Exactly how old the Great O Antiphons of Advent are nobody knows. They go back to the ninth century at least, and some historians of worship are ready to accept the medieval manuscript ascription of them to St. Gregory the Great.

Their number has varied. By the end of the Middle Ages their number had been almost universally fixed at seven antiphons, the key words of which, when reversed in order, form an acrostic that fits beautifully into the season: ERO CRAS—"I shall be tomorrow." Twelve antiphons appear hereunder in a new English version of the Latin original. In addition to these, the texts of four others—O summe Artifex, O mundi Domina, O Sancte sanctorum, and O Pastor Israel—have survived.

The Church has used these antiphons in different ways. What ultimately became the commonest practice was to sing them as antiphons upon the canticle Magnificat at vespers on the days immediately preceding Christmas Eve. The usual date upon which their use began annually was December 17 on the Continent, and this is still the use of the Breviarium Romanum. Even in the late Middle Ages, however, we find them starting on earlier dates in different places, such as December 13 in the Monastery of the Augustinian Canons Regular at Klosterneuburg near Vienna, on December 15 in Paris, and on December 16 in England (hence the entry of O Sapientia against this date in the Kalendar of the 1559 Book of Common Prayer). Some surviving manuscripts prescribe their use from St. Nicholas’ Day (December 6) through St. Lucy’s Day (December 13), others from St. Nicholas’ Day through December 23.

Their use at vespers has been justified as reflecting the Church’s belief that the Savior came vergente mundi vespere; but in the Middle Ages their use with the lauds canticle Benedictus was not unknown. When sung as antiphons upon a canticle, they are treated in the same way as antiphons on double feasts, that is, they are sung complete as before as well as after the canticle with which they are used. For even greater solemnity they may be sung three times, before the canticle, before the Gloria Patri after the canticle, and after Gloria Patri.

On whatever date the series is begun, the ferial suffrages are not said at vespers from that day forward until the end of Advent. In addition to their use as antiphons upon a canticle, there is historic precedent for their independent use as seasonal liturgical pieces—as "anthems" in the modern, rather than the etymological, sense of the term.

Five of these antiphons freely reworked by an unknown hymnographer, provide the basis for the familiar Advent hymn, Veni, Emmanuel, of which John Mason Neale’s English version is most commonly used, O come, O come, Emmanuel.

Arthur Carl Piepkorn

Clayton, Missouri
Feast of St. Peter’s Chains, August 1, 1957

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97-7587 Service Folder for “An Advent Devotion based on the Great O Antiphons”
O Sapientia

December 17

HEALEY WILLAN

O—Wis—dom, who cam—est

forth—from the mouth—of the Most—High, reach—ing

might—ly from one—bound—ary of the world to the oth—er—

and plea—sant—ly or—der—ing all things, come—come—

to teach us the way—of pru—dence.

97-6302

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Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis

Tone II. 2. Solemn

With fauxbourdons by HEALEY WILLAN

1. My soul doth magnify the Lord:

and my spirit hath rejoiced in God, my Savior.

2. For He hath regarded: the lowliness of His handmaid-en.
world without end. Amen, Amen.

world without end. Amen, Amen.

world without end. Amen, Amen.

world without end. Amen, Amen.

The Nunc Dimittis

Cantors: Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace: according to Thy word.

Full:

Men:

For mine eyes have seen: Thy Salvation,
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

VENI, EMMANUEL
Melody adapted from plainsong, Mode I
by THOMAS HELMORE, 1854

1. O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel, That mourns in lonely exile here.
2. O come, thou Wisdom from on high, Who ordrest all things mightily; To us the path of knowledge show, And teach us in her ways to go.
3. O come, O come, thou Lord of might, Who to thy tribes on Sinai's height In ancient times didst give the law, In cloud, and majesty, and awe.

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