics):

<i>In dulci jubilo</i>	In sweet rejoicing
Nu singet und seyt froh!	Now sing and be glad!
Unsers Herzens Wonne	Our hearts’ Joy
Leit <i>in praesepio</i> ;	Lies in the manger
Und leuchtet als die Sonne	And He shines like the sun
<i>Matris in gremio.</i>	In the Mother’s lap.
<i>Alpha es et O!</i>	You are the Alpha
<i>Alpha es et O!</i>	and the Omega.

It is not hard to understand why “Now Sing We, Now Rejoice” is one of the best-loved Christmas hymns. The energetic tune is combined with a strong text that confesses Christ and what Christmas has ushered in. Stanza one identifies Christ as the greatest source of joy and light, even shining brighter than the sun. But we can do nothing to put ourselves in the glow of this Light. “I cannot rise to Thee” is the confession of salvation. We can do nothing to save ourselves. It is only when God comes to us with His grace and merit that we can be drawn to Him (st. 2). We can only be drawn to God because we are dead in our sin and vanity (st. 3). Our human nature wants nothing to do with turning from sin. It is only when God, in Christ Jesus, extends His grace to us, that we can obtain “eternal joy on high.” Ultimately we will experience that grace in its fullest form when we are “on heavenly ground.” When we are in heaven, united with angels and all God’s saints, we will forever sing His praises “in heavenly joy and light” (st. 4).