

Christmas Carol Information:

A **Christmas carol** (also called a **noël**) is a **carol** (song or hymn) whose lyrics are on the theme of **Christmas** or the winter season in general, and which is traditionally sung in the period immediately surrounding the holiday. Christmas carols may be regarded as a subset of the broader category of **Christmas music**.

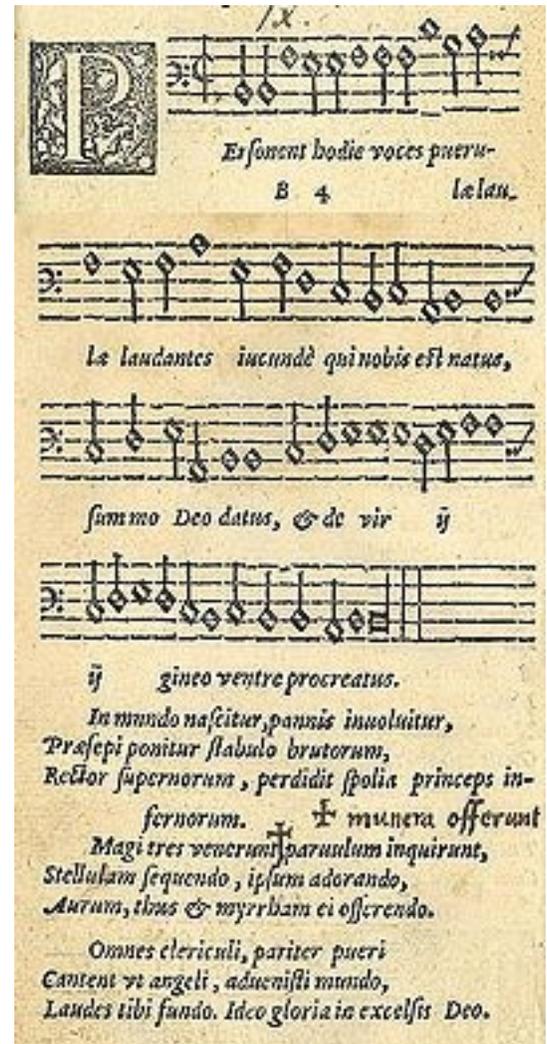
History

The first specifically Christmas hymns for Christians that we know of appear in fourth century **Rome**. Latin hymns such as *Veni redemptor gentium*, written by **Ambrose**, **Archbishop** of **Milan**, were austere statements of the theological doctrine of the Incarnation in opposition to **Arianism**. *Corde natus ex Parentis* (*Of the Father's love begotten*) by the Spanish poet **Prudentius** (d. 413) is still sung in some churches today.[1]

In the ninth and tenth centuries, the Christmas "Sequence" or "Prose" was introduced in North European monasteries, developing under **Bernard of Clairvaux** into a sequence of rhymed **stanzas**. In the twelfth century the Parisian monk Adam of St. Victor began to derive music from popular songs, introducing something closer to the traditional Christmas carol.

In the thirteenth century, in France, Germany, and particularly, Italy, under the influence of **Francis of Assisi** a strong tradition of popular Christmas songs in the native language developed.[2] Christmas carols in English first appear in a 1426 work of **John Awdlay**, a **Shropshire** chaplain, who lists twenty five "caroles of Cristemas", probably sung by groups of 'wassailers', who went from house to house.[3] The songs we know specifically as carols were originally communal songs sung during celebrations like harvest tide as well as Christmas. It was only later that carols began to be sung in church, and to be specifically associated with Christmas.

Carols gained in popularity after the **Reformation** in the countries where **Protestant** churches gained prominence (as well-known Reformers like Martin Luther authored carols and encouraged their use in worship), this was the consequence of the fact that the Lutheran reformation warmly welcomed music.[4]



A 1582 published version of the Latin carol *Personent hodie*

"[Adeste Fideles](#)" ("O Come all ye faithful") appears in its current form in the mid-18th century, although the words may have originated in the thirteenth century. The origin of the tune is disputed. The first appearance in print of "[God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen](#)", "[The First Noel](#)", "[I Saw Three Ships](#)" and "[Hark! The Herald Angels Sing](#)" was in *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern* (1833) by [William Sandys](#). Composers like [Arthur Sullivan](#) helped to repopularize the carol, and it is this period that gave rise to such favorites as "[Good King Wenceslas](#)" and "[It Came Upon the Midnight Clear](#)", a New England carol written by Edmund H. Sears and Richard S. Willis.

Today carols are regularly sung at Christian religious services. Some compositions have words which are clearly not of a religious theme, but are often still referred to as "carols". For example, the sixteenth century song "A Bone, God Wot!" appears to be a [wassailing](#) song (which is sung during drinking or while requesting ale), but is described in the [British Library's Cottonian Collection](#) as a Christmas carol.^[5]

Carols for dancing

It is not clear whether the word carol derives from the French "carole" or the Latin "carula" meaning a circular dance. In any case the dancing seems to have been abandoned quite early.^[citation needed] The typical 3/4 (waltz) time would tend to support the latter meaning.

Music

Traditionally, carols have often been based on [medieval](#) chord patterns, and it is this that gives them their uniquely characteristic musical sound. Some carols like "[Personent hodie](#)", "[Good King Wenceslas](#)", and "[The Holly and the Ivy](#)" can be traced directly back to the [Middle Ages](#), and are among the oldest musical compositions still regularly sung.

Compositions continue to be written that become popular carols. For example, many of the carols written by [Alfred Burt](#) are sung regularly in both sacred and secular settings, and are among the better-known modern Christmas carols.

Church and liturgical use of Christmas carols

Almost all the well-known carols were not sung in church until the second half of the 19th century.^[citation needed] *Hymns Ancient and Modern 1861–1874* included several carols. [Isaac Watts](#), the "father of English hymnody", composed "[Joy to the World](#)" which has become a popular Christmas carol even though it is widely believed that Watts did not write it to be sung only at Christmas.

[Charles Wesley](#) wrote texts for at least three Christmas carols, of which the best known was originally entitled "Hark! How All the Welkin Rings", later edited to "[Hark! the Herald Angels Sing](#)".^[6] In 1840 [Felix Mendelssohn](#) wrote a tune in a cantata; William H. Cummings adapted this tune to fit Wesley's words and this combination first appeared in "Hymns Ancient and Modern" in 1861.^[citation needed]

"[Silent Night](#)" comes from [Austria](#). The carol was first performed in the Nikolaus-Kirche (Church of St. Nicholas) in [Oberndorf, Austria](#) on December 24, 1818. Mohr had composed the words much earlier, in 1816, but on [Christmas Eve](#) brought them to Gruber and asked him to compose a melody and [guitar](#) accompaniment for the church service.^[7] The first English translation was in 1871 where it was published in a [Methodist](#) hymnal.

Episodes described in Christmas carols

Several different Christmas episodes, apart from the [birth of Jesus](#) itself, are described in Christmas carols, such as:

- The [Annunciation](#), for example "[Gabriel's Message](#)"
- The [Census of Quirinius](#), a rare subject, but touched on in "On a Day When Men Were Counted" by Daniel Thambyrajah Niles (1964)
- The [Annunciation to the shepherds](#), for example "[While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks](#)"
- The [Adoration of the shepherds](#), for example the [Czech](#) carol "[Nesem Vám Noviny](#)" (translated into English as "Come, All Ye Shepherds")
- The [Star of Bethlehem](#), for example, "[Star of the East](#)"
- The [Visit of the Magi](#), for example "[We Three Kings](#)"
- The [Massacre of the Innocents](#), for example the "[Coventry Carol](#)"

In addition, some carols describe Christmas-related events which are of a religious nature, but not directly related to the birth of Jesus. For example:

- "[Good King Wenceslas](#)", based on a legend about [Saint Wenceslaus](#) helping a poor man on December 26 (the [Feast of Stephen](#))
- "[Ding Dong Merrily on High](#)" and "[I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day](#)", reflecting on the practice of ringing [church bells](#) at Christmas

Early carols

Nineteenth century antiquarians rediscovered early carols in museums. According to the Encyclopædia Britannica,^[9] about 500 have been found. Some are wassailing songs, some are religious songs in English, some are in Latin, and some are "[macaronic](#)" — a mixture of English and Latin. Since most people did not understand Latin, the implication is that these songs were composed for church choristers, or perhaps for an educated audience at the Royal courts. The most famous survival of these early macaronic carols is the "The Boar's Head". Allegedly, it has been sung at Christ Church Cambridge since 1607. The tradition of singing carols outside of church influence, early in the nineteenth century is best illustrated by [Thomas Hardy's](#) novel "[Under the Greenwood Tree](#)" (1872). In England and other countries, such as [Poland](#) ([kolęda](#)), [Romania](#) ([colinde](#)) and [Bulgaria](#) ([koledari](#)), there is a tradition of Christmas caroling (earlier known as [wassailing](#)), in which groups of singers travel from house to house, singing carols, for which they are often rewarded with gifts, money, mince pies, or a

glass of an appropriate beverage. Money collected in this way is now normally given to charity.

Singing carols in church was instituted on [Christmas Eve](#) 1880 in [Truro Cathedral, Cornwall](#), (see article on [Nine Lessons and Carols](#)), and now seen in churches all over the world.^[10] The songs that were chosen for singing in church omitted the wassailing carols, and the words "hymn" and "carol" were used almost interchangeably. Shortly before, in 1878, the [Salvation Army](#), under Charles Fry, instituted the idea of playing carols at Christmas, using a [brass band](#). Carols can be sung by individual singers, but are also often sung by larger groups, including professionally trained choirs. Most churches have special services at which carols are sung, generally combined with readings from scripture about the birth of Christ; this is often based on the famous Festival of [Nine Lessons and Carols](#) at [King's College, Cambridge](#).

Christmas carols in classical music

In the 1680s and 1690s, two French composers incorporated carols into their works. [Louis-Claude Daquin](#) wrote 12 noels for organ. [Marc-Antoine Charpentier](#) wrote a few instrumental versions of noels, plus one major choral work "Messe de minuit pour Noël". Other examples include:

- [Ralph Vaughan Williams](#): *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*, 1912.
- [Victor Hely-Hutchinson](#): *Carol Symphony*, 1927.
- [Benjamin Britten](#): *A Ceremony of Carols* (for choir and harp), 1942
- [Christina Rossetti](#)'s poem "In the Bleak Midwinter" has been set to music by (amongst others) [Gustav Holst](#) (1905) and [Harold Darke](#) (1911).
- Polish composer [Krzysztof Penderecki](#) extensively quotes the Christmas carol "Silent Night" in his Second Symphony, nicknamed the *Christmas Symphony*.

Star singers

Main article: [Star Boys' Singing Procession](#)

In Austria, Belgium and Germany, Christmas is celebrated by some with children dressing as "The Three Kings", carrying a star on a pole. Going from house to house from New Year's Day to January 6, the children sing religious songs and are called "star singers". They are often rewarded with sweets or money, which is typically given to a local church or charity. "C.M.B" is written in chalk on houses they have visited. Although this is sometimes taken as a reference to the three kings — [Caspar](#), [Melchior](#)^[*disambiguation needed*] and [Balthasar](#) — it may originally have represented the words *Christus mansionem benedicat* (Christ bless this house).

Christmas carols by country

Australia and New Zealand

In Australia and New Zealand, where it is the middle of summer at Christmas, there is a tradition of [Carols by Candlelight](#) concerts which are held outdoors at night in cities and towns across the country, during the weeks leading up to Christmas. First held in Melbourne, "Carols by Candlelight" is held each Christmas Eve in capital cities and many smaller cities and towns around Australia. Performers at the concerts include [opera](#) singers, [musical theatre](#) performers and [popular music](#) singers. People in the audience hold lit candles and join in singing some of the carols in accompaniment with the celebrities. Similar events are now held all over Australia, usually arranged by churches, municipal councils, or other community groups. They are normally held on Christmas Eve or the Sunday or weekend before Christmas. A similar recent trend in New Zealand is for smaller towns to host their own Carols by Candlelight concerts.

France

A 16th-century carol, "Ça, Bergers, assemblons nous", was sung aboard [Jacques Cartier's](#) ship on Christmas Day in 1535. Dating from the 18th century, "Les Anges dans nos Campagnes" is another famous French carol. The 19th century "Cantique de Noël" (also known as "Minuit, chrétiens", adapted as "[O Holy Night](#)" in English) is another classic. "Dans cette étable" and "Venez Divin Messie " are also popular Christmas carols. Perhaps the best known traditional French carol, "Il est né, le divin Enfant!", comes from the region of Provence.

In 1554, a collection of French carols, "La Grande Bible des Noëls", was printed in Orléans. Another collection, "Chants des Noëls Anciens et Modernes", was printed by Christophe Ballard (1641–1715), in Paris, in 1703.

Germany and Austria

Some carols familiar in English are translations of German Christmas songs (*Weihnachtslieder*). Three well-known examples are "[Silent Night](#)" ("*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*"), by the Austrians [Franz Xaver Gruber](#) and [Joseph Mohr](#), "[Still, Still, Still](#)" ("*Still, Still, Still*"), an Austrian folksong also from the Salzburg region, and "[O Christmas Tree](#)" ("*O Tannenbaum*"), from a German folksong arranged by [Ernst Anschütz](#).

The tune of "[Still, Still, Still](#)" is based on an 1819 melody by Süss, with the original words, slightly changed over time and location, by G. Götsch.

Greece and Cyprus

Custom

Greek tradition calls for children to go out with [triangles](#) from house to house on Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve and [Epiphany](#) Eve, and sing the corresponding folk carols, called the *Kálanda* (Κάλαντα, the word deriving from the Roman [calends](#)). There are separate carols for each of the three great feasts, referring respectively to the [Nativity](#), to [St. Basil](#) and the [New Year](#), and to the [Baptism of Jesus](#) in the [River Jordan](#), along with wishes for the household. In addition to the carols for the [winter festive season](#), there are also the springtime or [Lenten](#) carols, commonly called the "Carols of [Lazarus](#)", sung on the [Saturday before Palm Sunday](#) as a harbinger of the [Resurrection of Christ](#) to be celebrated a week later.



Nikiphoros Lytras, *Carols*, 1872

In older times, caroling children asked for and were given edible gifts such as dried fruit, eggs, nuts or sweets; during the 20th century this was gradually replaced with money gifts — ranging from small change in the case of strangers to considerable amounts in the case of close relatives. Caroling is also done by marching bands, choirs, school students seeking to raise funds for trips or charity, members of folk societies, or merely by groups of well-wishers. Many internationally known carols, e.g. "[Silent Night](#)", "[O Tannenbaum](#)" or "[Jingle Bells](#)", are also sung in Greek translation.

Variants

Many carols are regional, being popular in specific regions but unknown in others, whereas some are popular throughout the two countries. Examples of the latter are the [Peloponnesian](#) Christmas carol "*Christoúgenna, Prōtoúgenna*" ("Christmas, Firstmas"), the [Constantinopolitan](#) Christmas carol "*Kalēn hespēran, árchontes*" ("Good evening, lords"), and the New Year's carol "*Archimēniá ki archichroniá*" ("First of the month, first of the year"). The oldest known carol, commonly referred to as the "Byzantine Carol" ([Byzantine Greek](#): Ἄναρχος θεός καταβέβηκεν, *Ánarkhos Theós katabébēken*, "God, who has no beginning, descended"), is linguistically dated to the beginning of the [High Middle Ages](#), ca. 1000 AD; it is traditionally associated with the city of [Kotyora](#) in the [Pontos](#) (modern-day [Ordu](#), [Turkey](#)).

Form

Most carols follow a more or less standard format: they begin by exalting the relevant religious feast, then proceed to offer praises for the lord and lady of the house, their children, the household and its personnel, and usually conclude with a polite request for a treat, and a promise to come back next year for more well-wishing. Almost all the various carols are in the common [dekapentasyllabos](#) (15-syllable [iamb](#) with a [caesura](#) after the 8th syllable) verse, which means that their wording and tunes are easily interchangeable. This has given rise to a great number of local variants, parts of which often overlap or resemble one another in verse, tune, or both. Nevertheless their

musical variety remains very wide overall: for example [carols](#) from [Epirus](#) are strictly [pentatonic](#), in the kind of [drone polyphony](#) practised in the [Balkans](#), and accompanied by [C-clarinets](#) and [fiddles](#); just across the straits, on [Corfu Island](#), the style is [tempered harmonic polyphony](#), accompanied by [mandolins](#) and [guitars](#). Generally speaking, the musical style of each carol closely follows the secular music tradition of each region.

Philippines

Main article: [List of Filipino Christmas carols](#)

Poland

Christmas carols are very popular in Poland, where they have a long history, the oldest dating to the 15th century or earlier.^[11]

Spain and Portugal

The *villancico* (or *vilancete*, in [Portuguese](#)) was a common poetic and musical form of the [Iberian Peninsula](#) and Latin America popular from the late fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. With the decline in popularity of the villancicos in the 20th century, the term became reduced to mean merely "Christmas carol". Important composers of villancicos were [Juan del Encina](#), [Pedro de Escobar](#), Francisco Guerrero, Gaspar Fernandes, and Juan Gutiérrez de Padilla. Popular Spanish villancicos include "Los pastores a Belén," and "[Riu, riu, chiu: El lobo rabioso](#)" and "Los peces en el río". Popular Catalan Christmas carols are "Fum fum fum" and "El noi de la mare".^[12]

Ukraine

Basically all Ukrainian Carols (*Колядки*), some of them centuries old, are associated with the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. The Ukrainian carol most known to the Western World is the "[Carol of the Bells](#)", composed by the Ukrainian composer [Mykola Dmytrovych Leontovych](#), and premiered on December 1916 by a choral group made up of students at [Kiev University](#).

United States

Christmas carols and songs written in the United States range from "Jingle Bells," and "O Little Town of Bethlehem" to "Away in a Manger," and numerous others of varying genres.