



# Once Upon a Night!



**Text by Bill F. Leach**  
**Music by Vicki Hancock Wright**

# Once Upon a Night!

A Unison Christmas Cantata

Text by Bill F. Leach

Music by Vicki Hancock Wright

This cantata is designed for presentation by a choir (or choirs) of grades 1-3, grades 4-6, or grades 1-6. Performance time is approximately 22-25 minutes.

## Contents

Overture .....	3
Down the Road to Bethlehem .....	7
No Place to Spend the Night .....	11
Mary's Going to Have a Baby .....	14
In the Stillness of the Night .....	17
Shepherds, Shepherds .....	20
Star Light, Star Bright .....	23
Hodie, It's Christmas Day .....	26
Once Upon a Night! .....	29

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## Notes

The **staging suggestions** are made from the perspective of a very young choir and are therefore very simple (and are also optional). Depending on the age of the singers and the circumstances, feel free to make the presentation as elaborate as your own imagination and creativity suggests.

The **designation of vocal lines** has been made from the perspective of a first to third grade choir, making considerable use of the adult choir leaders to sing solo lines and, if desired, to do some singing along with the children. With a choir of fourth to sixth graders, it is suggested that the adults be used much more sparingly if at all.

The **cast** includes four or five "choir leaders" in addition to the choir: an accompanist, a director, and two or three activity leaders – just as in a regular choir rehearsal. The "storyteller" role can be played by one person, or can be divided among several. The activity leaders assist with the pantomimed table activities at the beginning of the rehearsal. When the choir is seated for singing one of the leaders tells the Christmas story and the other two sing portions of some of the choruses.

The **setting** is the regular weekly choir rehearsal. The choir members' families and friends have been invited to the rehearsal so the children can informally share with them some of the activities they have been doing in choir, some of the music they have been learning, and enjoy refreshments and fellowship with them after the rehearsal.

The **stage** is set like a rehearsal room, with three or four tables set up for activities stage left. On one of the tables is an autoharp and a songbook or sets of autoharp cards. Art materials that have been used to make a mural depicting events in the Christmas story are on another table. The mural (or several smaller individual pictures depicting scenes in the story) should be made prior to the presentation, perhaps by the children in their regular rehearsals. During the Overture, the children pantomime working on the mural, then hang it for a backdrop. On a third table are simple instruments such as woodblocks, tambourines, and bells (using whatever instruments are available). On the fourth table is a large doll and simple costumes for Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the Wise Men; the children will don the costumes during the Overture.

At stage right, chairs are arranged in a semicircle, obliquely facing the audience. These are for the choir members to sit on when it is time for the singing. (If you prefer, children may be seated on the floor or on risers instead.) A single chair faces the choir chairs; when seated in it, the director faces the choir with his or her back slightly toward the audience.

At rear center stage is a simple manger with straw scattered around. The children form a live mural around the manger during the singing of the final chorus.

The **Overture begins with the lights dimmed** on both the stage and audience. The choir leaders enter the room and take their places – the director at the door and the others at the activity tables – to pantomime greeting the children as they enter the room to begin the rehearsal. When the children enter, the lights come up full on the choir room. The children move to the tables to pantomime the activities. As the end of the Overture approaches, they take their seats in the semicircle. Those who have donned the costumes mix in with those who are not costumed. By all means, do not group the Wise Men together or the shepherds together. As the Overture ends, the director begins the opening dialogue. (See the score for the remainder of the staging suggestions.)

**Little or no drilling will be needed for the staging/drama part of this work** (unless you choose to make it more elaborate). The children simply do the kinds of things they normally do in their usual rehearsal, and do them in an informal manner.

During one of their rehearsals, you may want to have the children make and mail their own handwritten invitations to their parents. Perhaps together the choir could write an invitation to the congregation to be printed in the church bulletin or newsletter.

– Bill F. Leach and Vicki Hancock Wright

## Once Upon a Night!

### Overture

Bill F. Leach

Vicki Hancock Wright

(As the Overture begins, choir leaders take their places and pantomime greeting the children as they enter. Children pantomime the table activities and hang the mural as a backdrop.)

With excitement (♩ = 72)

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22 Sweetly (♩ = 84)

*mf*

25

28 1. *mp*

31 2. *mp* *broaden* *mf*

35

38 1.

41 2. *rit.*

44 Much slower, very legato *mp*

(As the Overture draws to a close, the children and leaders seat themselves in chairs;

48

all should be seated by the time the Overture ends.

52 1.

56 2. *rall.*

Director begins dialogue.)

**DIRECTOR:** I'm so glad all of you could come. It's a very special time with your families and other friends here to share with us, see some of the things you do in choir each week, hear some of the music you've been learning, and . . .

**A BOY:** Don't forget the cookies and cakes and everything, (*name of director*)!

**A GIRL:** Um hm! Don't forget that!

**DIRECTOR:** Oh, I won't! You wouldn't let me! (*Name of child*), did your grandmother get to come? (*Give child time to respond, then ask one or two other children similar questions to make it as relaxed, informal and intimate as possible.*)

I hope your parents have enjoyed seeing some of the activities you did in small groups. Now would you like to share with them some of the Christmas music that you've been learning? (*All members respond*)

Good! But first, I have a surprise for you. As we share the music with your parents and friends, we will have the help of (*a*) storyteller(s), who will tell the Christmas story as we sing about it. (*Name of storyteller*), will you begin?

**STORYTELLER:** All of you know that many stories begin "Once upon a time . . ." Well, the Christmas story is a very special story and much of it happened at night, so let's begin it: "Once upon a night."

Once upon a night, long, long ago, in the far off land of the Jews, three weary travelers slowly made their way along a dusty road toward a little town called Bethlehem. One of the travelers was a young woman called Mary. The second traveler was a man named Joseph, and he was Mary's husband. The third traveler had no name for he was a little donkey on which Mary rode.

For days they had traveled all the way from Nazareth, which was the city where they lived. They had seen many other travelers, too, on their journey — some going south just as they were, and others going east or west or north.

But why were so many people traveling? It was because Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, had commanded a census to be taken. Everyone throughout the land had to be enrolled, or counted. To do this, they had to go to the town or city from which their family had come. And no one dared to disobey!

## Down the Road to Bethlehem

Bill F. Leach

Vicki Hancock Wright

60 (♩ = 88)

Guitar (Capo up 1)

Claves

mp

Down the road to Beth - le - hem, Jo - seph and Mar - y are

62 mp

(Claves tacet)

64

go - ing;

On their way to be en - rolled, Down the road they're

66

68

go - ing.

D Am7 D Am7

Clvs.

70 ADULT LEADER 1

Mar - y looks so ver - y tired, Rid - ing a lit - tle

D Am7 D Am7

(Claves tacet)

72

don - key;

D Am7 D Am7

74 children join leader

Jo - seph's walk - ing by their side, Down the road they're

D Am7 D Am7

76

go - ing.

D Am7 D Esus (B bass)

Clvs.

CHILDREN

78 *mf*

Trav - 'ling south from Naz - a - reth, O - ver Ju - de - an

E Bm7 E Bm7

*mf*

(Claves tacet)

80

hills;

E Bm7 E Bm7

82

Pass - ing through Je - ru - sa - lem, Down the road they're

E Bm7 E Bm7

68

go - ing.

D Am7 D Am7

Clvs.

70 ADULT LEADER 1

Mar - y looks so ver - y tired, Rid - ing a lit - tle

D Am7 D Am7

(Claves tacet)

72

don - key;

D Am7 D Am7

74 children join leader

Jo - seph's walk - ing by their side, Down the road they're

D Am7 D Am7

76

go - ing.

D Am7 D Esus (B bass)

Clvs.

CHILDREN

78 *mf*

Trav - 'ling south from Naz - a - reth, O - ver Ju - de - an

E Bm7 E Bm7

(Claves tacet)

80

hills;

E Bm7 E Bm7

82

Pass - ing through Je - ru - sa - lem, Down the road they're

E Bm7 E Bm7