

Reflection on Music Sunday

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*“We cannot tell, we do not know what stars shone down so long ago, when Mary birthed her sweet Son and peace and love became one.”* John Jacob Niles

What is it about music? Why does it touch our souls in ways that are profoundly moving, and yet nearly impossible to explain. Songs are just words carried on a melody or tussled about by counter melodies... and yet the effect on one's heart is without rival. I believe that music is the native tongue of our loving God. What do you think?

Composer, collector, and the source of this morning's music, John Jacob Niles, was born in Louisville, Kentucky, April 28, 1892. Niles came from a musical family. His great-grandfather was a composer, organist, and cello manufacturer; his mother, Lula Sarah Niles, taught him music theory. In 1904, Niles's family moved to a farm in rural Jefferson County where John Jacob began collecting folk music from the residents.

Niles writes in his autobiography, *I Wonder As I Wander* grew out of a single line of music sung for me by a girl who called herself Annie Morgan. The place was Murphy, North Carolina, and the time was July, 1933, in the height of the Depression. The Morgan family, revivalists all, were about to be ejected by the police, after having camped in the town square for some little time, cooking, washing, hanging their wet clothes from the Confederate monument and generally conducting themselves in such a way as to be classed a public nuisance.

I met the family at a filling station. Preacher Morgan and his wife pled poverty; and apparently they had to hold one more meeting, in that most unlikely setting, in order to buy enough gas to get out of town. It was then that Annie Morgan stepped out to the edge of the little platform attached to the automobile.

She began to sing.

Her clothes were unbelievable dirty and ragged, and she, too, was unwashed. Her ash-blond hair hung down in long skeins. But, best of all, she was beautiful, and in her untutored way, she could sing. She smiled as she sang, smiled rather sadly, as she sang only a single line of a song.

She repeated the fragment seven times in exchange for a quarter per performance, and I left with, "...a line of verse, a garbled fragment of melodic material—and a magnificent idea".

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky  
How Jesus the Saviour did come for to die  
For poor on'ry people like you and like I;  
I wonder as I wander out under the sky*

The image of that little girl, standing in rags, singing tiny snippets of what would become one of our most beloved songs of Christmas, is a powerful reminder of how the gentle grace of our loving God can be concentrated, magnified, into a radiant embodiment of Humility and Grace, and how lives can be changed.

Some two thousand years earlier, in the home of her aunt, another poor young girl, felt the gentle stirrings of God's Spirit in the depth of her soul and from her lips another beloved song found its beautiful voice—a song reflecting God's unmistakable love and Grace, and lives were forever changed.

Mary begins the song by singing, *My soul magnifies the Lord*.

Curious wording, don't you think? Some modern translators want to make it easier for us, if less poetic, by rephrasing it in English as *My soul praises God* or *My heart rejoices in the Lord*. Now once I would have appreciated that clarity. But now... now, I prefer the original poetry. *My soul magnifies the Lord*.

Magnifies implies on the one hand to make bigger, make greater, enlarge—an image that Mary's burgeoning pregnancy with the messiah certainly makes fitting.

But a magnifying glass has another very interesting potential, besides making things look larger. A magnifying glass can focus bright light into a tiny, hot point of intensity. Remember trying experiments like that with a magnifying glass? The glass can concentrate light into a single brilliant spot.

When Mary sings: her soul magnifies the Lord, maybe she's pointing to a possibility we rarely acknowledge. Maybe what she's saying is that the depth of who we are, our souls, can focus reality in certain ways—ways that have the capacity to shine on and affect those around us in surprising and life changing ways.

Can't we think, in the course of our own lives, of people whose influence upon us has been great, precisely because of what they brought into focus through their lives... their very souls? I've had such experiences with special people. Haven't you?

And what might we bring into focus through our lives? What we focus or magnify to those around us makes all the difference doesn't it? Imagine all the experiences you've had, all you've known, all you've had and lost, and gained again, all you've loved and learned—and now use your life as a lens, like a magnifying glass, to focus it all to a single point of brightness. And what might the point be? What are you capable of bringing to focus?

Upon reflection, I can see Mary best now as the sort of magnifying glass or lens that faithfully gathered the light of God's love and condensed it, focused it to human shape and form as Christ was born. I think Mary brought God's love to a small point of great strength and brilliant intensity.

And... I find myself pondering in this Advent season, whether or not, like Mary, we could bring God to focus. Surely, in every era, God's love must find ways to be born anew in the world.

Could we do it? In our earthly wanderings, as we lift our gaze to the sky and ponder the state of our domain, it is time to try—our world longs for the notes of our song!  
Let us pray... We thank you God for every new hope that comes to us in this advent season, for your ageless love and for every astounding way you have found to be present among us, even being born among us. May we, through all our lives' highs and lows poise ourselves to bring you to focus in the world. Amen.