



Home for the Holidays

Notes on the Christmas Carols



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Barlow Bradford, Artistic Director

CHRISTMAS CAROLS



Although any Christmas song might be called a 'carol' these days, the word actually refers to an ancient English song-form where a refrain or chorus repeated after every stanza (or verse) and is often connected to celebrations like Christmas or Easter.

The word *carol* is derived from the Old French word *carole*, a circle dance accompanied by singers (in turn derived from the Latin *choraula*). Carol's origins are complex and disputed. Some of our familiar Christmas carols were originally pagan songs, sung at the

Winter Solstice celebrations. They were very popular as dance songs from the 1150s to the 1350s, after which their use expanded as processional songs sung during festivals, while others were written to accompany religious mystery plays. Whatever the origin, composers all over Europe started writing carols but most people could not understand them since they were written and sung in Latin.

This changed in the early 13th century when St. Francis of Assisi introduced Christmas songs in church services in Italy for the first time — and true Christmas carols were officially born. In Assisi's Nativity plays, which began in 1223, actors sang songs that described the scenes in the plays. Although the choruses were sometimes in Latin, the songs were usually written in the language that people could understand. The actors composed Christmas carols to sing during their Nativity plays and, later, they would walk through the streets still singing. It didn't take long for these plays to spread to France, Spain and the rest of Europe. The tradition of singing Christmas songs in native languages became well established.

Before carol singing in public became popular, there were sometimes official carol singers called 'Waits'. These were bands of people led by important local leaders who had the only power in the towns and villages to take money from the public for their caroling. If others did this, they might be charged with begging. These "official carolers" were called 'Waits' because they only sang on Christmas Eve which was known as 'watchnight' or 'waitnight' because of the shepherds were watching their sheep when the angels appeared to them.

When the Puritans came to power in England in 1640s, the celebration of Christmas and singing carols was stopped. However, the carols survived as people still sang them in secret. Carols remained mainly unsung until Victorian times, when two men called William Sandys and Davies Gilbert collected lots of old Christmas music from villages in England. William Sandys published "*Christmas Carols, ancient and modern*" in 1833 and championed the practice of the public singing carols. In 1852 Sandys published another carol collection, "*Christmas-tide*" for an even wider market.



Since then, caroling, Christmas carol festivals and religious services have been established and composers continue to generate new carols to add to the canon. Christmas carols have become a popular and almost essential part of the holiday.

December 7, 2020

Sing We Now of Christmas arr. Barlow Bradford

"Sing We Now of Christmas" is an English version of "Noël Nouvelet", a traditional French carol that dates from the late 15th century and the early 16th century. The word *nouvelet* has the same root as *Noël*, both stemming from the word for news and newness.

This carol celebrates all of the figures in the crèche, the handmade nativity scenes found throughout France, where they are part of the Christmas celebration in homes and in town squares. This song would be sung by families at home and at community gatherings rather than as part of the liturgy in Roman Catholic churches at the time it was written.

The song is in a minor key/ Dorian mode and there are many versions found from those early centuries. It was printed in the 1721 "*Grande Bible des noëls, taunt vieux que nouveaux.*" Translations into English and variations in French would all be colored by the denominational differences between Christian faiths and doctrines.

Text:

Sing we now of Christmas,
Noel, sing we here!
Hear our grateful praises
to the babe so dear.

Refrain:

Sing we Noel,
the King is born, Noel!
Sing we now of Christmas,
sing we now Noel!

Angels called to shepherds,
"Leave your flocks at rest,
journey forth to Bethlehem,
find the lambkin blest."
[Refrain]

In Bethlehem they found him;
Joseph and Mary mild,
seated by the manger,
watching the holy child.
[Refrain]

From the eastern country
came the kings afar,
bearing gifts to Bethlehem
guided by a star.
[Refrain]

Gold and myrrh they took there,
gifts of greatest price;
there was ne'er a place on earth
so like paradise.
[Refrain]



December 11, 2020

Gabriel's Message arr. Barlow Bradford

"Gabriel's Message" is a Basque folk carol, originally based on *Angelus Ad Virginem*, a 13th or 14th Century Latin carol. It was collected by Charles Bordes and then paraphrased into English by Sabine Baring-Gould, who had spent a winter as a boy in the Basque country. It relates the story of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary by the archangel Gabriel where he tells how she would become the mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It quotes the biblical account of the Annunciation (Luke, Chapter 1, verses 26–38) and Mary's Magnificat.

Gabriel is one of seven archangels who enter and serve before the Glory of the Lord, and one of the three archangels mentioned in sacred scripture: Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel. He delivers two messages in the book of Luke: one to Zechariah and the other to Mary. Both concern miraculous births. Painters often depicted the angel extending a white lily to Mary as it was the flower of virginity and purity.

Musician, Sting recorded his version of "Gabriel's Message" for his 2009 album, *If on a Winter's Night* and introduced the carol to an audience that may never have heard this evocative carol otherwise.

Text:

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
His wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame,
All hail, said he, thou lowly maiden Mary!
Most highly favoured Lady, Gloria!

For known a blessed mother thou shalt be,
All generations laud and honour thee,
Thy son shall be Emmanuel by seers foretold,
Most highly favoured Lady, Gloria!

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
"To me be as it pleaseth God," she said,
"my soul shall laud and magnify his holy Name."
Most highly favoured Lady, Gloria!

Of her, Emmanuel, the Christ, was born
in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
and Christian folk throughout the world will ever say,
Most highly favoured Lady, Gloria!



December 16, 2020

O Magnum Mysterium Barlow Bradford

The specific origins of the Medieval Latin responsorial chant known as “O Magnum Mysterium” are not really clear but they do go back to at least the 10th century. The text is not from the scriptures but from the Holy Matins of Christmas, describing the wonderment of the animals as they gaze on Christ: “O great mystery and wonderful sacrament, that animals should see the newborn Lord, lying in a manger!”

“O Magnum Mysterium” was part of the matins service for Christmas. For much of the Middle Ages, matins took place roughly at midnight. The Latin text describes the nativity scene in which Christ was born and laid in a manger, and animals were witnesses to the sacrament of his birth:

The text was inspired by two verses of the New Testament, first Luke 2:7 (quoted here from the Wycliffe Bible) :

And sche bare hir first borun sone, and wrappide hym in clothis, and leide hym in a cratche, for ther was no place to hym in no chaumbir.

(modern English)

And she bore her first born son, and wrapped him in cloths, and laid him in a manger, for there was no place to him in no chamber.

The second part is derived from Isaiah 1.3 which refers to animals present at the birth of Christ:

An ox knew his lord, and an asse knew the cratche of his lord; but Israel knewe not me, and my puple vndurstood not.

(modern English)

An ox knew his lord, and an ass knew the manger of his lord; but Israel knew not me, and my people understood not.

“The juxtaposition of the two verses in the minds of medieval illuminators and many poets led to the familiar scene of the nativity in a stable with the manger, with the resident animals looking on, and, in the words of Isaiah, they “knew” the baby as Christ.” - Lisa Spangenberg

“So the sublime and the mundane exist simultaneously there in the stable. And Mary herself is seemingly aware of all these implications. It’s kind of interesting to see how public everything is, with Mary first having to give birth in front of the animals and *then*, later on that same night, receiving a visit from the shepherds who have just heard of the birth of Christ from the angels”. – Debi Simons

Composers from Palestrina to Morten Lauridsen have set this profound text to music resulting in music that stirs within the listener a yearning and sometimes the fulfillment of the transcendent. Utah Chamber Artists is proud to premiere Artistic Director Barlow Bradford's thoughtful and beautiful setting of "O Magnum Mysterium."

Latin text

*O magnum mysterium,
et admirabile sacramentum,
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum,
iacentem in praesepio!
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera
meruerunt portare
Dominum Iesum Christum.
Alleluia!*

English translation

*O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the newborn Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear
the Lord, Jesus Christ.
Alleluia!*



December 21, 2020

Let Us All be Merry! Barlow Bradford

In 2016, Barlow Bradford came across a text that brought to mind jolly, warm, and traditional Christmases celebrated by families and friends who over the years gathered to celebrate, revel in each other's company and join together in a grand feast. He knew he wanted to set the text to music as it brought to his mind the grand Christmas parties of the TV series, "Downton Abbey."

The poet's whose words Barlow chose was George Wither, a British poet who lived from 1588-1667. He was born during the reign of Elizabeth I, lived in London during the plague, and fought in the Civil War at the time of Charles I.

Educated at Magdalene College at Cambridge Wither became a prolific writer exploring a wide range of topics. From Wither's poem *A Christmas Carol* Barlow selected five of the 12 verses and settled on "Let Us All Be Merry" as a title for his rollicking carol.

So now is come our joyful feast,
Let every man be jolly;
Each room with ivy leaves is dressed,
And every post with holly.
Though some churls at our mirth repine,
Round your foreheads garlands twine,
Drown sorrow in a cup of wine,
And let us all be merry.

Now all our neighbors' chimneys smoke,
And Christmas blocks are burning;
Their ovens they with baked meats choke,
And all their spits are turning.
Without the door let sorrow lie,
And if for cold it hap to die,
We'll bury it in a Christmas pie,
And evermore be merry.

Rank misers now do sparing shun,
Their hall of music soundeth;
And dogs thence with whole shoulders run,
So all things aboundeth.
The country-folk themselves advance,
For crowdy-mutton's come out of France;
And Jack shall pipe and Jill shall dance,
And all the town be merry.

Then wherefore in these merry days
Should we, I pray, be duller?
No, let us sing some roundelays
To make our mirth the fuller.
And whilst we thus inspired sing,
Let all the streets with echoes ring;
Woods, and hills, and everything
Bear witness we are merry.



December 24, 2020

The First Noel arr. Barlow Bradford

It is thought that "The First Noel" had its rise in France during the fifteenth century. History hasn't preserved the record of how the music came to be written, but some historians think that the traditional melody originated in France as early as the 1200s. The song is thought to have been brought across the channel to England by the wandering troubadours. By the 1800s, the melody had become popular in England, and people had added some simple words.

Englishmen William B. Sandys and Davies Gilbert collaborated to write additional words and published it in 1823. Noel is a French word originating from Latin meaning *birthday*. The carol became a great favorite for Christmas Eve. This was when entire villages gathered for singing and celebrating the bringing in of the Yule log. English Christmas traditions called for the yule log to burn as a sign of goodwill through all 12 days of Christmas and the goodwill was shared through song. At this time carols were thought of as popular religious songs meant to be sung outside the church while hymns were sung within.

The tune consists of two identical sections, plus the refrain, which could be called an AAA form. Some of speculated the structure resembles that of medieval storytelling.

The first Noel the angel did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
In fields as they lay, keeping their sheep,
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
Born is the King of Israel.

They looked up and saw a star
Shining in the east beyond them far,
And to the earth it gave great light,
And so it continued both day and night.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
Born is the King of Israel.

Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord;
That hath made heaven and earth of naught,
And with his blood mankind hath bought.
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
Born is the King of Israel.

