

The melody of hope

By [Leonard Beechy](#)

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Many of us who enjoy the novels of Kurt Vonnegut were surprised to read [these words](#) among his last public utterances before his death in 2007:

But no matter how bad things may get for me, the music will still be wonderful. My epitaph, should I ever need one, God forbid: "The only proof he ever needed of the existence of God was music."

The surprise was not in the mention of God—God comes up frequently in his work—but in the implication that God was for him a proven reality, that Vonnegut *believed*. Yes, we know him well enough to be suspicious of this; his career was built on irony, wisecrack and self-parody. He was also a passionate ethical humanist who regarded all communal religious expression as so much [Bokononism](#) (a fictional religion in [Cat's Cradle](#) that exists for the purpose of manufacturing harmless falsehoods).

Still, I'm with Vonnegut when it comes to God and music. Advent in particular arrives for me through the vehicle of melody and lyric. In three descending notes, the tenor sings, "Comfort ye," and I am all ears and heart, ready. An organ plays ten unadorned tones—"O come, o come, Immanuel"—and I've already joined the prayer. Longing, exile, displacement—they don't have to be conjured up; they're there within me, waiting to resonate with the first tone, the first plaintive voice.

Mark Twain is often identified as Vonnegut's predecessor, while Emily Dickinson, at least at first glance, seems like his exact opposite. On second reading, though, the likenesses are striking: the droll and epigrammatic style, the fascination-from-a-distance with God, the breezy eccentricity in the face of life's Big Questions:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers—  
That perches in the soul—

And sings the tune without the words—

And never stops—at all—

For me, Advent sings hope's "tune without the words." There are words in Advent, of course. For this first Sunday there is a messianic prophecy from Jeremiah, an individual lament from the Psalms, an eschatological discourse from Jesus, a joyful outburst from Paul. But their effect is cumulative and indirect. They wash over us, more music than message.

Running through and around the texts of Advent, we hear the melody of hope. The dizzying variety of historical circumstances these texts traverse reminds us that, while exile and devastation are persistent realities, so are God's love and promise, a tune that "never stops—at all."

As Vonnegut put it in his evening-of-life credo, "No matter how bad things may get . . . the music will still be wonderful."