

# Story of a Favorite Christmas Hymn



## HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING

CHARLES WESLEY.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY.

For unison singing.



1. Hark! The her-ald an-gels sing, "Glo-ry to the new-born King! Peace on earth, and  
2. Hail, the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail, the Son of Righteousness! Light and life-



mer-cy mild; God and sin-ners rec-on-ciled. "Joy-ful, all ye na-tions, rise;  
all He brings, Ris'n with heal-ing in His wings. Let us then with an-gels sing,



Join the tri-umph of the skies; With th'angel-ic hosts proclaim, "Christ is born in  
Glo-ry to the new-born King! Peace on earth and mer-cy mild; God and sin-ners

REFRAIN. After each stanza.



Beth-le-hem." } Hark! The her-ald an-gels sing, "Glo-ry to the new-born King-  
rec-on-ciled!

Charles Wesley's revised lyric and the music of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, as finally brought together by a church organist many years after the lyric and the music were written separately.

By JOHN PAUL ADAMS

WHAT hymn would be chosen by the most Christians as their favorite?

Choices would vary according to country, denomination, and language, of course. A generation ago, Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology*, a monumental compilation of particulars regarding over 400,000 hymns, stated that the following four stood at the head of all in the English language as to popularity:

Ken's Morning Hymn, *Awake, my soul*; Isaac Watts' *When I survey the wondrous cross*; Charles Wesley's *Hark! the herald angels sing*; Toplady's *Rock of ages*.

Probably after a lapse of time, others would be found among the foremost favorites. Yet the unforgettable *Hark! the herald angels sing* would undoubtedly remain in the group at the top. Few if any hymns will be sung more widely this Christmas season than the lyric Charles Wesley was inspired to write on Christmas morning, 1739.

Charles Wesley was 32 then. He had become a hymn writer only a few years before, during a trip to America. He went to Georgia in the expedition led by Gen. James Oglethorpe, founder of Georgia colony. The Rev. John Wesley, who had been or-

dain in the Church of England, was missionary-chaplain of the expedition. Charles Wesley, who also was educated for the ministry, acted as secretary to Gen. Oglethorpe.

It is stated that hearing some of the moving songs of faith of Moravians among the colonists determined Charles Wesley to write hymns. The voyage confirmed the Wesleys in beliefs they had begun to formulate in England, and it was followed by the founding of the Methodist Church.

It was not unusual for Charles Wesley's thoughts to be set soaring as they were that Christmas morning in 1739 by the pealing of church bells and for him to jot down lines for a hymn as he walked. In fact he wrote one or more practically every day—a total of over six thousand hymns.

The verses of *Hark! the herald angels sing* he penned that Christmas are not the same as those sung now. All of the four stanzas he wrote underwent modifications at the hands of others down through the years. The fifth stanza owes its present form to John Wesley.

*Hark! the herald angels sing* was originally set to the tune of an Easter hymn of Charles Wesley's, *Christ, the Lord is ris-*

Each century to find a perfect tune for one of C. Wesley's 6000 songs.

(CHRISTMAS CAROL)

## HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING HYMN by GEORGE W. WARREN.

Original Key A1

Allegro Moderato (MM2/4)

Two of many musical settings for Charles Wesley's hymn in which no credit is given to him for the lyric.

## HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING!

HENRY WILSON.

Moderato

en today. Scores of composers wrote original music for it.

Dr. W. H. Cummings, organist at Waltham Abbey in England, was not satisfied with any of these. One day in 1855, a cantata by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy written in 1840 for a secular purpose, caught his attention. Mendelssohn wrote the cantata, entitled simply *Festgesang*, or 'Festival Song,' to be sung at a Gutenberg anniversary celebration in Leipzig.

As Cummings played the second movement of the cantata, he felt that here at last was the perfect music for Wesley's noble poem. He adapted the music to the words.

Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, upon hearing of the use to which his composition was put by Cummings, is said to have expressed lack of confidence regarding the music's appropriateness for a religious theme. The world disagreed with him.

Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, born in 1809, was the grandson of Moses Mendelssohn, a distinguished Jewish philosopher who was called "the German Socrates." A musical prodigy, Felix made his public debut as a pianoforte artist at the age of nine and began to compose regularly in his twelfth year. He left 200 published works, including operas, symphonies, chamber music.