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Enjoy

Christmas

Music

Enjoy Christmas Music

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Today it is hard to realize that Christmas was once a subject of strenuous controversy. Its religious observance was the source of bitter denominational quarrels during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Large groups of colonists objected to Christmas at that time. For the Church of England, the Feast of the Nativity was one of the most important of the year, yet the English Puritans condemned it.

Eventually attention turned to the realm of economics and politics so that religious controversies, including that of Christmas observance, became of less importance. The American Constitution established separation of church and state and gradually opposition to Christmas disappeared.

Sunday schools began to integrate Christmas celebrations with those of religion. Finally in 1847 a Sunday school Christmas tree was set up in a New York City church where carols were sung, and gifts were provided for under-privileged children. By 1880 the religious significance of Christmas had improved in all Evangelical churches. Now Sunday schools support Christmas widely as a religious and as a social observance by commemorating the Nativity with special services and activities.

The St. Nicholas figure, from which Santa Claus developed, was brought to the American colonies as a mixed religious-folk figure. He had long been popular in several European countries. During the past 50 years Santa Claus has become a symbol of charity and generosity. To children he expresses affection and devotion. He depicts the "spirit" of Christmas.

Christmas not only affects the family unit internally but also relates it to the community. Many families have developed their own personal traditions. They attend church activities together; they have special festive occasions; home and tree decorations often represent certain incidents or memories to cherish. The philosophy of "doing-for-others" grows stronger at Christmas time.

POPULAR CHRISTMAS MUSIC

Christmas in the past concerned aspects of religion and sect, but today there is a new type of expression for Christmas as well. This is termed "popular" in contrast to the serious because it seeks commercial success by using themes and symbols that are simple and liked by many. It reveals the interrelations between the festival and contemporary life.

Our varied communications and vast entertainment influence considerably our modern American life. Books, radio, TV, movies, comic strips, advertising in various forms, all are closely associated with our way of life. The Christmas theme has been used in all of these media in song, drama, poems, religion, story, picture, and a bit of humor.

Rudolph Becomes Popular

The story of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, written in 1939 by Robert L. May, who was employed in the advertising department of a well-known mail-order house, shows the acceptance of "popular" expression of Christmas. This animal story was written to distribute to the branches of his firm as a "give-away" during the Christmas of 1939.

Over 2,400,000 copies of the first give-away edition were distributed that year. It reappeared in 1946. In 1949, Johnny Marks composed the song, which quickly became so popular.

Rudolph, rejected because of his unusual large, shiny red nose, was discovered by Santa Claus, who asked him to guide his other reindeer and sleigh so that he was able to complete his deliveries that foggy night before Christmas. His story has exemplified the fact that he eventually found happiness through his tribulations and previously thought handicap.

Examples of Popular Music

A great deal of "popular music" about Christmas has been written

recently. Some are humorous and give novelty interest, while others will remain popular longer. Some examples are:

"White Christmas"

"I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus"

"Here Comes Santa Claus"

"Christine the Christmas Tree"

"This Christmas"

"All I Want for Christmas" (Is My Two Front Teeth)

"Santa Claus Is Coming to Town"

"The Christmas Tree Angel"

"Frosty the Snow Man"

Bring Customs and Traditions

During the early Colonial period, the Dutch settlers of New York brought their many Christmas customs and traditions to America. St. Nicholas was one of them. In Holland and France he put his gifts in the children's shoes. In England he would fill the children's stockings which hung by the fireplace. In Germany and the Scandinavian countries he would hide the gifts away for the children to find.

"Jolly Old Saint Nicholas" and "Up On the House-Top" are two of the secular carols that tell us what St. Nicholas (or Santa Claus) does in America on Christmas Eve. No definite date has been placed on the origin of these songs.

Most of the songs mentioned have been written to appeal more to children rather than adults. They symbolize Christmas excitement,

joy, and gifts rather than the subject of Nativity, charity, family ties, or human brotherhood.

CHRISTMAS HYMNS AND CAROLS

Though the novelty-type songs have their place, remember that the music that will remain with us consists of hymns and carols that each year continue to appear. They are the ones that first come to mind when we feel we want to express our sincere feelings at Christmas time. They preserve the true meaning of Christmas and have followed through the lives of our people from the Old Countries to America as we know it today.

Christmas hymns existed long before carols, but these were stately Latin verses that dealt with the theological rather than the human aspect of the Incarnation.

Carols Differ from Hymns

Carols were not and never have been hymns, though they are sometimes confused with them. They are not as solemn and stately as church hymns. Carols express the common emotions of Christmas joy in language and music which can be easily understood and enjoyed by all. They have always been sung in words that were sometimes merry and sometimes tender but always simple and homey, set to lilting, happy tunes that suggest dance rhythms rather than the music of hymns.

The word "carol" originally meant a ring dance accompanied by a song. Such dance songs were mainly secular in theme, concerned with love and courtship, feasting,

the return of spring, or any other cheerful matter, and it was not until the end of the thirteenth or beginning of the fourteenth century that the true religious carols were first heard. Carols were later accepted by the Church without the dancing.

Dramatize Christmas Story

In 1223 in Graecia, Italy, St. Francis of the Middle Ages could possibly be called the father of the carol. He thought the Gospel message had become so highly intellectualized that it seemed inhuman to an ordinary person. He wanted to create a better understanding of the meaning of the Incarnation. On Christmas Eve the members of his parish were surprised to see the Christmas story dramatized. In a manger scene were Joseph, Mary, and the Child.

The formal, dogmatic methods had been replaced by a new spirit and interest in Christmas. This spread throughout Europe. St. Francis had given them a new meaning of Christmas. The singing of the carols denoting happiness were then expressed with a spontaneous vigor that makes even the oldest carol seem as modern and alive today as it was when it was first sung long ago.

"Away in the Manger" is one of the carols that tenderly tells this Christmas story. The "Creche," or Crib of St. Francis, is used frequently in home and church today.

Happy people enjoy expressing themselves by singing. By the fifteenth century—especially in the British Isles—groups of carolers

would go about offering a hot drink from the Wassail Bowl and a song, in exchange for gifts. Wassail means "a pledge to good health."

"**Here We Come A-Caroling**" is a very old English wassailing song, which originally was "Here We Come A-Wassailing." This gay, rollicking old song is ever popular among the carolers of today.

"**God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen**" is the most popular Christmas carol in England. (Its meaning is best understood when the comma of the title is in the correct place—after "merry.") This song of "good will to all" has a feeling of recitation, similar to that of the old folk songs. It is written in the minor key and is easy to sing. The same chorus is repeatedly sung with all verses, adding emphasis to the wish for "comfort and joy."

"**I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day**" was first a poem, written by Henry W. Longfellow in 1863, giving expression of millions of weary hearts in America during the Civil War. This made it possible to include Longfellow among our Christmas hymn writers.

At one time almost every parish had its hand-bell ringers, who would sound out the old tunes as they were sung by the carolers, or accompanied the Christmas hymns in church. Bell music is still an important part of the English Christmas, but today is associated more with the pealing of church bells than the more gentle notes of hand bells.

The melody for this poem was composed in 1872 by a popular London organist, J. Baptiste Calkin.

"**Angels, From the Realms of Glory**" was also first a poem which appeared on Christmas Eve, 1816, in an English newspaper. James Montgomery, one of the best sacred poets of England, was described by Lord Byron as being "a man of considerable genius." Over one hundred of Montgomery's hymns are still in use.

In 1867 Henry T. Smart, a member of a prominent musical family of England, composed the melody for this Christmas hymn during the latter part of his life, while he was almost blind.

"**O Come, All Ye Faithful**" is traced back to France in about 1700, where it was often used as a processional hymn by religious orders on their way to sanctuaries for Christmas Mass. It was also commonly used in England. There are various theories concerning the origin of this song. There are many translations from the original Latin (*Adeste Fideles*), but there is no question that it has always been a favorite in America. It is also sung to the words "How Firm a Foundation." This song has been translated into 119 languages and dialects and is considered one of the greatest hymns ever written.

"**The First Noel**" is a true folksong, having traditional words and music. The tune of this song is very simple with its three-time repeat of an eight-measure theme, but it is not monotonous. One never grows

tired of this traditionally Christmas story. "The First Noel" is claimed by both France and England. It was commonly used in both countries in the seventeenth century. The word "noel" is derived from the Latin word, "natalis," meaning birth.

"O Christmas Tree!" (O Tannenbaum!) is a very familiar melody in America. The tree became a part of the Christian symbol during the time of Luther. It is evergreen, representing Christ, ever-living and eternally the same. Germany considers this old folk-tune as popular as their Stille Nacht.

"We Three Kings of Orient Are" is an American carol. Reverend John Henry Hopkins, Jr., rector of Christ's Church, Williamsport, Pa., composed both words and music in 1857. This carol is also background music for the custom of dramatizing the story of the Three Kings, who carried gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Christ Child.

"Deck the Hall" is an old traditional song from Wales, which has no reference to the Nativity, but the words tell us much about the customs many centuries before the British Isles were Christianized. A winter festival called "Yule" was a jolly season that started by bringing in a large Yule log to be burned. Elaborate decorating of the home, singing and dancing, generous feasting, and drinking from the Wassail Bowl took place. As a result this song is jolly with a lilting rhythm for dancing. It is one of the best known of the secular carols and very popular in English-speaking countries.

"Hark! the Herald Angels Sing" was written by Charles Wesley, the younger brother of John (founder of the Methodist Church), in 1739. It is said that he wrote over six thousand hymns and spiritual songs. His two greatest hymns are: "Jesus Lover of My Soul" and "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing." A melody that Felix Mendelssohn composed for a cantata was eventually used for this carol as we know it today.

"O Little Town of Bethlehem" is one of the most popular carols of American origin. The words of this song resulted from an experience Phillips Brooks, of Philadelphia, had while walking on the starlit hills of Palestine one night and gazed over the hills to see the little town of Bethlehem nestled in between these hills. He wrote the poem for the children of his Sunday School. The music for this poem was written by Lewis Redner, who was organist and superintendent of the Sunday School at Holy Trinity Church of Philadelphia, where Brooks was rector. The love for children was the incentive for both poet and musician to compile this carol.

"Silent Night" was written under interesting circumstances. On Christmas Eve, 1818, the organ of St. Nicholas Church, Oberndorf, Bavaria, was in need of repair. Oberndorf was snowbound, and there was no repairman for miles around.

What about special music for the Christmas service? Franz Gruber, church organist, and his friend Joseph Mohr, vicar of the church, decided that a new song might be

helpful in the emergency. Gruber composed the music after Mohr wrote the lovely verses of "Stille Nacht" (Silent Night).

It lost its identity for a time as it rapidly traveled about and finally found its way across the ocean to America through a group of Tyrolean singers. The very simplicity of this song and the tranquil beauty of its music seem to accent the atmosphere of the humble manger-birth. It is now one of the universal favorites and has been translated into more than ninety different languages and dialects.

"Joy to the World" was included in Isaac Watts' publication of the "Psalms of David" in 1719. This was

a collection of hymns and paraphrases based on the Psalms, and this hymn was based on the 98th Psalm. Dr. Watts has justly been called the father of English hymnody, and shares with Charles Wesley the distinction of being the greatest of English hymn writers. More than four hundred of his hymns are in common use in English-speaking countries.

The first tune by Dr. Edward Hodges, was replaced by Lowell Mason's adaptation of Handel's "Antioch" from the Messiah, which has become the standard setting for this hymn. It is not only well suited to be used as a church hymn, but is also very effective for outdoor caroling.

