



essay

A Song in the Dark

by Dan Chouinard

I have a friend who spends each June 21, the summer solstice, crying on every available shoulder, "This is the *saddest day of the year!*" I can never quite match her pathos on such glorious days as late June brings, but I can agree with her logic, which by extension makes late December the happiest season, the Most Wonderful Time of the Year.

I do love the Holidays, I confess, this season of cheery defiance when winter comes charging at the door like a neckless repo man, only to be pulled into the party and handed a plate of cookies and a songsheet.

It's an egalitarian time, when the cold and dark chase us all from our various outdoor amusements and indoors toward pretty much the same things: warmth and light, sugar and fat, familiar company and something besides sleep to fill the long hours.

And it's a season that calls forth the impulse to sing like no other season does. At least this is what I've observed from my seat at the piano, having spent a bit of my career plinking away in restaurants and lounges and at people's parties.

At any time of year, my favorite thing is to try and lure people into singing together, even when (*especially* when) the host isn't crazy about the idea. My Pied Piper routine sometimes pays off handsomely, sometimes not at all.

But December is special, reliable. Winter's silence demands a rebuttal, so we sing. Lucky for us it's a season with a song list we know by heart, a beloved and sacrosanct repertoire that belongs to this month and this month alone. (Even songs about snow, like "Winter Wonderland," must not—Miss Manners would agree—be sung after New Year's.)

Clearing our throats, we sing out into this dark night of the year. Respectable strangers at parties gather around the piano, drape their arms over one another and belt out "Rudolph" and "Frosty" like third-graders. Parents walk their wide-eyed preschoolers up to the pianist at the mall and, crouching down, encourage them through "Jingle Bells," skipping the complicated verse where Fanny Bright gets upshot in a drifted bank. The troupe of old friends and their bundled-up kids ventures out into the frigid night caroling door to door until the accordionist (yours truly) can't feel the buttons anymore and the trumpeter has to quit for reasons of personal safety.

Enjoying ourselves, surprising ourselves, we venture out into December's silent night brandishing a torch of song, giving voice to the whispers—finally audible in the darkness—of miracle and mystery and awe that elude our hearing in brighter, noisier seasons.

Soon enough, if experience can still be trusted, the sun will begin its slow triumphant march to reconquer the night and before long we'll bask once again in voluptuous midsummer. But for now we indulge the luxury of wonder as we wander through the Holidays, welcoming winter with a song of joy and hope.

For three decades Dan Chouinard has been pianist and accordionist for a who's who of Twin Cities performers, an enabler of community sing-alongs and a writer of hit shows for public radio, concert hall and theatrical stage. Every December finds him performing with Kevin Kling at the Guthrie Theater and hosting an annual community show in Lanesboro. Among his commitments early in 2018 are co-hosting St. Joan of Arc's annual MLK Holiday event, hosting his variety show The Urban Farmer's Almanac and performing with his classic country band Lush Country. For more information, visit danchouinard.com.

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