

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH CHRISTMAS CAROLS

By Michael C. Maibach

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No matter if your favorite music is jazz, classical, pop, blues... or country, at this time of year most everyone will admit being in love with Christmas Carols. The hopeful, innocent and redemptive nature of carols touches even the souls of many non-believers.

In reading the history of carols, one sees that most of the classics were written in 18th and 19th century England -- *Joy to the World (1719)*, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing (1739)*, *O Come All Ye Faithful (1743)*, *Twelve Days of Christmas (1780)*, *Silent Night (1818)*, *First Noel (1823)*, *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen (1833)*, *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear (1849)*, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (1851)*, *O Holy Night (1855)*, *Jingle Bells (1857)*, *We Three Kings (1857)*, *Angels We Have Heard On High (1862)*, *What Child Is This? (1865)*, *Deck the Halls (1866)*, *O Little Town of Bethlehem (1868)* -- written by Phillips Brooks who attended the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia -- and *Away In A Manger (1885)*.

This period was so fertile for this genre of music because of the ebbs and flows of Christian history. Christmas music first appeared in 4th century Rome, as Latin chants and hymns sung at Catholic mass. They outlined church doctrine and sought to counter non-traditional schools of thought such as Arianism.

During the Middle Ages, monasteries developed poems with Christian themes, often matching them with popular tunes such as English Wassail drinking songs. This blending of popular melodies with church doctrine gained the emotional and intellectual attention of Christians and prospective converts. This blending was the progenitor of modern Christmas Carols, first sung in towns and later in churches. 13th century Europe, especially Italy under the influence of Francis of Assisi, saw a move from the use of Latin to the vernacular for religious songs. In the Middle Ages, the English combined "circle dancing" with singing and called these dancing songs "carols". Soon a "carol" became synonymous with a religious song of celebration across Europe.

In 1426, English Christmas carols first appear in writing in the songbook of John Audelay, a Midlands priest. His songbook lists 25 "caroles of Cristemas" sung by wassailers. Wassailing originally involved groups of farmers moving from orchard to orchard, singing to pagan gods in hopes of a good harvest. This tradition evolved into "house-to-house" caroling as pagan rituals gave way to Christian hopes for Divine blessings. In the 14th century John of Reading, an English Franciscan priest wrote a poem that formed the basis for the song *O Come All Ye Faithful*, rewritten in 1743 by Frederick Oakeley, an English priest.

The singing of carols fell out of favor after the Protestant Reformation. Christianity broke into various denominations that no longer agreed on doctrine. While reformers such as Martin Luther wrote carols and encouraged their use in worship, most churches put carols aside until the Christian revival of the 18th century.

The most striking blow against the celebration of Christmas with carols occurred in England. The Westminster Assembly of Divines (1643-1649) was convened to reorganize the Church of England. Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists... and Puritans were all involved. The Assembly established Sundays as the only holy days of the year, removing Christmas from the church calendar! Puritans most forcefully disapproved of the celebration of Christmas. Under The Commonwealth of England (1649-1660), Oliver Cromwell and the Rump Parliament prohibited the celebration of Christmas and the singing Christmas carols as Pagan-like acts. This interlude allowed the rise of the English mythology of "Father Christmas".

In 1660, Charles II restored the Stuarts to the throne. Englishmen could once again celebrate Christmas and sing Carols. With the restoration of caroling in the late 1600s came the English practice of singing Christmas songs to collect alms in the weeks preceding Christmas. This custom of caroling at the front doors of homes spread throughout the English-speaking world and continues today. Carols also regained their popularity in the 18th century, in Protestant countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and America. In 1878, the Salvation Army (founded by a Methodist minister in England in 1865) organized the playing and singing of Christmas carols to raise money for missions. This tradition remains alive in America today.

In the 1720s, John and Charles Wesley, English forerunners of the Methodist church, created perhaps the first evangelical church ethos. They saw the marriage of music to worship as vitally important to the spirit they brought to faith. Charles set Psalms to melodies, which became influential in America's "Great Awakening" of that period. He also wrote Christmas carols, including *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing* in 1739.

Singing carols in church was formally re-instituted by the Church of England on Christmas Eve in 1880. The first such service was held in Truro Cathedral, Cornwall. The liturgy was written by Edward White Benson, Bishop of Truro and future Archbishop of Canterbury. It was entitled *The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*. This Christmas Eve service is still repeated in Christian churches around the world.

Great traditions have rich histories of debate, colorful personalities, and the fire of spiritual searching. The early Christian church used song to protect its doctrines and unity. The Reformation called into question those two fundamentals, which caused caroling to fall silent for many years. With the re-awakening of Christian faith in 18th century, Europe and America came the resurrection of much loved *Christmas Carols*. When we sing them this month, keep in mind the seventeen centuries of voices we join in joyful chorus.

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