

BRITTEN: "SAINT NICOLAS"

Last performed by the Symphony and Chorus on December 9, 2005

Although Benjamin Britten does not rank among the "three Bs" (Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms still maintain their titles), his extraordinarily prolific output of works, particularly in the genres of opera, art song, oratorio, and church music, rank him among the most productive and important composers of Western music. Additionally, he composed at least 12 works that either feature children among the participants, or were written quite specifically for their enjoyment. *Saint Nicolas*, a cantata about the life of the patron saint of children, seamen, voyagers, and scholars, and utilizing text by Eric Crozier (1914–94), is one of those works. Originally composed for the combined forces of several boys' and girls' schools, it marvelously captures both the innocence and reverence with which the memories of St. Nicolas' life and deeds are upheld.

Almost countless stories and legends have been told over the centuries about the deeds of Nicolas, although few facts can be certain. We do know that he was born during the third century in Patara, a village in Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey. He was born of wealthy parents, who died of the plague while he was still young. Observing the teachings of his faith, he gave all his wealth to charity, to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering, and went in pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Legend tells us that on his return voyage to the city of Myra, his ship was in great peril as a mighty storm threatened to wreak vast destruction. Nicolas' prayers were answered, and the lives of the terrified sailors were spared. Then, in Myra, he was chosen Bishop while still a young man. Under the Roman Emperor Diocletian, he was exiled and imprisoned, but after his release he attended the First Ecumenical Council of Niceaea in AD 325. He died on December 6, AD 343. Within just a century of his death, he was venerated as a saint, and December 6 has become a widely celebrated feast day, at least in Europe. (In America, in 1809, Washington Irving published his satirical *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, which greatly influenced the

portrayal of Saint Nicolas in Clement Clarke Moore's enormously popular poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas," which is now known as "The Night before Christmas," and in which the saint was transformed into the jolly and elfin character who would soon be known as Santa Claus.)

More than 400 churches were dedicated to Saint Nicolas in England alone, contributing to a total of more than 2000 worldwide, including at least 300 in Belgium, and 34 in the city of Rome. His benevolence as patron saint—as a result of the rich legacy of legend and folklore that surrounds his life—has been extended to a wider circle, including bankers, pawn-brokers, orphans, laborers, travelers, merchants, judges, paupers, marriageable maidens, students, victims of judicial mistakes, captives, perfumers, thieves, and murderers; he is the protector of all in trouble or

mistakes, captives, perrumers, thieves, and murderers: he is the protector of all in trouble or need.

Britten's 1948 cantata—scored for multiple choirs, piano duet, organ, strings, percussion, and tenor soloist—chronicles several of the saint's most celebrated life events. The first movement is an entreaty to Nicolas by the performers, who ask him to strip off his glory and speak to them. He responds, "Across the tremendous bridge of sixteen hundred years, I come to stand in worship with you as I stood among my faithful congregation long ago." The second movement charmingly portrays the birth of Nicolas. Representing school children, the sopranos and altos tell couplet stories of his first years, and of the young Nicolas' determination that "God be glorified!" After six episodes, the young boy is transformed into the man, in a delightful reassignment of vocal solos. In the third movement, which features the tenor soloist exclusively, Nicolas speaks of his experiences following the death of his parents. In "the wider world of man" he found decay, hopelessness, faithlessness, and poverty, which made him angry and heartsick. In verse that reminds us of the great metaphysical poets Donne and Herbert, he finds "sweet humility, and Love was satisfied." Nicolas' journey to Palestine is recounted in the music of the fourth movement, in which we hear the seeds for a similar but tremendously expanded scene in *Billy Budd* (1951). Here, Nicolas predicts a storm, but the ship's crew ignore his concerns. As the winds and waves begin to overtake the ship, the cries of the sailors are interspersed with descriptions of the "angry roar" of lightning, thunder, and tempests. Nicolas prays again, and following one of the most poignant and self-accusing lines of the libretto ("We pray from fear and from necessity at death, in sickness or private loss"), calm is miraculously restored, leaving Nicolas awake on the deck, alone and weeping. Nicolas receives the bishop's mitre and robe in the fifth movement, a grand scene in which, following a Haydnesque fugue, the audience is called to serve as well, joining the stage forces in the singing of a familiar hymn, based on the 100th Psalm. The sixth movement again features the tenor alone, as he sings of the persecution of the church under Roman rule.

The next movement proves Britten's impeccable sense of theatricality and pathos. Nicolas' role as patron saint of children, scholars, and travelers is summarized here, in the French version of the story of an innkeeper who robbed and murdered three theological students, storing their remains in a pickling tub. In France, the story was modified to describe three small children, lost and then captured by an evil butcher. In Crozier's setting, all variations seem successfully conflated, as we are told of travelers along a wintry road (including Nicolas) who are seeking food. They overhear the voices of women calling for their missing sons Timothy, Mark, and John. When the travelers reach an inn and order food, Nicolas warns them not to eat ("O do not taste! O do not feed on sin!"), for the meat they have been served is the flesh of the three boys who have been murdered and pickled in salt. Nicolas restores them to life, and in perhaps the most touching moment of the work, the three pickled boys enter the stage singing "Alleluia!"

The penultimate movement is sung by the choirs alone, as they recall the kindness, courage, and gentle guidance of Nicolas, keeping "his memory alive in legends that our children and their children's children treasure still." Nicolas' death is depicted in the final movement, which grippingly couples Nicolas' final prayers with a setting of the traditional *Nunc dimittis* text. As Nicolas' life fades away, the intonations of faith sung by the chorus grow stronger and stronger. The two forces cross in their intensities, yielding to one final scintillating display of orchestration,

until the organ alone intones what will be the denouement of the work: all forces, including the audience, join in singing “God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.” Theatrical, satisfying, and deeply moving, Britten closes with a message of gracious universality.

—Jeffrey Thomas

Saint Nicolas

Text by Eric Crozier

1. Introduction

[CHORUS]

Our eyes are blinded by the holiness you bear
The bishop’s robe, the mitre and the cross of gold
obscure the simple man within the Saint
Strip off your glory, Nicolas, Nicolas, and speak!

[NICOLAS]

Across the tremendous bridge of sixteen hundred years
I come to stand in worship with you as I stood

among my faithful congregation long ago
All who knelt beside me then are gone
Their name is dust, their tombs are grass and clay
yet still their shining seed of faith survives in you!
It weathers time, it springs again in you!
With you it stands like forest oak
or withers with the grasses underfoot
Preserve the living faith for which your fathers fought!
For faith was won by centuries of sacrifice
and many martyrs died that you might worship God

[CHORUS]

Help us, Lord, to find the hidden road
that leads from love to greater love
from faith to greater faith
Strengthen us, O Lord!
Screw up our strength to serve Thee with simplicity

2. The Birth of Nicolas

[CHORUS]

Nicolas was born in answer to prayer
and leaping from his mother’s womb he cried:

[NICOLAS]

God be glorified!

[CHORUS]

Swaddling-bands and crib awaited him there
but Nicolas clasped both his hands and cried:

but Nicolas clapped both his hands and cried.

[NICOLAS]

God be glorified!

[CHORUS]

Innocent and joyful, naked and fair
he came in pride on earth to abide

[NICOLAS]

God be glorified!

[CHORUS]

Water rippled Welcome in the bath-tub by his side
he dived in open-eyed, he swam, he cried:

[NICOLAS]

God be glorified!

[CHORUS]

When he went to church at Christmastide
he climbed up to the font to be baptised

[NICOLAS]

God be glorified!

[CHORUS]

Pilgrims came to kneel and pray by his side
he grew in grace, his name was sanctified

[NICOLAS]

God be glorified!

[CHORUS]

Nicolas grew in innocence and pride
His glory spread in rainbow round the countryside
"Nicolas will be a Saint!" the neighbours cried

[NICOLAS]

God be glorified!

3. Nicolas devotes himself to God

[NICOLAS]

My parents died all too soon
I left the tranquil beauty of their home
and knew the wider world of man
Poor Man! I found him solitary, racked by doubt:
born, bred, doomed to die
in everlasting fear of everlasting death:
the foolish toy of time, the darling of decay -
hopeless, faithless, defying God

Heartsick, in hope to mask the twisted face of poverty
I sold my lands to feed the poor
I gave my goods to charity but love demanded more
Heartsick, I cast away
all things that could distract my mind
from full devotion to His will
I thrust my happiness behind but love desired more still
Heartsick, I called on God
to purge my angry soul
to be my only master, friend and guide
I begged for sweet humility and love was satisfied

4. His Journeys to Palestine

[CHORUS]

Nicolas sailed for Palestine
across the sunlit seas
The South West wind blew soft and fair
seagulls hovered through the air
and spices scented the breeze
Everyone felt that land was near:
all dangers now were past:
except for one who knelt in prayer
fingers clasped and head quite bare
alone by mizzen-mast
The sailors jeered at Nicolas
who paid them no regard
until the hour of sunset came
and up he stood and stopped their game
of staking coins on cards
Nicolas spoke and prophesied
a tempest far ahead
The sailors scorned such words of fear
since sky and stars shone bright and clear
so “Nonsense!” they all said
Darkness was soon on top of them
but still the South wind blew
The captain went below to sleep
and left the helmsman there to keep
his course with one of the crew
Nicolas swore he ‘d punish them
for mocking at the Lord
The wind arose, the thunder roared
but the captain with the helmsman that he had

Lightning split the waves that poured
in wild cascades on board

Waterspouts rose in majesty
until the ship was tossed
abaft, aback, astern, abeam
lit by the lightning's livid gleam
and all aboard cried, "Lost!"

Lightning hisses through the night
blinding sight with living light!
Ah! "Spare us!" – "Man the pumps!"
"Axes!" – "Save us, Savior!"

Winds and tempests howl their cry
of battle through the raging sky!
Ah! "Spare us!" – "Lifeboats!"
"Lower away!" – "Save us, Savior!"

Waves repeat their angry roar
Fall and Spring again once more!
Ah! "Let her run before the wind!"
"Shorten sail!" – "Reef her!" "Heave her to!"

Thunder rends the sky asunder
with its savage shouts of wonder!
Ah! "Pray to God. Kneel and pray!"
Lightning, thunder, tempest, ocean
praise their God with voice and motion

Nicolas waited patiently
till they were on their knees
then down he knelt in thankfulness
begging God their ship to bless
and make the storm to cease

[NICOLAS]

"O God! We are all weak, sinful, foolish men
We pray from fear and from necessity at death
in sickness or private loss
Without the prick of fear our conscience
sleeps, forgetful of Thy grace

Help us, O God, to see more clearly
Tame our stubborn hearts
Teach us to ask for less and offer more gratitude to Thee
Pity our simplicity
for we are truly pitiable in Thy sight Amen"

The winds and waves lay down to rest

The winds and waves lay down to rest
the sky was clear and calm
The ship sailed onward without harm
and all creation sang a psalm
of loving thankfulness

Beneath the stars the sailors slept
exhausted by their fear, while I
knelt down for love of God on high
and saw his angels in the sky
smile down at me, and wept

5. Nicolas comes to Myra and is Chosen Bishop

[CHORUS]

Come Stranger sent from God!
Come, man of God!
Stand foremost in our church
and serve this diocese as Bishop Nicolas

our shield, our strength, our peace!

[NICOLAS]

I, Nicolas, Bishop of Myra and its diocese
shall with the unfailing grace of God
defend his faithful servants
comfort the widow and fatherless
and fulfill his will for this most blessed church
Amen

[CHORUS]

Place the mitre on your head to show your mastery of men!

Amen

Take the golden robe that covers you with Christ's authority!

Amen

Wear the fine dalmatic woven with the cross of faith

Amen

Bear the crozier as a staff and comfort to your flock!

Amen

Set the ring upon your hand in sacramental sign of wedlock with thy God!

Amen

Serve the faith and spurn his enemies!

[AUDIENCE and CHORUS]

All people that on earth do dwell
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice!
Him serve with fear, His praise forth tell
Come ye before Him and rejoice

O enter then His gates with praise
approach with joy His courts unto
praise, laud and bless His name always
For it is seemly so to do

For why? The Lord, our God is good:
His mercy is for ever sure
His truth at all times firmly stood
and shall from age to age endure

Amen

6. Nicolas from Prison

[NICOLAS]

Persecution sprang upon our church
and stilled its voice
Eight barren years it stifled under Roman rule:
And I lay bound
condemned to celebrate my lonely sacrament with prison bread
while wolves ran loose among my flock. O man!
The world is set for you as for a king!
Paradise is yours in loveliness
The stars shine down for you
for you the angels sing
yet you prefer your wilderness
You hug the rack of self
embrace the lash of sin
pour your treasures out to bribe distress
You build your temples fair without and foul within:
You cultivate your wilderness
Yet Christ is yours, yours!
For you he lived and died
God in mercy gave his Son
to bless you all, to bring you life
and Him you crucified
to desecrate your wilderness
Turn, turn away from sin! Ah!
Bow down your hard and stubborn hearts!
Confess, confess yourselves to Him in penitence
and humbly vow your lives to Him, to holiness

7. Nicolas and the Pickled Boys

[CHORUS]

Famine tracks us down the lanes
hunger holds our horses' reins

winter heaps the roads with snow

O we have far to go!

Starving beggars howl their cry

snarl to see us spurring by

times are bad and travel slow

O we have far to go!

We mourn our boys, our missing ones!

We sorrow for three little ones!

Timothy, Mark and John are gone, are gone!

Landlord, take this piece of gold!

Bring us food before the cold

makes our pangs of hunger grow

O we have far to go!

Day by day we seek to find

some trace of them but oh! Unkind!

Timothy, Mark and John are gone, are gone!

Let us share this dish of meat

Come, my friends, sit down and eat!

Join us, Bishop, for we know

that you have far to go!

Mary meek and Mother mild

who lost thy Jesus as a child

our Timothy, Mark and John are gone, are gone!

Come, your Grace, don't eat so slow!

Take some meat!

[NICOLAS]

O do not taste! O do not feed on sin!

But haste to save three souls in need!

The mothers' cry is sad and weak

within these walls they lie

whom mothers sadly seek

Timothy, Mark and John

put your fleshly garments on!

Come from dark oblivion! Come!

[CHORUS]

See! Three boys spring back to life

who, slaughtered by the butcher's knife

lay salted down!

And entering, hand in hand they stand and sing

“Gloria in excelsis Deo”

"Alleluia" to their King!

8. His Piety and Marvelous works

[CHORUS]

For forty years our Nicolas
our prince of men, our shepherd
and our gentle guide walked by our side

We turned to him at birth and death
in time of famine and distress
in all our grief to bring relief

He led us from the valleys
to the pleasant hills of grace
He fought to fold us in from mortal sin
O! He was prodigal of love!

A spendthrift in devotion to us all
and blessed as he caressed
We keep his memory alive
in legends that our children
and their children's children treasure still

A captive at the heathen court
wept sorely all alone
"O Nicolas is here, my son!
And he will bring you home!"
"Fill, fill my sack with corn!" he said
"We die from lack of food!"

And from that single sack he fed
a hungry multitude
Three daughters of a nobleman
were doomed to shameful sin
till our good Bishop ransomed them
by throwing purses in
The gates were barred, the black flag flew
three men knelt by the block
But Nicolas burst in like flame
and stayed the axe's shock
"O help us, good Nicolas!

"Our ship is full of foam!"
He walked across the waves to them
and led them safely home
He sat among the bishops
who were summoned to Nicaea:
then rising with the wrath of God

boxed Arius's ear!

He threatened Constantine the Great
with bell and book and ban:
till Constantine confessed his sins
like any common man

Let the legends that we tell
praise him, with our prayers as well

We keep his memory alive
in legends that our children
and their children's children treasure still

9. The Death of Nicolas

[NICOLAS]

Death, I hear thy summons and I come
in haste, for my short life is done
And o! my soul is faint with love

for Him who waits for me above

Lord, I come to life, to final birth
I leave the misery of earth
for light, by Thy eternal grace
where I shall greet Thee face to face

Christ, receive my soul with tenderness
for in my last of life I bless
Thy name who lived and died for me
and dying, dying yield my soul to Thee.

[CHORUS]

Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant
depart in peace, according to Thy word
For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation
which Thou hast prepared
before the face of all people
to be a light to lighten the gentiles
and to be the glory of Thy people Israel

Glory be to the Father
and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost
As it was in the beginning
is now and ever shall be world without end
Amen

God moves in a mysterious way

His wonders to perform

He plants His footsteps in the sea

He plants His footsteps in the sea
and rides upon the storm

[AUDIENCE and CHORUS]

Deep in unfathomable mines
of never failing skill

He treasures up his bright designs
and works His sovereign will

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take
the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy and shall break
in blessings on your head

Amen