Softly Gather Shepherds

SATB with Organ Accompaniment
Christmas Eve, Christmastide

The hymn “Ave Maris Stella” from the Vespers of 1610 by Claudio Monteverdi provides the music for this setting. My arrangement draws from various sources, including numerous recordings and live performances. I am particularly indebted to the public-domain edition of the Vespers by John Kilpatrick (2009), and as a touchstone I have used photographic copies of the manuscript Sanctissimae Virgini Missa (Venice, 1610) provided by Performer’s Edition.

“Ave Maris Stella” comprises seven stanzas of four lines each. It begins:

Ave maris stella, Hail star of the sea,
Dei Mater alma, dear Mother of God,
atque semper Virgo, ever virgin,
felix caeli porta. blessed heaven’s portal.

For this Christmas anthem Marian has taken the image of portal and transferred it to the Bethlehem stable, approached by wondering shepherds. She adopts the Latin poem’s meter, 6666 trochaic. I have matched English syllable placements with the Latin placements of Monteverdi’s musical setting, thereby keeping alive his intricate interweavings, marvelous cross-rhythms, and tender harmonic suspensions.

Albert Blackwell
January 4, 2012
Softly Gather Shepherds

Marian Willard Blackwell

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)

Arr. Albert Blackwell

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Organ

1. Softly, softly gather shepherds, through

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* "Ave Maris Stella" from the Vespers of 1610

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this stable portal, see him frail and
this stable portal, see him frail
this stable portal, see him frail and
this stable portal, see him frail

sleeping, God as infant mortal.
and sleeping, God as infant mortal.
sleeping, God as infant mortal.
and sleeping, God as infant mortal.

[Interlude]
Interlude
(To be played after verses 1, 2 and 3)
2. See his fingers quiver, hands now weakly clinging, one day to be wounded, blessed dedication bringing.

[Interlude]
3. Flesh from flesh and spirit, new -
- born child of Mary, rumored by the an -

gels, love ex - traor - di - na - ry.

[Interlude]
4. See his mother fold him, nourish our salvation,
Sustainer, bearer of creation.