

### Christmas Music Through The Ages

New York (NAPS) -- Called noels in France, le pastorali in Italy and Weihnachtssieder in Germany, carols are everywhere the welcomed sound of Christmas. Groups of friends and relatives gathered around a piano as they sing Christmas carols are a twentieth-century tradition. Yet few of those who hear and sing them know their surprising history -- a tale well worth giving ear to.

When was the first carol sung? Scholars think caroling probably began in the early church when Nativity plays, accompanied by songs of joy, told the story of Christ's birth. One of the earliest choruses of praise, gloria in excelsis deo (glory to God in the highest) is still sung by carolers at Christmas time. Early Latin-speaking worshippers must have shouted it forth with a magna vox (also Latin, for "great voice").

Though many people don't realize it, carols were originally connected not only with song but with dance: The Old French word carole meant "a ring dance accompanied by song." An English carol dating from 1350 has a refrain which refers to a round dance: "Honnd by

honnd we schulle ous take and joye and blisse schulle we make."

Early carol composers didn't confine themselves to Christmas themes -- a collection of Carolles Newly Imprinted (1550) contained more Crucifixion than Nativity carols! On the other hand, quite a few carols of this time were not sacred in mood, but simply light-hearted invitations to feasting and toasting. The Boar's Head carol, a big hit in 16th century England and still sung annually by the students of Queen's College, Oxford, actually celebrates the course of a Christmas dinner, in these words: "The boar's head in hand bear I; Bedeck'd with bays and rosemary. And I pray you masters, be merry...."

The custom of outdoor carol singing is many hundreds of years old. It seems to have started in the Middle Ages when groups of people went from house to house to sing by torchlight.

Yet despite these joyous beginnings, the Christmas carol eventually ran into some rough weather. As the Puritan influence grew strong, carols became gloomy and

grim; finally the Puritans made it a crime even to print them or sing them publicly! After Puritanism waned in England, carols made a comeback -- but in the 17th and 18th centuries were considered a rustic, socially inferior form of song! By 1882, a writer named William Hone was predicting that carols were dying out and in a few years' time would be heard no more!

Even as he spoke, a new upsurge of interest in carols was beginning. Today, Christmas carolers enjoy the music all the more when they experience the excellent tone of a fine piano. These instruments, like the songs themselves, are enduring. The Baldwin piano, for example, uses only selected solid spruce for its sound board. The plate -- of grey cast iron -- withstands the tremendous, continual tension of the strings and provides the necessary extreme rigidity for the tone-producing elements. Baldwin pianos -- both old and new -- can last a lifetime.

When you hear your favorite carols sung in church, outside your window, or on a precision phonograph, can you tell which of them are ancient and which are comparatively recent?

Some authorities think that The Twelve Days of Christmas originally belonged not to Christmas but to the turn of the year; its roots may go far back into pagan times. Good King Wenceslaus, a British favorite, was borrowed from a Swedish songbook of 1582. God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen, may also date back to the 16th century. Some say Adeste Fideles was composed by St. Bonaventura before 1274 -- but the earliest surviving manuscript is dated 1790 and signed by John Francis Wade, a music dealer in France.

Joy to the World was taken from a hymn written in 1719 by Isaac Watts; its current music was adapted from Handel's Messiah. John Westy wrote Hark the Herald Angels Sing in 1737; its musical accompaniment was adapted in 1855 from one of Mendelssohn's works. O Little Town of Bethlehem is less than 100 years old; it was written in 1868 by Phillips

Brooks.

The most beloved carol of all -- Silent Night -- has an interesting story behind it. According to information supplied by Baldwin researchers, it was hastily written in 1818 by an Austrian parish priest, Joseph Mohr, as a surprise for his parishioners. Mohr feared they would be disappointed when they learned that the church organ had broken down! He took the poem to his friend, church organist Franz Gruber, who completed the famous melody in a few hours. At midnight mass that evening, the two of them sang the masterpiece -- to a guitar accompaniment.

Some of the most popular Christmas music of all times has been composed in the 20th century. The greatest seller of any phonograph record to date is Irving Berlin's White Christmas; first recorded in 1942, it had sold 40,000,000 copies as of December 31st, 1963 -- and is still going strong. The Little Drummer Boy is another recent record best-seller that promises to become a Christmas classic.

Ancient and traditional or up-to-the-minute modern, Christmas songs play a vital role in setting the mood of the season. For after all, "Til the season to be jolly."



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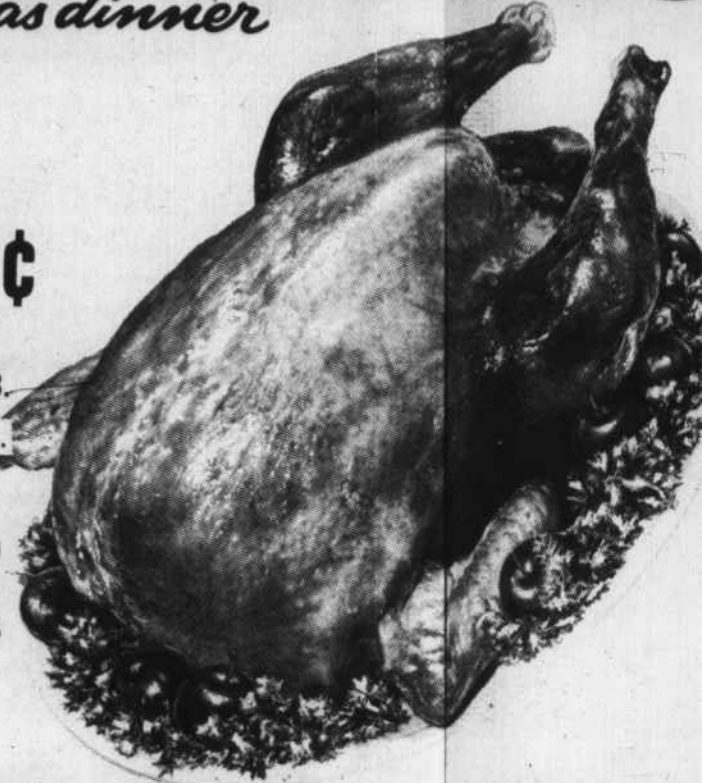
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