

A Christmas Carol

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The carol, or "carolle," was a popular, lively dance form enjoyed by our medieval forefathers. It is not at all surprising that special carols were written for the Christmas festivities, enabling the revelers to express their joy in song and dance. What is a bit more surprising, considering the opinions of the church concerning the "blasphemous" and exaggerated revelries of court and populace, is that eventually these carols began to be sung in church alongside the more serious liturgical music. This is due, in part, to the efforts of St. Francis, who attempted to bring the Christmas experience closer to the people by constructing the first manger scene, complete with live animals and statues of the Holy Family, in 1223 or 1224. The Christmas story was sung at the side of the creche, probably by setting new religious words to popular carols of the time.

The following is a sampling of "contemporary" carols that had their origins in the medieval period:

The Coventry Carol. This carol was performed by the shearmans' and tailors' guild of Coventry in the mystery play they staged for the town Christmas celebrations in 1534. Traditionally, each guild in town would perform one of the Christmas plays, the same play every year.

I Saw Three Ships. This legend dates back to 1162, when three ships brought relics of the wise men to Cologne on Christmas day. (Adds my source: "It is typical of the simple faith of the Middle Ages that no one would raise objection to the image of the three ships sailing into little land-locked Bethlehem.")

The Holly and the Ivy. There is a whole series of English medieval carols on the subject of the rivalry between these two plants. Most of them generally portray them as representative of the male and the female, and the eternal battle of the sexes.

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming. The words and music were first published in 1600 in Cologne, Germany, although the tune may date back to a century earlier. The harmonization in use today was first published in 1609.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Although the tune was written in the 19th century, the words are actually 12th century Latin verses.

O Tannenbaum. The origins of this song are not at all clear, except that it did appear sometime in the Middle Ages, in Germany, of course.

The Twelve Days of Christmas. The counting song was very popular during the Middle Ages. This medieval carol is rather unique- its only message is that of receiving gifts!

What Child is This? Only the tune predates the 16th century. The earliest reference to "Greensleeves" was made in the year 1580, and the tune has been used variously through history

as an English Civil War party song and as a prison lament in "The Beggar's Opera." The Christmas words we know were written in Victorian England.

Good Christian Men, Rejoice. Legend has it that this was written by 14th century German mystic Henry Suso after dreaming that he was invited by angels to join in a dance. The first manuscript copies date from about 1400; the first English translation, 1540.

Some iffy, but possibly medieval carols:

God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen. Although not published until 1846, this carol was not composed within the confines of our modern concept of major and minor keys, but in the medieval form of modes. It probably dates to the 16th century or earlier.

Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly. This completely secular carol is of Welsh origin, but no one has ever been able to put a definite date on it. However, the repeated nonsense word was a very popular feature of medieval ballads and madrigals.