

Christmas carols—I love Christmas carols! Actually, I love almost everything about Christmas. My grown-up son does too—he sings them all year long with great joy and no embarrassment whatsoever. But the original carols had nothing at all to do with Christmas. They were dancing songs, of very ancient origin, and were secular in nature. The dancers would be in a ring, and danced in a circle clockwise (ALWAYS clockwise) as the chorus was sung, standing still as the soloist sang the verses. When the chorus (also known as the burden) began again, the dancers would start circling clockwise again, singing along if they wanted. All holding hands, the dancers would take a stately step to the left, and then bring their right foot up to meet it with a little slap. It was regarded as the very height of elegance. In the middle ages these dances came to be seen as racy, if not downright satanic, and faded away while the music remained.

There are just a few very early Christmas carols that we know of, one from 129 by a Roman bishop which was called Angel's Hymn, one from the 4<sup>th</sup> century by St. Hilary of Poitiers, and another from 760 by Comas of Jerusalem, written for the Greek Orthodox Church. There was a small influx of them after this, but they were all written and sung in Latin, so they never really caught on as a popular thing, and with the exception of the Christmas Eve mass, Christmas as a celebration kind of faded away from lack of interest.

This changed with our old friend St. Francis of Assisi. In 1223 he started Nativity Plays in Italy, with songs that told the story. Some of them were in Latin, but mostly they were written in the vernacular, which was a totally new idea, so they began to spread. Vernacular Christmas songs were included in the liturgy from that time on. “What are the servants of God”, he said, “if not his minstrels who ought to stir and incite the hearts of men to spiritual joy?”, so his missionaries were taught to begin each sermon with a song, and they composed laude that set scripture in the mother tongue to popular tunes.

Medieval life was not great in many ways, but it did produce the golden age of carols. Life was short, death was no stranger, and the biggest influence in life was the church. Everything had a spiritual aspect to it, and this manifested itself in ways we might think are a little strange today. For instance you might be instructed, in a recipe, to beat the eggs for the length of three paternosters, and you wouldn't think a thing about it because that was normal. So no wonder the 13<sup>th</sup> through 16<sup>th</sup> centuries were busy times of carol-writing. The ring dancing petered out, except in Scotland (those little rebels), but the songs flourished. We get some of our older and less-often sung songs from this period, like I Saw Three Ships, and The Holly and the Ivy.

English-language carol writing came crashing to a complete halt in 1649 when Oliver

Cromwell and the Puritans outlawed all forms of Christmas celebration. Christmas was to be a day of solemn reflection. Theoretically people still sang carols in secret, but starting with the Restoration in 1660 the night watchmen sang them at the gates of the cities on Watch Night, or Christmas Eve. Of course carols stayed alive and bloomed in continental Europe too, and really flourished again in the Victorian years, when Queen Victoria's German husband brought Christmas trees and carols from his home to England. Victoria and Albert loved Christmas, and it was during Victoria's reign that all sorts of traditions took root in the English-speaking parts of the world—Christmas cards, decorations, giving gifts at Christmas instead of at New Years, and the Christmas feast. All of this, of course, was popularized by Charles Dickens.

So by now I'm sure you would like me to pipe down so you can sing some yourself. These carols were selected to be sung in the chronological order in which they were written, or sometimes the order in which they appeared in English, which is not always the same thing.

Pg19—God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen. This dates from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and was written by unknown common people in reaction to the somber Latin hymns of the church. It wasn't published until Queen Victoria's day even though it had been sung in England for about 500 years. In the 1400s when it was written, merry didn't mean jolly, it meant mighty. And rest meant keep or make. So the title ought to actually be “God make you mighty, Gentlemen”.

Pg 2—Joy To the World, from 1719. The words were by Isaac Watts, and the music by George Friedric Handel, he of Messiah fame. Watts said he tried to write this as though King David, who wrote so many psalms, would have written it had he lived in Christian times. So think of it as an 18<sup>th</sup> century psalm.

Pg 5—Hark the Herald Angel Sings. In 1739, this was written by Charles Wesley, a brother to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Charles wrote more than 6000 hymns. This takes him somewhat beyond prolific and well into the realm of chronic. That comes out to an average of between two and three hymns a week over the course of his 53 years as an adult Christian. This was originally entitled “Hark how all the welkin rings!” but was changed to its present title by the evangelist George Whitefield.

Tucked in here in 1741 would have been Handel's Messiah. We're not going to sing it, due to constraints on time and vocal ranges. In any case the Hallelujah Chorus was meant to be an Easter song. So gather your friends together in the spring and give it a

go.

Pg 3—Oh Come All Ye Faithful, from 1743. It was written by John Wade, who later had to flee England at the time of the Jacobite Rising. He wrote it in Latin as *Adeste Fidelis*. A century later someone translated it as *Ye Faithful, Approach Ye!* That never caught on, and eventually it was upgraded to *Oh Come All Ye Faithful*.

Pg 8—Angels From the Realms of Glory, from 1816. John Montgomery was a newspaper owner in Sheffield, England. On Christmas Eve of that year he read from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke, “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests”. He was so inspired that he wrote the lyrics of this carol, and by evening people were reading it in that newspaper which he so conveniently owned. That's one way to get published! It was set to music and sung in church on Christmas Day in 1821.

Pg 9—Silent Night. Many of you will be familiar with the story that Father Joseph Mohr, in 1818, finding himself with a broken church organ and needing something simple that could be sung with just a guitar on Christmas Eve, wrote this song. I'm so glad he did. But you might not be so familiar with the story of how the carol spread—by the organ repair man. It was then picked up by a family of glove makers, whose four children would stand outside their glove booth and sing songs to drum up business. They sang this particular song so well that they were invited to sing it for the king and queen of Austria, and *Silent Night's* fame was set. It made it to England in 1863.

Pg 18—The First Noel. This was written by our good friend Anonymous in 1823. If you are in France and someone says *Joyeaux Noel* to you, he is wishing you a merry Christmas, or more literally a joyous Nativity. But in England, in the middle ages, *noel* was kind of an all-purpose exclamation of joy for any occasion. Like *whoo hoo!* Or *Go Bucks!* This is how Geoffrey Chaucer used it, for instance. I think that's not what Anonymous intended, but it's appropriate for a Christmas carol, isn't it?

Pg 10—It Came Upon a Midnight Clear. This is a truly American carol, written by Edmund Sears in 1849. This was only 12 years before the Civil War, and the seeds of that war were already planted and growing fast. That may explain the carol's focus on peace on earth.

Pg 1—Good Christian Friends Rejoice, from 1854. John Mason Neale was an Anglican minister who wanted to return church architecture and church music to its ancient roots. He heartily disliked the hymns of Isaac Watts (*Joy to the World*) and in reaction translated many ancient Greek, Latin, and Syrian hymns into English. He is responsible for *O Come O Come Emmanuel*, and *Good King Wenceslaus*, which was the story of a

10th century Duke of Bohemia set to a 13th century tune. Good Christian Friends Rejoice is a 14<sup>th</sup> century text (In Dulci Jubilo) set to a 14<sup>th</sup> century tune, and it isn't hard to imagine dancing to this one.

Pg 11-- We Three Kings. The tradition of there having been three kings or magi was in place before the year 500, although the Bible doesn't number them. There could have been anywhere from two of them to a whole platoon. Nobody knows! All we can say for sure is that there were more than one. John Hopkins Jr was the instructor of church music at General Theological Seminary here in the United States, and he wrote this song for a Christmas pageant there in 1857. I used to blame him for the fact that every nativity scene had three wise men, but I was unjust, and astonished to find out just how old that tradition is. John Hopkins is exonerated.

Pg 4—Let's end with something sweet, simple, and childlike. Away in the Manger is generally attributed to Martin Luther, and was often referred to as Luther's Cradle Hymn, with the note that he sang it to his children. Or—maybe not. It doesn't appear in any documents of German church history, or in any of Luther's written works. But it does appear, suddenly, in a songbook published by German Lutherans in Pennsylvania in 1885. It was widespread throughout the German American community in that area, but as to where and when it began, who knows?

Other tidbits which you can use if you want:

In 1868 rector Philips Brooks went to the Holy Land, and the sight of Bethlehem inspired Oh Little Town of Bethlehem.

The 12 Days of Christmas was written as a poem in 1780, but had not tune until 1909. 1909 is also the year in which O Holy Night, written by a Frenchman, was only the second song to ever be played on the radio.

Deck the Halls was a 16th century Welsh song, and the original chorus included all the Fa-la-las. But the verses were about how to gather kisses from pretty young misses. The current words were produced in the 1870s.