Sometimes a Light Surprises

SAB, *A Cappella* or with Accompaniment
Epiphany, General

*Olney Hymns* was published in 1779 as a joint venture by William Cowper, the author of this lyric, and John Newton, the former slave trader who repented and became an evangelical minister. Cowper contributed 67 texts to the collection, of which "Sometimes a Light Surprises" is one.

The hymn reflects Cowper’s lifelong personal struggles with mental instability and spiritual insecurity. Verses 1–3 express his sense of spiritual cheer when God grants him an unpredictable “season of clear shining.” The final verse goes further, echoing the prophet Habakkuk’s radical faith (3:17–18) that even in seasons of barrenness the faithful soul, knowing that God remains ever the same, “cannot but rejoice.”

I have matched Cowper’s lyric with a buoyant melody by Michael Praetorius, *Ach Gott, vom Himmelreiche* (1609). By this three-voice harmonization I have hoped to bring the anthem within the reach of smaller choirs, and also to lighten the texture, avoiding thicker harmonizings of this melody dating from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Albert Blackwell
January 20, 2012
Sometimes a Light Surprises

William Cowper (1731-1800)  Melody, Michael Praetorius (1571-1621)
Arr. Albert Blackwell

Sometimes a light surprises the

In holy contemplation, we

It can bring with it nothing but

Though vine nor fig tree neither their

Christiaan while he sings; it is the Lord who
sweetly then pursues the theme of God's salvation
he will bear us through: who gives the lilies
wonted fruit should bear, though all the fields should

rises with healing in his wings: when
vagitation, and find it ever new: set
cloth ing will clothe his people too: be-
with er, nor flocks nor herds be there: yet
com-forts are de-clin-ing, he grants the soul a-
free from pres-ent sor-row, we cheer-ful-ly can
neath the spread-ing hea-vens no crea-ture but is
God the same a-bid-ing, his praise shall tune my

gain a sea-son of clear shin-ing, to
say, e'en let th'un-known to-mor-row bring
fed; and he who feeds the rav-ens will
voice; for while in him con-fid-ing, I

cheer it af-ter rain.
with it what it may.
give his chil-dren bread.
can-not but re-joice.