

CAROLS WITH THE MONKS



COMMENTARY 2022

Puer Natus Est

Welcome, welcome one and all to our abbey's church, prepared and adorned for this most joyful of feasts. Tonight, this precious night, we would like to sing for you some choice carols, chants, and polyphony as we await together the Light of the Lord's birth.

Like most good things, our first "carol" has a long and rich history. *Puer Natus Est*, "A Boy is Born," began its life in the 13th century at the ancient abbey of Bobbio in northern Italy. There, and for centuries following, it was sung by the monks as an antiphon to complete the divine office during Christmastime. It was popularized in the 16th century by the Lutheran hymnist Hermann Bonn, and has remained popular in German and in Latin since. The version we will sing for you tonight, with its simple, lilting melody harkens back to its humble yet profound beginnings in the solemn joy of the Christmas liturgy.

And so, as the chorus sings, "In our joyful hearts, let us now adore Christ who was born for us with a new song."

In the Bleak Midwinter

A poem written by Christina Rosseti in 1872, *In the Bleak Midwinter* was put to music by Gustav Holst in 1906. The first verse sets the scene for the birth of Christ which took place in the bleak midwinter. The following verses of the carol go on to contrast the celestial with the terrestrial, the coming of Christ in glory with his coming as a lowly child, the adoration of the angels with the loving Mother's kiss. Finally, the carol wraps up by reflecting on what is the gift I can give the baby Jesus to fittingly show my love. Each one of us has his or her own particular gift to offer but there is only one thing that Jesus desires from us above all else: our hearts.

Adeste Fideles

Traditionally the final anthem during midnight mass at St Peter's Basilica, the origins of this well-beloved Christmas carol, *Adeste Fideles*, are shrouded in mystery. Known in England for a time as "the Portuguese hymn", one of these mythical composers is said to have been King John IV of Portugal, an amateur composer whose works were reported to have been destroyed in the great earthquake of 1755. The hymn has also been attributed to anonymous Cistercian monks, some claiming that the plain melody recalls simple Cistercian chant. The text has even been ascribed to the thirteenth century Franciscan theologian, St Bonaventure. What we do know is that one of the earliest known manuscripts of the hymn is found in the collections of the plainchant scribe, John Francis Wade, a man well known in English Catholic circles in France during the 18th century.

Whatever its origins, today this carol, sung in churches around the world each Christmas, uplifts our souls and directs our minds and hearts to the God of the universe, carried in a virgin's womb. The refrain of the carol echoes the longing of the Christian's heart each Christmas to come let us adore the word made flesh, Love Himself, lying poor in a manger. *Venite Adoremus! Venite Adoremus! Venite Adoremus Dominum!*

Carol of the Russian Children

With our next selection, *Carol of the Russian Children*, our hearts go out to all our brothers and sisters suffering beneath the dark shadow of war in Ukraine and elsewhere. Though the bleak beauty of this 16th century carol's mystical melody paints a stark and snowy scene, it also carries the gentle aspirations of a child waiting for the light. May little Jesu, the Light of the World, come this night to shine in the darkness of our world.

Christmas Dance of the Shepherds

Our next gift to you is the *Christmas Dance of the Shepherds*, composed between 1927 and 1935 by Hungarian composer Kodály, and translated to English by Elisabeth Lockwood. The joyful lyrics and melody were inspired by the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 8-12:

“And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

Ding-Dong, Merrily On High

The joyful strains of our final selection are reminiscent of the jubilant voices of the angels serenading the shepherds as they watched their flocks by night. The tune of *Ding-Dong, Merrily on High* was originally secular in nature, used as a standard for French dances in the 1590s. It wasn't until around 1824 that the tune received its Christmas lyrics by the Anglican priest, George Ratcliffe Woodward. Woodward's great devotion to bell ringing was a clear influence on the lyrics, particularly the mellifluous *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* refrain. The entire piece is a clear call to all Christians to resound the heavens with exuberant joy and thanksgiving. The bell motif is indicative that we must all 'ring in' the Saviour, allowing the new born babe to lodge in our hearts. Mourning has fled; let us raise our hearts and voices in true worship of our long-awaited King and Deliverer!