

Meditation

Philipp Nicolai wrote the words and music to the Epiphany hymn *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* (How brightly shines the morning star) in 1597. It soon became a staple of Lutheran hymnody, inspiring many composers to write compositions based on the tune. In our own hymnal, we have two versions of this music: Hymn 496 uses Nicolai's original metric structure and harmony. Hymn 497 is Bach's adaptation, made over a century later, and it has a new harmonization and rhythmic profile.

Below are links to two very different pieces based on *Wie schön leuchtet*. The first is Bach's cantata of the same name. Strings, oboes and horns introduce the cantata in a lilting dance. The sopranos enter joyfully, singing the chorale (hymn) melody, with the lower parts imitating the buoyant instrumental textures. Yet for all of the beautiful musical decoration, the chorale tune remains the clear focus for Bach.

In contrast, Peter Cornelius' anthem *The Three Kings* uses *Wie schön leuchtet* as more of a backdrop to a melodious baritone solo. The chorale tune is certainly vital to the structure of the piece, yet its constant presence is mostly understated. Indeed, it is easy to miss it on first hearing. Only near the conclusion does the hymn shine into the foreground at the phrase "Praise, O praise such love o'erflowing". The soloist's words are complementary to the hymn text, recounting the journey of the three kings to pay homage to the baby Jesus.

I hope you enjoy these contrasting musical adaptations of *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*. Both are fitting celebrations of the feast of the Epiphany.

With all best wishes,

Tim Pyper
Director of Music

J.S. Bach: *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*, BWV 1 (opening chorus)

<https://youtu.be/gBfHemeJTfg>

Peter Cornelius: *The Three Kings*

https://youtu.be/HledUioo_Jk

Text to *The Three Kings* (Text to *How Brightly Shines the Morning Star* interspersed):
https://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/three_kings_from_persian_lands_a.htm