

Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending

Helmsley - English Melody from the 18th century

Set and scored 2010 by Klaus Smedegaard Bjerre,

but for the 3rd verse, which follows the setting from the 1906 English Hymnal

This piece was set and scored specifically for the brass quintet of a tuba friend. This church associated quintet works with organ and choir, so these were the media chosen for this setting. Part of the story is that a member of the said quintet would want more than plain hymn settings, if carols should be on the quintet repertory.

Hymns in many styles have had my interest for several decades. My schooling was in the pre-Bach chorale style and later on also in Bach's own chorale style. The Danish hymn tradition is, what I have heard all my life, but I am not extensively acquainted with the British and American hymn traditions. So here was a challenge to be met.

Fortunately I could find the brilliantly made setting of the British Hymnal from 1906, where I also found the 4 verses of text used in this present setting (with a few spelling changes inspired by some of the several other versions available). It has not been my intention to enter theological or confessional discussions, hence the choice of a very standard text source.

It belongs to the tradition that the 4th verse is sung in unison. Which gave me inspiration for the form of this setting. I never would want to compete with or write in opposition to the 1906 hymnal.

Embellishing on it would have no purpose either. As my own writing of music is about the contrasts between chaos and order or about the contrasts between various categories of order, I chose the 1906 setting as one of the anchor points of order.

The firsts thing written in this process was the chromatic setting for the second verse. I consider it being tonal, but with a quite extended and less stable tonality. The first verse was written with no deviations from the given tonality, but still has some restlessness. In the fourth verse the ultimate order in form of the unison choir is contrasted with martial brass signals on top and a stampeding bass line below. The epilogue, like the introduction, compresses important elements of the melody into a very short form. The British Hymnal indicates that Amen sung on the Plagal cadenza should conclude this hymn.

The altos, tenors, and basses of some choirs may find the two first verses very difficult with their offset placement of syllables, which call for an almost percussive exactness in rhythm and intonation. If the ATB singers are uncomfortable about their parts in these two verses, my suggestion would be letting the sopranos and altos sing the melody in unison accompanied by brasses and organ, whereas the male voices rest until the full choir sings the 3rd verse in the four-part setting from 1906. The full choir then sings the 4th verse in unison and the Amen in its four-part setting. Letting the male voices join the melody in the two first verses would lead to many tonal clashes. For the same reason the organ should avoid 16' stops on the melody line during these verses.

A performance for brasses alone is possible, even if it will be a challenge for the players responsible for the melody in the 4th verse. A performance omitting either brass, organ, or choir also would be possible.

There will be compatible versions for other instruments also. However a mixed performance always should have brasses and/or organ at its core.

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