

Christmas Carols are Age-Old Melodic Expressions of Faith, Hope for Peace

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Once upon a time, on a cold winter evening long ago, a young village priest in the Austrian Tyrol was sitting quietly by the fireside of his parish house, writing out his Christmas sermon, when there suddenly came a knock at the door. It was one of the villagers, bringing an important message. A peasant woman in the little town had that night given birth to a child and wanted it to have the priest's blessing. "Will you come, Father?" the messenger said. "Yes," Father Josef Mohr replied quickly, as he drew on a heavy cloak.

In the peasant's hut where the messenger led him, Father Mohr found a beautiful infant, cradled in the arms of a radiant young mother. It was only two days before Christmas, and as he gazed at the sleeping child and proud mother, Father Mohr could not help being reminded of the Holy Infant and the Virgin Mary.

As he trudged home through the deep snow, later that night, Father Mohr looked up at the stars shining brightly down on the sleeping village of Oberndorf and he was awed by the majestic stillness of the night. Suddenly he murmured to himself: "It must have been something like this on that silent, holy night in Bethlehem."

"PERFECT SONG"
 As he walked on homeward, he meditated on the symbolic events that he had been part of. For years he had been searching for "the perfect Christmas song," something simple and beautiful and filled with reverence, and now he decided to put his thoughts and impressions of the evening into words that might become just such a song.

Back at his desk he dipped his quill pen into the inkwell and wrote, "Silent Night, Holy Night!" Writing swiftly, he went on, "All is calm, All is bright." In a remarkably short time he finished his Christmas poem.

But Father Mohr had no music for his words. The next day, Christmas Eve, he hurried over to the house of Franz Gruber, the church organist and his friend. Could Franz write a melody for his Christmas poem—in time to be sung during the Christmas service? Herr Gruber agreed to try, caught the true spirit of Father's Mohr's words

and finished the melody in little more than an hour.

GIVEN WORLD
 Thus at midnight, on Christmas Eve in 1818, before a hushed congregation in a little village church, "Silent Night, Holy Night!" was given to the world. When Herr Gruber's wife first heard the song, she told her husband, "We will die—you and I—but this song will live."

Frau Gruber's prophecy was remarkably accurate. Some months later a visiting organist copied the song and taught it to a quartet of gifted children in a neighboring province. They, in turn, sang it at the Leipzig Fair, at concert halls, before the King and Queen of Saxony. It was taken to France, to England, to Russia, to America.

Years after, Franz Gruber died in poverty and obscurity, but the song he and Father Mohr composed has become immortal. Like the Holy Manger, the Three Wise Men, the Christmas tree and jolly old St. Nicholas himself, "Silent Night" is an unforgettable part of the annual rites honoring the Birth of Christ.

St. Francis of Assisi, who lived in the thirteenth century, is often called the "Father of the Christmas Carol," but the custom of caroling at Christmas time was well established long before he lived. In fact, there is good evidence that in the year 129 A.D. a Roman bishop, Telesphorus, called on his churchmen to gather at Christmas and sing in honor of Christ's birth. Some 300 years later, St. Jerome wrote of the custom, and a Latin hymn of Christmas, "Christ Is Born! Tell Forth His Name!" dates from the eighth century.

ADESTE FIDELES
 One of the best known of the early carols is "Adeste Fideles," or "O Come, All Ye Faithful." Exactly who wrote it may never be discovered. Some historians believe it was written in the thirteenth century by St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan friar who was an associate of St. Francis.

In the seventeenth century "Adeste Fideles" was chanted by French monks as they marched to church in procession on Christmas Eve. John Francis Wade, an Englishman who copied and sold religious music in Douai, France, included it in a manuscript written about 1750, and may have been the first to commit to paper this poignant carol.

The exact origin of the word "carol" is unclear. Some scholars believe it is derived from the Latin word, carolare, meaning to sing. But others say it comes from a Greek word for "flute player," and originally referred to the musicians who usually accompanied the chorales.

Early carols were stately, musically complex and usually sung in Latin. What St. Francis of Assisi did, in a sense, was make them popular. The holiday season called for "jovial singing," in his view. By the fifteenth century, the Christmas carol had become more melodic, its words simple and easy to remember; and in 1521, an English printer, Wynkyn de Worde, published the first book of carols.

FOLK SONGS
 Folk songs and pagan rites brought secular influences into the pure religion of the original carols. There is no mention of Christ's birth in "Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly," which goes back to the pagan celebration of the winter solstice. The melody is Welsh, and was once adapted by Mozart for the piano and violin.

Cornishmen first sang "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen." In medieval times this old favorite was, by tradition, the first to be sung by strolling musicians in the narrow streets and mews of London during the holidays. "Good King Wenceslas," another secular carol, is meant to be a colloquy between King Wenceslas, a devout and generous ruler of Bohemia from 928 to 935 A.D., and his page.

Martin Luther, with his love of music, did much to advance the custom of caroling. For many years he was thought to be the author of "Away in a Manger," and many books still carry the credit line, "Composed by Martin Luther for his

children." But recent research suggests that he did not actually write it, though it is known to have been a favorite at the Luther hearthside.

CAROLS OUTLAWED
 With the coming of Oliver Cromwell's harsh regime in Britain, and the growing public influence of the stern Puritans, carols were officially outlawed, and remained so for much of the seventeenth century.

And as religion became austere, the custom of caroling went into a decline that lasted for almost 200 years, especially in English cities. Charles Dickens, whom many remember for his touching story, "A Christmas Carol," probably never heard caroling in London during his youth. The custom had almost disappeared.

Yet, official edicts could not stamp out a tradition so popular. Some families continued to sing carols in their homes, and composers continued to write them. One Englishman who was not intimidated was Isaac Watts, who published "Joy to the World" in 1719. He based it on the Ninety-Eighth Psalm ("Make a joyful noise unto the Lord...")

In this same era of religious formalism Charles Wesley, younger brother of the John Wesley who founded Methodism, composed "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," as well as some 6,500 other hymns and carols.

JOYOUS BELLS
 Wesley's inspiration for "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" came on Christmas Day in 1730, as he heard the joyous pealing of the church bells while walking to the morning service. Long after that Dr. W. H. Cummings, the organist at Waltham Abbey in England, adapted it to a cantata by Felix Mendelssohn, and this is the version most often heard today.

Though most Christmas carols are of European origin, America has also produced her share. One of the best known is "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," by Dr. Edmund H. Sears, a Unitarian minister who lived in Massachusetts between 1810 and 1876, and his friend, Richard S. Willis, who was a friend of Mendelssohn.

Another American carol is "We Three Kings of Orient Are." It was written by the Rev. John Henry Hopkins, Jr., an

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