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# Caroling

BY DAVID W. MUSIC

The singing of carols reminds us that God, in his love for us, sent his Son to *be* one of us. Just as that first Christmas was marked by singing, so Christians through the centuries have celebrated and borne witness through song to the coming of the Messiah.

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The word “carol” describes a type of song that, in many ways, is characterized by ambiguity. This situation results in large part from the carol’s long history. The carol had its origin in the medieval period as vocal accompaniment to a dance; its distinctive feature was a chorus that was sung at the beginning of the dance and again after each stanza. The dancers would sing the chorus as they danced, while the stanzas were performed by a soloist as the dancers rested.<sup>1</sup>

By the fifteenth century the carol had lost its association with dancing, though the original form of chorus-stanza remained. The words could be in English, Latin, or a mixture of the two, and usually dealt with some religious aspect of the Christmas season. These carols were largely the work of clerics and monastics who had the background and education to write the Latin phrases and to appreciate the theological sophistication of the texts and the artistry of the music that accompanied them. The songs had no specific place in the liturgy and they appear to have been used mainly as “spiritual entertainment” for the clergy, nobility, and perhaps (in some circumstances) the general populace. In Richard Leighton Greene’s fetching phrase, these carols were “popular by destination rather than by origin.”<sup>2</sup>

The carol as a specific form did not survive the English Reformation, since the abandonment of monasteries removed the very people who were its primary authors, composers, and consumers, and the carol became linked with the ballad as a form of popular music. During the seventeenth century the Puritans attempted to suppress Christmas celebrations – and the songs

that were associated with them—but the carol endured as a popular song type associated with the Christmas season.

In the eighteenth century, hymn singing (as opposed to versified psalm singing) was introduced into English church services and writers such as Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley wrote texts that dealt specifically with the Incarnation.<sup>3</sup> While these are perhaps more properly known as “hymns,”

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they have colloquially come to be known as “carols” because of their Christmas subject matter. The nineteenth century saw the first significant attempts to preserve the carols of the folk tradition, and new hymns continued to be written on Advent-Christmas-Epiphany themes, such as James Montgomery’s “Angels, From the Realms of Glory.” A unique contribution of

the twentieth century was the American popular song with a secular Christmas theme: “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” “White Christmas,” and so on. Such songs quickly became “traditional” and have been added to the historic body of religious carols that are heard and sung annually.

Thus, over the course of its long history the carol has fulfilled a variety of roles and taken on many different forms. It has been sacred or secular, folkish or artistic, liturgical or extra-liturgical; followed a specific form or been freely constructed; found welcome in or been banned from the Church; had a known author/composer or been completely anonymous; and been cultural or countercultural.

### **THE CAROL IN AMERICAN CULTURE**

In the modern church, carols typically do not have a specific liturgical role to play: essentially they simply replace hymns during the Advent and Christmas seasons. The chief exception is in the service of “lessons and carols,” a series of Scripture readings on the Incarnation alternating with carols for congregation or choir. Here the carol is more fully integrated into the service, becoming a distinct means of response to the biblical message. The once popular custom of “caroling,” the practice of going from house to house singing Christmas songs with a group, has steadily diminished in frequency as entertainment has become more professionalized and electronic, and as Americans have become busier and less neighborhood-conscious.

Carols have several features that set them apart from other types of song in American life. One notable aspect of carols is their ubiquity. For at least a month each year carols can be heard not only in churches, but also in elevators, shopping malls, and automobiles. They are known across cultural, ethnic, national, and even religious boundaries. It has been claimed that "Christmas carols are probably the most influential body of songs in the Western world."<sup>4</sup> It is certainly true that they form one of the best known bodies of religious song in the United States and far beyond.

Another important characteristic of Christmas carols is that they are one of the few elements of American culture in which public religious expression is still readily accepted. It is difficult to imagine "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" or "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" being broadcast over loudspeakers in shopping malls or sung in public schools. However, it is not uncommon in these places to hear recorded versions of "Silent Night" or to find children singing "The Little Drummer Boy."

True, in some places, most notably public schools, concerts of Christmas music have now become "holiday programs," but even here religious carols generally find a place because they are such an important part of the Western musical heritage for this time of the year. Even semi-religious patriotic songs such as "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and "America, the Beautiful" are often not welcome in public schools, but Christmas carols are usually at least tolerated, especially if balanced with secular material or pieces from other religious traditions. During the Christmas season, and only during this season, religious messages can be heard or sung by thousands of people in these secular venues.

Another unusual aspect of the Christmas carol is that it seems to be one of the few song types in contemporary American life in which music in minor keys is widely accepted. Popular hymns and secular songs in the United States are almost invariably in major keys. At Christmas, however, people readily hear and sing "Coventry Carol" ("Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child"), "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," "We Three Kings of Orient Are," and "What Child Is This," all of which make use of minor keys.

### **THE CAROL AND CHRISTIAN FAITH**

Given the historic variety of styles and roles of Christmas carols, not to mention their familiarity, it is important to evaluate how they function in faith formation. As noted above, in the Church carols operate in much the same manner as hymns or other spiritual songs. Both hymns and carols furnish a vehicle for praise, prayer, and proclamation in worship, education, ministry, evangelism, and fellowship. Carols may contain sophisticated theological messages ("Of the Father's Love Begotten," "O Come, All Ye Faithful") or be simple, child-like expressions of faith and joy ("Silent Night," "Good Christian Men, Rejoice").

Like other types of Christian song, carols are a significant means of teaching the faith. While most church-goers are probably familiar with the Nativity stories found in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 2, these are reinforced and interpreted through Christmas carols such as “The First Nowell” and “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night,” which retell the story in poetic and musical—and therefore more easily memorable—form. Some songs use the Christmas story to project messages on different, though related subjects. For example, neither “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” nor “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” mentions Jesus or any details of the Incarnation directly; instead, both use the second part of the song of the angels in Luke 2:14 as the backdrop for a song about peace on earth.

The teaching of incarnational theology and biblical information through Christmas carols must be approached with some caution. Many of these songs were written not by pastors, professional theologians, or biblical scholars, but by humble laypersons whose knowledge of the story may have been shaped more by legend, enthusiasm, and imagination than by the Scriptures. A case in point is “The First Nowell,” the original second stanza of which began “They looked up and saw a star / shining in the east, beyond them far.” The problem is that “they” refers back to the shepherds mentioned in stanza one, but according to the Bible it was not the shepherds but the wise men (who do not come into the carol until the third stanza) who saw the star. Without going into all the pros and cons about whether the star was an unusual and striking phenomenon that would have been visible to all (including the shepherds) or an astronomical sign whose meaning would only have been evident to those who could interpret it (such as the Magi), it is generally unwise to add to the details given in Scripture.

Furthermore, carols often tell only half the story: the Incarnation is incomplete without the Crucifixion and Resurrection. A few carols touch on these subjects (most notably “What Child Is This”), but those who encounter Christian song only at Christmas will probably have at best only a partial understanding of what it is all about.

With that said, a certain amount of leeway must be given to the carol. Carols seldom originate or function primarily as theological expression but as outpourings of tenderness and rejoicing. No single carol can tell the whole story, just as no single hymn, or all of them together, can express the entire truth. A carol is like a snapshot: it gives us a glimpse of one aspect of the Incarnation. Add these snapshots together and we can get a fuller picture, but even then they can never exhaust the subject.

Furthermore, carols often approach their subject obliquely through symbolism, metaphor, and simile. An obvious example is “Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming” (based on Isaiah 11:1), in which the newborn Jesus is compared to a flower blooming from a stem that has been awaiting this budding for centuries, but “poetic license” is frequently found in other carols as well, such as “The Holly and the Ivy” and “I Saw Three Ships.” It undoubtedly

aids the memorability of carols to sing that the angels appeared to the shepherds at midnight, that there was hay in the manger, or that the birth took place amid cattle and donkeys, though none of these features are mentioned in Scripture.<sup>5</sup> Whether these elements are literally true or not, they certainly reinforce the biblical message that Jesus was born in humble circumstances.

The singing of carols reminds us that God, in his love for us, sent his Son to *be* one of us. Just as that first Christmas was marked by singing, so Christians through the centuries have celebrated and borne witness through song to the coming of the Messiah. And they will continue to do so for ages to come, for this is a message that is worth singing about.

## NOTES

1 This background is evident in the term “chorus” which is derived from the Greek word for dance.

2 Richard Leighton Greene, ed., *The Early English Carols*, second edition, revised and enlarged (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), clxxii.

3 Isaac Watts, as a Calvinist, did not write Christmas carols per se: his versification of Psalm 98, “Joy to the World! the Lord Is Come,” does not include a single detail of the biblical Christmas story, merely stating in the first line that “the Lord is come,” but it has become traditionally associated with Christmas. Charles Wesley wrote “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.”

4 William E. Studwell, “The Christmas Carol as a Cultural Phenomenon,” *The Hymn*, 45:4 (October 1994), 9.

5 See “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” “Away in a Manger,” and “What Child Is This.” The suggestion that the angels’ song was at midnight derives from the shepherds “keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8), but for all we know, the angels might have sung at 8:00 p.m. or 2:00 a.m. The implications regarding the hay, cattle, and donkeys are grounded in the fact that Jesus was laid in a manger. There is every possibility that the assumptions made by the carol writers are all true; they might equally well be false.



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