

Why the Chimes Rang

A Christmas musical
written and composed by Stephen DeCesare

*Based on the story "Why the Chimes Rang,"
by Raymond McDonald Alden, 1906,
and a sermon by Henry Van Dyke, 1902.*

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Dedication

This is dedicated to the memory of Anna Mansolillo.

STORY OF THE PLAY

Once, long ago, a majestic church stood on a high hill in the center of a great city. But more remarkable than its tall towers, great archways and grand entrance was the legend surrounding its bells. It was the custom on Christmas Eve for all the people to bring to the church their offerings to the Christ-child. And there had been a time when an unusual offering brought magnificent music from the chimes which were rung, everyone believed, by the angels. But lately, no offering had been great enough ... that is until young, poor brothers, Pedro and Manuel, make their first pilgrimage through the snow to give their simple gift.

This touching story is enhanced with a re-enactment of the nativity by the children's choir. There is a beautiful variety of songs, from the holy "Birthday of a King," to the operatic "I Can Remember When" to the exuberant, "Today Is Born Our Savior." Make this musical a focal point for your church's glorious holiday celebration.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(Widely flexible cast. Major speaking parts for 2 m, 2 w, 1 boy, numerous extras; adult and children's choirs.)

MANUEL

MOTHER

PEDRO

MINISTER

OLD WOMAN

TOWNSPEOPLE/CHURCH CHOIR

(Those with a spoken line or verse include:)

Man

Woman

Scholar

Girl

Boy

Old Man

Trumpeter

Townspersons 1-4

Rich Person 1-4

KING

QUEEN

CHILDREN'S CHOIR

(Those in the mimed Nativity include:)

Mary

Joseph

Several shepherds

Three Wise Men

(DOUBLING: Mother may double for Old Woman. Adjust optional appearance at ending scene if necessary.)

SETTING

This play takes place on Christmas Eve several hundred years ago in a European town famous for its ancient cathedral. Settings include the outside of the boys' humble village home, and the exterior and interior of the great cathedral.

PROPS

Hat, basket with bread rolls, infant doll wrapped in a blanket, silver coin, Christmas wreath, doll, fishing pole, container with false teeth, other gifts, Wise Men gifts, king's crown.

Performance Time: About an hour.

MUSIC

OVERTURE/UNDERScore ... 17

(Music by P. Mascagni and Stephen DeCesare.)

THE BIRTHDAY OF A KING ... Sung by Mother ... 19

(Music by W. H. Neidlinger. Arranged by Stephen DeCesare.)

THE BIRTHDAY OF A KING (REPRISE) ... Sung by Mother, Pedro and Manuel ... 22

(Music by W. H. Neidlinger. Arranged by Stephen DeCesare.)

WE'LL GET THE BELLS TO RING ... Sung by Townspeople with solos ... 25

(By Stephen DeCesare.)

FANFARE - KING AND QUEEN PROCESSIONAL ... 34

(By Stephen DeCesare.)

MY HUMBLE PRAYER ... Sung by Minister ... 36

(Music by P. Mascagni and Lyrics by Stephen DeCesare.)

TRANSITION SCENE MUSIC ... 39

(By Stephen DeCesare.)

I CAN REMEMBER WHEN ... Sung by Old Woman and Pedro ... 40

(Music by G. Verdi. Adapted and lyrics by Stephen DeCesare.)

TODAY IS BORN OUR SAVIOR ... Sung by Choir with solos ... 49

(By Stephen DeCesare.)

O COME, LITTLE CHILDREN ... Sung by Children's Choir ... 54

(German carol translated by Melanie Schute. Arranged by Stephen DeCesare.)

O WORSHIP THE KING ... Sung by Choir and Townspeople ... 57

(Composed by Stephen DeCesare with lyrics by William Kethe.)

JESUS, CREATOR OF THE WORLD ... Sung by Choir ... 62

(Composed by Stephen DeCesare. Lyrics anonymous.)

IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER ... Sung by Company ... 66

(Composed by Stephen DeCesare. Lyrics by Christina Rossetti.)

(A rehearsal/performance CD is available from the publisher.

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OVERTURE/UNDERSCORE

Scene 1

(AT RISE: Lights come up on the exterior of the BOYS' humble village home. It is early evening and bitterly cold with a few snowflakes coming down.)

(VOICE-OVER.): Once, long ago, a magnificent church stood on a high hill in a great city. When lighted up for a special festival, it could be seen for miles around. And yet there was something even more remarkable about this church than its beauty - the strange and wonderful legend of the bells. At the corner of the church was a tall gray tower, and at the top of the tower, so people said, was a chime of the most beautiful bells in the world. But the fact was that no one had heard the bells for many years. Not even on Christmas. For it was the custom on Christmas Eve for all the people to bring to the church their offerings to the Christ Child. And there had been a time when a very unusual offering laid on the altar brought glorious music from the chimes far up in the tower. Some said that the wind rang them, and others, that the angels set them swinging. But lately no offering had been great enough to deserve the music of the chimes. Many had often wondered, "Will we ever hear the chimes ring again?"

(MANUEL runs out of house. MOTHER follows a beat behind.)

MOTHER: Wait a minute, young man. *(Holds up a hat.)* You need to wear this. It will be a cold night. *(SHE puts his hat on HIM and gives him a kiss on the cheek.)*

MANUEL: Oh, Mother. *(MANUEL yells into the door.)* Hey, Pedro, hurry up! I've waited all my life to visit the cathedral on Christmas Eve and we cannot be late.

PEDRO: *(From inside the house.)* Patience, little brother! I'm coming.

MANUEL: If we want to make the celebration by nightfall, we need to leave now!

(Enter PEDRO. MOTHER re-enters house and will return in a beat with a basket of bread and holding an infant.)

PEDRO: There now. I am here and ready for our journey.

MANUEL: You certainly took a long time getting dressed.

PEDRO: I want to look nice for tonight.

MANUEL: Is it because you're hoping Valerie will be there so that you two can meet underneath the mistletoe? *(Starts blowing kisses in the air. PEDRO grabs MANUEL, puts him in a headlock and messes up his hair.)*

MANUEL: Hey! Quit it!

MOTHER: My sons! Stop that now. *(MANUEL fixes his hair again and MOTHER holds out basket of rolls.)* Here. Take some of this bread. It will tide you over on your journey. It will be a long, cold trip. And it may snow some more.

(MANUEL and PEDRO take a couple of rolls and put them in their pockets.)

PEDRO: I wish you were coming with us.

MOTHER: As do I, but (*Looking at baby she holds.*) to take your baby sister that far is much too great a risk. (*Looking up again.*) Unless one of you wants to stay home with her instead?

MANUEL: No!

MOTHER: I thought you might say that. Anyway, I will be happy here celebrating the King's birthday while you two are enjoying the festivities.

MANUEL: Is it King Stefan's birthday?

PEDRO: No, not that king. You know, Savior of the world, God's only Son, Jesus.

MANUEL: Oh.

MOTHER: It was a night almost like this one so many years ago that God gave to the whole world His special gift: "For God loved the world so much that He gave us His only Son, so that all who believe in Him might have eternal life."

SONG: THE BIRTHDAY OF A KING

MOTHER:

IN THE LITTLE VILLAGE OF BETHLEHEM, THERE LAY A CHILD ONE DAY;
AND THE SKY WAS BRIGHT WITH A HOLY LIGHT O'ER THE PLACE WHERE JESUS LAY
ALLELUIA! O HOW THE ANGELS SANG. ALLELUIA! HOW IT RANG!
AND THE SKY WAS BRIGHT WITH A HOLY LIGHT
'T WAS THE BIRTHDAY OF A KING.

'T WAS A HUMBLE BIRTHPLACE, BUT O HOW MUCH GOD GAVE TO US THAT DAY,
FROM THE MANGER BED WHAT A PATH HAS LED, WHAT A PERFECT, HOLY WAY.
ALLELUIA! O HOW THE ANGELS SANG. ALLELUIA! HOW IT RANG!
AND THE SKY WAS BRIGHT WITH A HOLY LIGHT
'T WAS THE BIRTHDAY OF A KING.

MOTHER: Speaking of gifts, before I forget, do you two have your offerings?

PEDRO: I do. See. (*Holds up silver coin.*)

MANUEL: Where did you get that?

PEDRO: I worked for it. It took me almost a year to earn this. It's all that I have.

MOTHER: Well, Pedro, make sure you don't lose it.

(*MANUEL starts creeping away.*)

PEDRO: Don't worry. It will be right here. (*Puts it back in his pocket.*) Safe and sound.

MOTHER: Manuel. (*MANUEL stops dead in his tracks.*)

MANUEL: Yes, Mother dear?

MOTHER: What about you? (*MANUEL looks down and says nothing.*) Well?

MANUEL: (*Trying desperately to change subject.*) Oh my, I think it is starting to snow some more. We really need to get going ...

MOTHER: (*Starting to get cross.*) Manuel!

MANUEL: I have ... I have nothing to give.

PEDRO: Nothing?

MANUEL: (*Earnestly*) Mother, Pedro says thousands of people will attend the service tonight and that they will bring all the finest things they have. I want to give something, but I do not have anything worthy enough to give. So, I'm without a gift. (*Pause.*) May I still go?

MOTHER: Yes, of course. (*Hugs HIM.*) It is your first time going and I know you have been very excited about it over these past months.

PEDRO: It's all he ever talked about.

MOTHER: Be that as it may, I'm sure God sees what is in your heart and knows you have good intentions and that counts too.

MANUEL: *(Surprised.)* It does?

PEDRO: Of course, little brother. Now let's get going before we miss everything.

MANUEL: Bye, Mother!

MOTHER: So long! May God be with you.

(The BOYS start to exit and MOTHER looks on. They stop and sing in their respective spotlights.)

SONG: THE BIRTHDAY OF A KING (REPRISE)

MOTHER, PEDRO & MANUEL:

ALLELUIA! O HOW THE ANGELS SANG.

ALLELUIA! HOW IT RANG!

AND THE SKY WAS BRIGHT WITH A HOLY LIGHT

'T WAS THE BIRTHDAY OF A KING.

(MOTHER watches two BOYS exit.)

(Blackout)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: The TOWNSPEOPLE are gathering outside the magnificent church with their gifts before the service begins.)

TOWNSPERSON 1: I heard a great musician cast the chimes. That's why they sound so beautiful.

TOWNSPERSON 2: I heard they sound so beautiful because the tower is so tall and the air is so clean and pure.

TOWNSPERSON 3: Someone told me the chimes sound like angels in the sky.

TOWNSPERSON 4: But no one's heard them for years. What will make them ring?

SONG: WE'LL GET THE BELLS TO RING

MAN: *(Sings.)*

TONIGHT IS CHRISTMAS EVE AND WHAT WE DO EACH YEAR

IS GIVE EXPENSIVE GIFTS IN THE HOPES THAT

THEY WILL MAKE THE BELLS RING AGAIN.

WE BRING THE BEST OF EVERYTHING,

BUT ALWAYS IT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH;

SO EACH YEAR WE KEEP TRYING

'TILL WE GET THE BELLS TO RING.

MAN AND CHORUS:

WE BRING THE BEST OF EVERYTHING,
BUT ALWAYS IT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH;
SO EACH YEAR WE KEEP TRYING
'TILL WE GET THE BELLS TO RING.

WOMAN: I'VE BROUGHT MY FINEST FURS.

SCHOLAR: I'VE BROUGHT MY FAV'RITE CHRISTMAS WREATH.

GIRL: I'VE BROUGHT MY DOLL.

BOY: MY FISHING POLE.

OLD MAN: A CONTAINER HOLDING ALL MY FALSE TEETH.

THE 5 GIFT-BRINGERS:

WE BRING OUR VALUED TREASURES
TO LAY UPON THE ALTAR
IN HOPES THAT MAYBE ONE OF THEM
WILL CAUSE THE BELLS TO RING.

ADD CHORUS:

WE BRING OUR VALUED TREASURES
TO LAY UPON THE ALTAR
IN HOPES THAT MAYBE ONE OF THEM
WILL CAUSE THE BELLS TO RING.

IF THERE'S ONE THING THAT YOU CAN SAY
ABOUT OUR YEARLY RITUAL
IT'S THAT WERE QUITE DETERMINED
AND INSISTENT THAT WE GET OUR WAY.
FOR WE FEEL WE DESERVE IT
FOR OUR FERVOR AND OUR EFFORT.
SEEMS LIKE WE'VE BEEN TRY'NG FOREVER
JUST TO GET THE BELLS TO RING.

FOR WE FEEL WE DESERVE IT
FOR OUR FERVOR AND OUR EFFORT.
SEEMS LIKE WE'VE BEEN TRY'NG FOREVER
JUST TO GET THE BELLS TO RING.

IF THIS YEAR WE DO NOT SUCCEED,
WE'LL MAKE SURE NEXT YEAR'S BETTER
WITH MORE GRANDER GIFTS AND HOPEFULLY
WE'LL GET THE BELLS TO RING.

IF THIS YEAR WE DO NOT SUCCEED,
WE'LL MAKE SURE NEXT YEAR'S BETTER
WITH MORE GRANDER GIFTS AND HOPEFULLY
WE'LL GET THE BELLS TO RING.

(Sound cue: Trumpet Fanfare.)

TRUMPETER: Presenting His Majesties King Stefan and his wife Queen Theresa!

MUSIC: FANFARE - KING AND QUEEN PROCESSIONAL

(As soon as the music starts, the MINISTER enters and is at the top of the church stairs. The sea of PEOPLE part and the KING AND QUEEN proceed across the stage until they reach the bottom of the church stairs. The people and the royal couple bow their heads.)

MINISTER: Heavenly Father, we praise and thank you for sending Your only Son into the world to save and instruct us in the way to become your children forever. Grant to these people an ever greater desire to be more Christlike, and exemplary lover of God and neighbor, and eventually a member of the Divine Family in Heaven. Bless too these gifts that will be presented tonight upon your altar. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

CROWD: Amen.

(MUSIC begins. THE ROYAL COUPLE enter the church while the PEOPLE are talking amongst themselves.)

RICH PERSON 1: I wonder what the King has brought as his gift.

RICH PERSON 2: Maybe the Queen's gift will be better.

RICH PERSON 3: You should see the gift I have brought this year.

RICH PERSON 4: I bet my gift will be the one which makes the chimes ring.

(The music continues until all the TOWNSPEOPLE have followed the royal couple into the cathedral. The MINISTER, who has been off to side waiting for everyone to enter, is finally alone. He descends the stairs and sings his prayer.)

SONG: MY HUMBLE PRAYER

MINISTER:

O LORD, SEE MY TEARS. SEE MY TEARS ARE FALLING.

THEY ARE ALL FOR THE PEOPLE HERE.

EACH YEAR IT IS THE SAME THING;

THEY TRY TO OUTDO EACH OTHER;

HOPING TO BE THE CHOSEN ONE.

THEY COME FOR GLORY; NOT FOR YOU.

HELP THEM TO SEE.

HELP THEM TO KNOW WHAT CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT.

O GOD, PLEASE ANSWER MY PLEA.

I THANK YOU, LORD, FOR HEARING THIS,

MY HUMBLE PRAYER.

MUSIC: TRANSITION SCENE MUSIC

(Blackout)

PEDRO: *(Continued.)*

I'LL CARE FOR YOU, KEEP YOU WARM
ON THIS HOLY CHRISTMAS NIGHT.

OLD WOMAN:

YES, I WILL REST FOR I AM SO WEARY.
I AM SO TIRED FROM MY LONG, HARD JOURNEY.
I TRAVELED FAR AND WIDE JUST TO BE HERE;
PRAYING I'LL HAVE THE CHANCE TO HEAR THE CHIMES RING.

PEDRO:

REST IN MY ARMS AND REGAIN YOUR STRENGTH
AND MAYBE TONIGHT GOD WILL ANSWER YOUR PRAYER.

OLD WOMAN:

I CAN REMEMBER WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL.
I HEARD THE STEEPLE BELLS RINGING SO SWEETLY.
SINCE THEN, I'VE LONGED TO HEAR
THEIR SOFT AND CLEAR REFRAIN
JUST ONE MORE TIME BEFORE GOD CALLS ME HOME.

PEDRO:

REST IN MY ARMS AND REGAIN YOUR STRENGTH
WHILE MY THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS
ARE WITH YOU TONIGHT.

OLD WOMAN:

THE NIGHT SHADES ARE FALLING
I FEAR TIME'S NOT WITH ME.
I HOPE AND PRAY THAT THE BELLS RING TONIGHT.

PEDRO: O, MY THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS ARE WITH YOU TONIGHT.

OLD WOMAN:

THE NIGHT SHADES ARE FALLING.
I FEAR TIME'S NOT WITH ME.
I HOPE AND PRAY THAT THE BELLS RING TONIGHT.

PEDRO: O MY THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS ARE WITH YOU TONIGHT.

OLD WOMAN:

FOR NOW, I'LL REST. I MUST HAVE REST.
FOR NOW, I'LL REST. I MUST HAVE REST.

PEDRO: O REST IN MY ARMS. O REST IN MY ARMS.

BOTH: AND MAY OUR PRAYERS BE HEARD TONIGHT.

(Blackout)

End of *Freeview*