

The Holly and the Ivy

*arranged for SATB Choir and Orchestra
by Ralph Vaughan Williams and Douglas Mears*

Instrumentation

Flutes 1 and 2
Oboes 1 and 2
Clarinets in A 1 and 2
Bassoons 1 and 2
Horns 1 and 2
Trumpet in B^b
Timpani
Percussion
Triangle and Glockenspiel
Harp
SATB Choir
Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello
Contrabass

Notes

The British Christmas carol “The Holly and the Ivy” possesses a rich and mysterious history. The version commonly sung today (*see lyrics below*) was first published in 1909 by English folk song collector Cecil Sharp (1859-1924). Sharp collected the lyrics from a woman named Mary Clayton in the market town of Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire. However, Clayton was not the author of the text; all evidence points to a much older origin, possibly dating back to medieval England.

Holly and ivy plants have strong ties to pagan traditions as symbols of fruitfulness, enduring greenery, and vibrant colors--emblems of hope amidst the harsh conditions of winter. The early Church and Christians embraced holly and ivy for similar reasons, applying this symbolism to the everlasting life of Christ and hope in the Resurrection. Holly and ivy blended Christian and pagan metaphors and were referenced repeatedly in poems and literature for centuries. Thus, this beloved carol likely originated as a poem with varied words but without accompanying music

Over time, these words have been sung to a variety of tunes. This new arrangement for SATB choir and orchestra by Ralph Vaughan Williams and Douglas Mears is based on an old English folk melody titled “The Lark in the Morning.” Vaughan Williams collected the tune on April 24, 1904, from Mrs. Harriet Verrall of Monk’s Gate, Horsham in Sussex, and he incorporated it into his 1949 cantata for women’s voices and orchestra titled “Folk Songs of the Four Seasons.” The combination of lyrics provided by a simple Gloucestershire woman with a tune sung by a folk singer from Monk’s Gate creates a joyous new setting of this enduring carol.

Text

The holly and the ivy,
When they are both full grown,
Of all the trees that are in the wood,
The holly bears the crown.

The holly bears a blossom,
As white as lily flower,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
For to be our sweet Savior.

The holly bears a berry,
As red as any blood,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
For to do poor sinners good.

The holly bears a prickly,
As sharp as any thorn,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
On Christmas Day in the morn.

The holly bears a bark,
As bitter as any gall,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
For to redeem us all.