

The Word's Eye View

The Word's Eye View is a newspaper column written by
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"The Music of Christmas" (Article 26)

Lieutenant Gitz Rice was a member of a famous Canadian regiment which went to France in World War I. The regiment fought in Flanders' Fields, across the desolate "No Man's Land" under cover of a fearsome barrage - sometimes even without the sheltering shells. Rice's company carried a strange implement of war - a piano. On that piano in France Gitz Rice composed one of the famous songs of the soldiers, "Mademoiselle from Armentieres."

The afternoon before Christmas Eve it was decided that the piano should be taken up to the frontline trenches. It was hoisted into an army truck and finally deposited at its destination. Peace had settled over "No Man's Land" that night, but the barbed wire remained, and a morning attack threatened each side. The hostile troops were so close that one could hear them conversing.

Shortly before the hour of midnight Rice began playing Christmas carols in the British trench. First he played "Silent Night, Holy Night." This was followed by "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" and other beloved carols familiar to all the Christian world. The Canadian soldiers sang lustily; then they paused. From across the shallow field they heard the German troops singing with them. It was Christmas Eve!

Rice then played an excerpt from Wagner's "Tannhauser." As he began the opening chords, a Canadian soldier mounted the rim of the parapet and sang the words. "More! More!" shouted the Germans. Then one of their own singers, a rich baritone, repeated the song to Rice's accompaniment, standing as a target for British rifles.

Such incidents bring to light the seeds of good will which are hidden in the hard soil of our embittered world. Interestingly, these seeds seem to find their root in the message of Christianity which has a foundation stone in Christmas. Mortal enemies did not lay their weapons down to join in mutual melody over the subjects of evolution, socialism, better government or higher education. These things do not inspire such behavior, but the story of a babe in a manger transcends uncommon boundaries. Every indication suggests there was a supernatural involvement in this historical event. There are more than 500 songs in my hymnal which are essentially all about the same Man. This number represents but a small fraction of the compositions that have been written in His honor. Me thinks (Shakespeare) there is not another religion, philosophy or theology that could boast the inspiration that produces thousands of musical lyrics.

The aging composer bowed by misfortune, wandered the lonely streets of London nightly in hopeless despair. Only memories of his past glory, when the brilliant man was touted by the court society of London and Europe, were left to him, and it now seemed his musical genius was gone forever. George Frederick Handel, once the favorite of kings and queens, had been forced into

bankruptcy and had become a pauper.

One bitterly cold morning during the winter of 1741 Handel returned to his lodgings to find a thick package on the table. It contained a text made up of scripture verses from the librettist, Charles Jennens. Dazed by cold and hunger, Handel listlessly leafed through the pages.

“Comfort ye comfort ye, My people, saith your God...Behold! A virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, God with us....The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light...For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given...and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God...Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped...He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: and He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom...”

Excitedly, he read on: “He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief...He looked for some to have pity on Him, but there was no man; neither found He any to comfort Him...But thou didst not leave His soul in hell...”

He hurriedly read on: “I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth...King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Hallelujah!”

The words burned into his soul and struck a responsive chord within him. He rushed to the piano with pencil in hand and began to write the music to the immortal “Messiah.” For two weeks he labored incessantly. Handel saw no one and refused food and sleep. At last he finished the great oratorio, and a friend was admitted to his room. Tears were streaming down his face. “I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself,” he declared at the completion of the glorious “Hallelujah Chorus.”

The composition was first heard in Dublin where it was an overwhelming triumph. Several weeks later it was again a wonderful success in London. During the performance the King, carried away by the glory of the great “Hallelujah Chorus,” rose to his feet and the audience followed his example! Today audiences all over the world still rise and remain standing during this chorus.

We, too, wish to acknowledge His saving grace.