

## ***The March of the Kings or The March of the Wise Men***

### ***La Marche des Rois or La Marche des Rois Mages (Provençal: La Marcha dei reis)***

*March of the Kings* is a popular Christmas carol of Provençal origin celebrating the Epiphany. The origins of both the tune and the lyrics are uncertain. Some say it dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> Century which would make it the first carol entirely composed in the vernacular. More likely, the lyrics are attributed to Abbe Joseph-François Domergue (1691-1728) from Avignon whose name appears on the first manuscript copy of the lyrics, dated 1742. The text was published in Paris in 1759.

According to the 1742 document, the text can be sung to the tune of a *Marche de Turenne*. This mention corresponds to the established practice of placing texts on known French songs spread by the printing press. One hypothesis is that this *Marche de Turenne* was a military march dating to the 17th century. Some authors attribute it to Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-87). Or was it composed by Domergue?

Recognition of the tune spread outside Provence when Georges Bizet (1838-75) used it in his incidental music for the drama *Arlésienne* by Alphonse Daudet based on a Provençal subject. The *March of the Kings* is one of three Provençal tunes he selected from an 1864 manuscript to incorporate into *l'Arlésienne* (1872). Bizet turned the music into a Suite. Four years after his death, his friend Ernest Guiraud wrote Suite 2 which also used the *March of the Kings* tune.

Bizet's music is scored for a chorus of 24 singers and an orchestra. At the premier Bizet played the harmonium backstage in support of the chorus. The original Provençal folk tune would have been accompanied by fifes and tambours (not the gentler flute and tambourin used for Provençal dances.)

The *March of the Kings* has become a traditional *chanson de France* and one of the most common Christmas carols in the repertoire of French-speaking choirs. At Aix-en-Provence, a tradition started from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century of a procession of people dressed in Provençal garb (shepherds, horsemen, drummers, trades, etc.) accompanying the Magi and their camels to Saint-Sauveur Cathedral. There the organist, accompanied by drummers, plays the *March of the Kings* starting pianissimo at the arrival of the procession and building to fortissimo as the procession approaches the altar. A large star is then lit on the main altar. The ceremony ends as the organist decrescendos back to pianissimo as the Kings leave.

There are as many translations and adaptations of the words to the tune as there are arrangers of *March of the Kings*. On the below page I have compared the words of Abbe Domergue with the literal translation alongside the version our arranger selected. Dana Alan Graybeal's version reflects the spirit and adheres more closely to the original lyrics than other popular versions.

### ***Pat Kilburn***

**Disclaimer:** I have pieced together the origins of this song from the sources below. You may find other sources with different or additional information. Reconstructing the history of carols is fraught with uncertainty. Most French accents are missing.

**Sources:** The New Oxford Book of Carols edited by Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott, 1992, The New Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians, sheet music, and various websites, and Wikipedia articles.



Note the various tabor pipes and tambourins (drums)



Images of Christmas in Provence, France

## **La marche des rois mages**

Joseph-François Domergue

De bon matin, j'ai rencontré le train  
De trois grands Rois qui allaient en voyage,  
De bon matin, j'ai rencontré le train  
De trois grands Rois dessus le grand chemin.

Venaient d'abord des gardes du corps,  
Des gens armés avec trente petits pages,  
Venaient d'abord des gardes du corps,  
Des gens armés dessus leurs justaucorps.

Puis sur un char doré de toutes parts,  
On voit trois Rois modestes comme des anges,  
Puis sur un char doré de toutes parts,  
Trois Rois debout parmi les étendards.

L'étoile luit et les Rois conduit  
Par longs chemins devant une pauvre étable,  
L'étoile luit et les Rois conduit  
Par longs chemins devant l'humble réduit.

Au fils de Dieu qui naquit en ce lieu  
Ils viennent tous présenter leurs hommages,  
Au fils de Dieu qui naquit en ce lieu  
Ils viennent tous présenter leurs doux vœux.

De beaux présents, or, myrrhe et encens,  
Ils vont offrir au maître tant aimable,  
De beaux présents, or, myrrhe et encens,  
Ils vont offrir au bienheureux enfant.

### **Literal Translation**

Early in the morning, I came across the procession  
Of three great kings going on a journey.  
Early in the morning, I came across the procession  
Of three great kinds on the great road.

First there came the troop of guards,  
Armed men, with thirty little pages;  
First there came the troop of guards,  
Men armed atop their tunics.

Then, on a chariot gilded on all sides,  
One sees three kings as modest as angels.  
Then, on a chariot gilded on all sides,  
Three kings standing amidst the standards.

The star shines and leads the kings  
By long roads before a poor stable.  
The star shines and leads the kings  
By long roads before the humble shed.

To the Son of God who was born in this place  
They come to present their respects.  
To the Son of God who was born in this place  
They come to present their dear prayers.

Fine presents, Gold, myrrh, and incense,  
They are going to offer to the master so admirable.  
Fine presents, Gold, myrrh, and incense,  
They are going to offer to the blessed child.

### **Translation**

Version selected among numerous options by  
our arranger Dana Alan Graybeal

Three great kings I met at early morn  
With all their retinue were slowly marching.  
Three great kings I met at early morn  
Were on their way to meet the newly born

With gifts of gold brought from far away  
And valient warriors to guard the royal treasure.  
Tiwth gifts of gold brought from faraway  
Their shields all shining in their bright array

Wond'rng then, I watched the mighty men.  
I stood amazed as all the knights were passing.  
Wond'ring then. I watched the mighty men,  
and as they passed, I followed them again.

They journeyed far to the guiding star  
That shown where Jesus was lying in a manger.  
Anda far away where the Christ child lay  
They saw the shepherds come to watch and pray.

Gaspard old had brought a gift of gold.  
He said "My Lord art the King of Glory."  
Gaspard old, gave Christ his gift of gold,  
And that this Child would conquer death he told.

Then incense sweet at the Christ child's fee  
King Melchoir place, saying "Thou art God of armies.  
Although He lies here in humble guise,  
This little child is God of earth and skies."