

Composer's note

The Gravity of Kindness came into being as a result of my relationship with The Addison Singers, particularly through their conductor, David Wordsworth, who has been a long-time champion of my work, but also the relationship between the choir and the remarkable former member whose memory the piece honours, Cathy Bereznicki. I had wanted for a while to write a work that might address one aspect of the modern experience of Christmas, our instinct to help those less fortunate than ourselves. I proposed the commission's text might be based on *Kindness*, by the American-Palestinian poet Naomi Shihab Nye, a poem I had long carried around in my pocket on a piece of crumpled paper. It was inspired by the poet's traumatic personal revelation when travelling in Latin America. One day, I thought, *I will set this to music, when the right opportunity arises.*

I have always felt that the Nativity story – however literally one addresses its various anecdotal, historical, mythical or blurred-by-time details – carries a striking universal message: a poor mother and her dangerously fragile new-born, in difficult, delicate circumstances, seeking shelter. Though on the face of it insignificant and lowly, they are elevated to centre-stage. Thus, power is transferred from a mighty empire to a tiny child. We have been reminded in recent years of the potency of unlikely yet immensely courageous children, from Malala Yousafzai to Greta Thunberg, and so the subtext of the nativity is clear to us whether or not we believe the child in question was some form of divine manifestation or representative. Nye's poem explores the idea that kindness is only truly known when one has experienced sorrow and jeopardy, so I framed it with two mother-child lullaby texts, one from Mexico, *Arrorró mi niño*, and perhaps the best-known of all English late-medieval carols, *The Coventry Carol*. That the latter contains within it, alongside a mother's comforting 'lullay-ing', the foretelling of the child's later responsibilities, torments and death, reminds us that it was once as much a Passiontide carol as a Christmas carol.

Millions of mothers, right now, many of them displaced or stateless, are fearful for their children's safety and respond to that fear with an unquenchable, boundless love, swaddling their babies as protection against the perils ahead. Naomi Shihab Nye describes this force-field of kindness as following us everywhere we go, 'like a shadow or a friend'.

Howard Goodall CBE, May 2021

The Gravity of Kindness

A Christmas Meditation

Kindness by Naomi Shihab Nye
Coventry Carol, Trad. 16th c. English
Arrorró mi niño, Trad. Mexican lullaby

HOWARD GOODALL

♩ = 76

SOPRANO SOLO

SOPRANO

ALTO

TENOR

BASS

Piano

p

5

pp
Ah, _____ Ah _____

pp
Ah, _____ Ah _____

pp
Ah, _____ Ah _____

The musical score is written for a five-part vocal ensemble (Soprano Solo, Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and piano. It is in 4/4 time with a tempo of 76 beats per minute. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 1-4) shows the vocal parts with rests and the piano accompaniment. The piano part features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand and a more melodic line in the right hand. The second system (measures 5-8) features vocal entries with the word 'Ah' and long, sweeping melodic lines. The piano accompaniment continues with a similar rhythmic pattern. The score concludes with a final piano accompaniment measure.

© 2021 by Faber Music Ltd.

By permission of the author, Naomi Shihab Nye, 2019.

"Kindness" appears in "Words under the words" (Far Corner Books, 1995, USA) and Tender Spot (Bloodaxe Books, 2008, UK).

312

ppp

— thou lit-tle ti-ny child — By by lul - ly, lul - lay_ lul - lay. — Lul-ly, lul - lay, —

ppp

— thou lit-tle ti-ny child — By by lul - ly, lul - lay lul - lay. — Lul-ly, lul - lay, —

ppp

Lul-ly, lul - lay, —

316

— thou lit-tle ti-ny child, — By_ by lul - ly, lul - lay, lul - lay. —

— thou lit-tle ti-ny child, — By by lul - ly, lul - lay, lul - lay. —

— thou lit-tle ti-ny child, — By_ by lul - ly, lul - lay, lul - lay. —

ppp

child, — By by lul - ly, lul - lay, lul - lay. —