

Christmas Carol Descriptions

This Word file contains brief descriptions of the twenty five carols which have been specially arranged for **Advent**. They are prefaced by an asterisk. The additional carols are not marked.

Larry Roberts, October 1994
(enhancements to "Good King Wenceslas" by Petr Grau, December 1997)

All Bells in Paradise

Music: Traditional, harmonized by Ralph Vaughan Williams
Words: Traditional

This folk carol, which is becoming more and more popular, was collected by Ralph Vaughan Williams at the turn of the century from a Mr. Hall in Castleton, Derbyshire. Originally a mystical carol with roots in the Holy Grail legends, earlier versions have a wounded knight on the bed, and have the stone engraved with the words '*Corpus Christi* (the Body of Christ)' The song has been sung as a Christmas carol for most of this century.

*** Angels From The Realms of Glory**

Music: Henry Smart (1813-1879)
Words: James Montgomery (1771-1854)

The writer of the words for this popular carol was James Montgomery, a hymn writer for the Moravian denomination, who was born to a poor peasant family in Ayrshire, Scotland. He left school because he was more interested in writing poems. He eventually became editor of the liberal journal, *The Sheffield Iris*. After having been imprisoned for his liberal writings several times, he devoted himself to writing hymns--producing over 400 during his lifetime. His most popular, however, was "*Angels from the Realms of Glory*" first published in 1816. The music for this carol was done in 1867 by Henry Smart, a blind composer. Smart had switched professions from lawyer to composer many years before. This melody is called "*Regent Square*", and is named after a famous Presbyterian Church in London.

*** Angels We Have Heard On High**

Music: Traditional
Words: Originally French

Like many traditional carols, *Angels We Have Heard On High* is a compilation from several sources. Parts of the song come from a late medieval Latin chorale, and other parts from a popular melody of the 18th century. This version uses two eighth notes in places in the verse where other versions may use a quarter note. The words are a translation of a French carol entitled "*Les Anges dans nos Campagnes*". The carol was first published in its present form in 1855.

*** Away in a Manger**

Music: Traditional
Words: Traditional

Even though the true author of the words and music for this popular Carol are unknown, it is possible that the composer was James R. Murray who published the song in 1887. The words were taken from a children's Sunday school book also published in the 1800's.

The Birthday of a King

Music: William Harold Neidlinger (1863-1924)

Words: William Harold Neidlinger

Neidlinger was a composer, conductor, organist, and voice teacher, but his main interest was working with retarded children, and he founded a school for this purpose in East Orange, N.J. Originally published in 1912 in Neidlinger's native Brooklyn, the song has been popular ever since, particularly as a baritone solo, since it shows off the voice quite well and is not difficult to sing.

The Boar's Head Carol

Music: Possibly by Wynkyn de Worde, 1521

Words: Traditional English

This is one of the oldest surviving secular carols. The legend of the *Boar's Head* relates how a student at Queen's College, Oxford, was attacked by a wild boar one Christmas Day. Not having any other weapon, the student crammed a book of Aristotle down the boar's throat. The head of the boar was then prepared, cooked, and to the delight of all the students, served in the refectory. Ever since that time, a boar's head has been served at Queen's College during Christmas celebrations. The Latin translations are as follows:

Quot estis in convivio - As many as are at the feast

Caput apri defero, reddens laudes Domino - I carry in the boar's head, giving thanks to the Lord

Servire cantico - serve it with a song

In Reginensi Atrio - In Queen's Hall (of Queen's College)

Brightest & Best of the Sons of the Morning

Music: John P. Harding (Morning Star)

Words: Bishop Reginald Heber (1783-1826)

This lovely carol was written by Bishop Heber in 1811 and was first published in the *Christian Observer* that year. Besides this carol, Bishop Heber also wrote the words to the hymns "*The Son of God Goes Forth to War*", "*From Greenland's Icy Mountains*", and "*Holy, Holy, Holy!*" The carol is sometimes put to the music of Lowell Mason's hymn "*Wesley*", but in this arrangement I have used the more customary version by James P. Harding which was composed in 1892 and is called "*Morning Star*".

Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabella

Music: Marc-Antoine Charpentier

Words: Traditional Provençal, translated to French by Émile Blémont, 1901

Torches and incredibly detailed nativity scenes are important parts of the celebration of Christmas in Provence, in the southern part of France. This Provençal carol, which alludes to both of these customs, was translated into French by Émile Blémont in 1901, and was originally called "*Vénès leou vieira la Pieoucelle*" ("Come there to see the Virgin"). The melody was written by Charpentier for the Molière play "*Le Médecin malgré lui*" ("The Doctor in spite of himself") in 1666. An English translation of the words is:

Jeanette and Isabelle, bring a torch and run to the cradle! It is Jesus, good folk of the village - Christ is born, Mary is calling. Ah! how beautiful the mother is! Ah! what a good-looking Child!

It's a bad thing when the Child is sleeping, it's a bad thing to yell so loudly. Be quiet everyone, for goodness sake! At the least noise, Jesus will wake up, Shh! shh! He is sleeping perfectly. Shh! Shh! look how He's sleeping!

Softly, into the closed stable, softly come here a moment! Approach - how cute Jesus is, how white! how pink! Shh! Shh! look how He is sleeping, look how He laughs in His sleep!

(translation by John Cowles)

Christmas Is Coming

Music: Edith Nesbit

Words: Traditional English Nursery Rhyme

This carol is basically a round composed by Edith Nesbit, and put to the words of an old English Nursery Rhyme.

The Coventry Carol

Music: Traditional

Words: Traditional

During Medieval times, Christmas pageants were held throughout England. This old carol comes from a traditional pageant which was held on the steps of the Coventry cathedral, and probably evolved from morality plays which were even older. The carol was sung as a prelude to the enactment of the killing of the children by King Herod's soldiers.

*** Deck the Halls**

Music: Traditional

Words: Traditional

The music for *Deck The Halls* most likely comes from an old Welsh song. The words are possibly American in origin, having been adapted sometime during the 1800's. It describes the various elements required for a traditional English Christmas celebration in more detail than does any other popular carol.

*** The First Noel**

Music: Traditional

Words: Traditional

This popular carol relates the Christmas Story, and the words probably are derived from old Miracle Plays which originated before the 15th century. The music is from much later, and is either English or French in origin. The carol in its present form was first published in 1833 by William Sandys.

The Gloucestershire Wassail Song

Music: Traditional

Words: Traditional

The first mention of this song comes from the 1760s, when it was sung in Gloucestershire by wassailers carrying a large bowl decorated with garlands and ribbon. The word *wassail* comes from the Old English '*wes hal*', which means 'be healthy' (or 'hale'). It was used as a form of greeting, and a '*wassail bowl*' was a drink upon meeting, especially for a festive occasion. In this carol '*Cherry*' and '*Dobbin*' are horses; '*Broad May*', '*Fillpail*', and '*Colly*' are cows.

* **God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen**

Music: Traditional

Words: Traditional

This popular carol traces its origins to the English carolers who were paid to sing seasonal songs for the upper classes of English society. It was first published in 1827 where it was described as an "*ancient version, sung in the streets of London*".

* **Good Christian Men, Rejoice**

Music: 14th century Germany melody harmonized by Sir Joh Stainer, 1867

Words: Medieval Latin translated by John M. Neale (1818-1866), 1853

This very old carol had its origins as a 14th century hymn which was later arranged by Bartholomaeus Gesius in 1601 as "*In Dulci Jubilo*". It was also arranged by Bach and incorporated into his *Chorale Preludes for Organ*. John Mason Neale, the son of an English clergyman, was a student at Cambridge University where he studied Latin. In addition to this carol, he published the book "*Hymns of the Eastern Church*". He is also known for the hymns "*Jerusalem the Golden*", "*Art Thou Weary, Art Thou Languid*" and the carol "*Good King Wenceslas*".

* **Good King Wenceslas**

Music: Traditional

Words: John Mason Neale

This carol is based on the historical figure of Vaclav the Good. Vaclav ("Wenceslas" in Latin) was the Knight of Bohemia from 922 to 925, was assassinated by his brother in 929 or 935, and was later sainted. St. Vaclav the Good has been the patron of the Bohemian state (now the Czech Republic) since 11th century. He founded St. Vite's cathedral at the Prague castle. Magnificent St. Vaclav's statue decorates the main square in Prague called "Vaclavske."

The carol is not based on any known incident in the saint's life. John Mason Neale first published this carol in 1853. The melody came from another carol published in a 1582 collection of Swedish secular and school songs.

Note: The prevailing view of historians now is that St. Vaclav ruled from 922 to 925. There are doubts about the year of assassination--older sources and tradition are inclined to 929, and newer sources to 935.

* **Hark! the Herald Angels Sing**

Music: Charles Wesley

Music: Felix Mendelssohn

The music for this carol comes from a cantata originally composed by Mendelssohn in 1840. In 1855 an English musician, W.H. Cummings, combined the music with an old hymn written by Charles Wesley originally titled "*Hark, How All the Welkin Rings*". This was rephrased by the publisher to the title we know today.

* **Here We Come a-Wassailing**

Music: Old English Melody

Words: Traditional

The carol is also known as "*Here We Come a-Caroling*" in some publications. The tradition of this "*wassail*" comes from the early practice of making a toast to the lord of the manor during the Christmas season. It has since become a standard part of the Christmas celebration. The *Wassail Bowl* contained a combination of ingredients, among them being ale, eggs, apples, nuts, spices and curdled cream, and is perhaps the origin of eggnog.

* **The Holly and the Ivy**

Music: Old French Melody

Words: Traditional English

This old carol is perhaps a combination of two traditions, one relating to the Celtic worship of nature and trees and the other relating to the Christian celebration of the birth of Christ. The carol describes the holly, which represents the crown of thorns worn by Christ, and the red berries, which represent his blood. In the Celtic Druid tradition, the holly represented the male part of nature, and the ivy represented the female. The first official publication of this carol was in 1861 by Joshua Sylvester, who had obtained it from unknown sources.

* **I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day**

Music: J. Baptiste Calkin, 1872

Words: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1863

This carol, also sometimes known as "*Christmas Bells*" (the title of the poem), first appeared in 1863 in a book of poetry by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow entitled *Flower-de-Luce*. Written shortly after the Battle of Gettysburg, Longfellow was influenced a great deal by its tragic events, and the original verses contain very specific anti-war sentiments – "*from each black, accursed mouth The cannon thundered in the South*". And like most Americans at the time, he prayed "*Of peace on earth, good will to men!*" In 1872, J. Baptiste Calkin, an English organist, provided a melody for the carol, adding four measures from an old hymn to the ending.

* **I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing In**

Music: Traditional English - Arranged by Sir John Stainer

Words: Traditional

This is one of the oldest traditional English carols. The English musicologist Cecil Sharp found several versions of the words and music through out England. The first publication of the carol was in 1666. It demonstrates the close association that the British Isles had with the sea. Despite the fact that Bethlehem is not a sea port, as inferred by the fifth stanza, the song has enjoyed a long and popular use in England. There have been many suggestions as to what the Three ships represented, the Three Wise Men and the Holy Trinity being the most often mentioned. The myth of a ship bringing miraculous beings at the end of the year is quite common throughout the entire world. For instance, the myth of the *Seven Happy Gods* who arrive by ship at year's end in Japan is remarkably similar to this song.

* **It Came Upon the Midnight Clear**

Music: Richard Storrs Willis

Words: Edmund Hamilton Sears

The words to this carol by the Unitarian minister Edmund Hamilton Sears were first published in 1849 in a church magazine. In 1850 the poem was put to music composed by Richard Storrs Willis, a musician, and an editor and critic for the New York Tribune.

* **Jingle Bells**

Music & Words: James L. Pierpont (1822-1893)

James L. Pierpont was the son of the Boston reformer and minister John Pierpont and served as music director of the Unitarian Church in Savannah, Georgia, at which his brother John Pierpont, Jr. was minister. He was also the uncle of the famous financier John Pierpont Morgan. James married Eliza Jane Purse, the daughter of the mayor of Savannah, and served for a time with a Confederate cavalry regiment. Although a prolific song writer during his lifetime, he is best known for his popular Christmas song "*A One Horse Open Sleigh*", subsequently known as "*Jingle Bells*". You will find two versions of this carol in the registered version. *Jinglebe.mid* is the more commonly heard version, and *Jingle.mid* is the original version first published by Pierpont. The difference occurs in the Chorus, a portion of which is automatically played when you first open the **Advent** program.

* **Joy to the World**

Music: Lowell Mason

Words: Issac Watts

This carol has long been wrongly attributed to George Frederick Handel. But it appears that the rightful composer was Lowell Mason who set the words of Issac Watts to original music he had composed in 1839. Mason had included the phrase "*From George Frederick Handel*" on his publication as a tribute to the composer whom he greatly admired and who had inspired his work. But there is no direct use of Handel's music anywhere in the work itself. Mason was a well known American composer and music educator in the 1800's. Among his other popular hymns are "*Nearer, My God To Thee*", "*My Faith Looks Up To Thee*", and "*From Greenland's Icy Mountains*". The words by Issac Watts were a translation of five verses from Psalm 98 in the Old Testament.

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

Music: Traditional - Harmonized By Michael Praetorius, 1609

Words: German, 15th Century

The words to this German carol relate to the events told in the New Testament book of Luke. It is also known as "*Behold, a Branch Is Growing*" due to a difference in German texts. The German composer Michael Praetorius set the words to a German folk tune, and provided the original harmonization around 1609.

Masters In this Hall

Music: Old French Carol Tune

Words: William Morris (1834-1896)

The melody of this carol was obtained by the English carol compiler Edmund Stedding some time in the 1850s from the organist at Chartres Cathedral in France. When Stedding met William Morris, one of the members of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in painting, in a publisher's office in 1859, and showed him the melody, Morris wrote out the words at one sitting. The song was published in 1860 in Stedding's "*Ancient Christmas Carols*". Besides painting, Morris wrote poetry, fantasy novels, and as a designer was one of the founders of the "art nouveau" movement. His designs for architecture, book endpapers, wallpaper, and furniture are still quite popular - he was the inventor of the Morris chair.

* **O Christmas Tree (O Tannenbaum)**

Music: Traditional

Words: Traditional

How the first Christmas tree came into existence is unknown. But one of the legends is that Martin Luther, on seeing how beautiful an evergreen tree looked against a starry Christmas Eve, took a tree home and decorated it with candles to simulate the shining stars. From that time on, the decoration of evergreen trees at Christmas became a custom. It therefore may be fitting that this traditional carol about the Christmas tree should have originated in Germany. Robert Graves, in his book "*The White Goddess*" traces the decoration of trees into the distant past of Celtic mythology. The melody of this carol became so popular that, during the American Civil War, it was borrowed and used in the song *Maryland, My Maryland*, and is now the melody for the state songs of nine states in the U.S.A.

* **O Come, All Ye Faithful (Adeste Fideles)**

Music: John Reading

Latin Words: John Francis Wade

English Words: Frederick Oakeley

The interesting thing about carols is how the words and music come together. In this case the music was pre-existing, most likely written in the 1740's by John Reading, and years later, around 1752, the English Roman Catholic John Francis Wade put his Latin words to the music. In the early 1800's another publication of the carol, with an English-language adaption by Frederick Oakeley, a British clergyman, occurred. The latter publication was the carol we have come to know today as "*O Come, All Ye Faithful*".

* **O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

Music: Ancient Plain song, 13th century

Words: Latin, 12th century - translated by John Mason Neale, 1851

This carol was derived from translations of the original Latin, having originated from the seven greater antiphons that were sung in the Roman Catholic church at vespers on the seven days before Christmas during the 9th century or even earlier. The melody comes from the 13th century plain song "*Veni Emmanuel*".

* **O Little Town of Bethlehem**

Music: Lewis H. Redner

Words: Phillips Brooks

The words to this timeless carol were inspired by a trip to the Holy Land by the Reverend Phillips Brooks. His organist, Lewis H. Redner, a real-estate broker by profession, set the words to

music for singing by the church's children's choir in Philadelphia in 1868. Since then it has become a traditional part of the Christmas season.

Once in Royal David's City

Music: Henry J. Gauntlett, 1849

Words: Cecil F. Alexander (1823-1895), 1848

The words to this carol were written by Mrs. Cecil Alexander, the wife of the Rev. William Alexander, archbishop of Armagh and primate of all Ireland. It was first published in a collection for children in 1848 titled "*Hymns for Little Children*" along with several others she had written. Among other hymns written by her were "*There Is a Green Hill Far Away*" and "*Jesus Calls Us: O'er the Tumult*". The melody was composed by Henry J. Gauntlett, who served as organist in his father's church in Olney, England. During Gauntlett's lifetime he edited many hymnals and composed thousands of songs.

Pat-A-Pan

Music: Traditional

Words: Traditional

This French Burgundian carol was first collected and published by Bernard de La Monnoye along with many others that he had collected. The first English version was published in 1907.

*** Silent Night**

Music: Franz Gruber

Words: Joseph Mohr

This is perhaps one of the most popular carols of all time. The charming, but apocryphal story of the broken organ, and the necessity of Father Joseph Mohr having to write some last minute lyrics for Midnight Mass, and the organist, Franz Gruber, providing a simple tune and setting the music for guitar (which he played quite well), is well known. The carol was written in 1818, in Obendorf, a tiny village in the Austrian Alps. Over the years the song was disseminated far beyond its origin, often without credit to the authors. It was not until the second half of the 1800's that the authors discovered just how popular their last minute carol had become, and were at last given proper credit for their popular composition.

*** The Twelve Days of Christmas**

Music: Traditional

Words: Traditional

This ancient carol is derived from the tradition of celebrating the twelve days from Christmas Day to the Epiphany, when the Wise Men arrived to give gifts to the Christ Child. And thus the tradition of Christmas gift giving. Originally, the song was part of a game of Forfeits, in which each player must recite the list of objects named by the previous player and add his own. The carol probably originated in the 16th century and has evolved over the years, being finalized in 1909 with the addition of the phrase "five gold rings". The 'pear tree' is probably from "perdrix", French for partridge, the 'calling birds' is from the archaic "cally-birds", which are blackbirds, and the 'gold rings' is probably from "goldspinks" which is Scottish dialect for goldfinches.

*** Up On The Housetop**

Music & Words: Benjamin Russell Hanby

This charming children's carol was written during the mid 1800's by Benjamin Russell Hanby, a resident of Ohio. His whimsical lyrics and attractive melody helped to establish the story of Santa Claus, first formalized by Clement Clarke Moore's classic poem "*A Visit from St. Nicholas*", later retitled "*'Twas the Night Before Christmas*". In this arrangement I have used a counter melody based on Hanby's original to introduce the song and to serve as a closing.

*** We Three Kings of Orient Are**

Music & Words: John Henry Hopkins

This popular carol was composed by John Henry Hopkins, Jr. for a Christmas pageant that was presented at the General Theological Seminary in New York City in 1857. Hopkins was an instructor in church music at the Seminary at the time. The carol concerns Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, the three kings from the East, who brought gifts to the new born Christ Child. It has become a traditional part of the Christmas celebration ever since.

*** We Wish You a Merry Christmas**

Music: Traditional

Words: Traditional

This is another of the old English carols that comes from the tradition of the singing of carols in the public streets. This carol was sung by the Waits, a special group of singers commissioned and licensed specifically to sing the music of the season in the streets during the Christmas holidays.

*** What Child Is This?**

Music: Traditional

Words: William Chatterton Dix

This old English folk song has had many titles, probably the most well known being "*Greensleeves*". Tradition names Henry VIII as the composer of the melody, and scholars do not question the possibility, as Henry was a skilled songwriter with many verified songs to his credit. But it was in 1865 that William Chatterton Dix first published a poem titled "*The Manger Throne*". Three stanzas were later combined with the song and resulted in "*What Child Is This?*" as we now know it.

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night

Music: George Frederick Handel

Words: Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brody

The words for this carol come from a scriptural paraphrase by Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brody which was published in 1696. In the 1800's the composer Richard Storrs Willis, who had composed "*It Came Upon A Midnight Clear*", adapted the words to an aria from Handel's opera "*Cyrus*". This carol quickly became a very popular song, even gaining the approval of strict church officials.