

Old Christmas Returned

Christmas Music and Song from 16th and 17th Century Britain

This collection began as the few pieces that I'd not been able to fit into my previous collection of Christmas music, "To Shorten Winter's Sadness", but as I kept finding more songs, I realized that there was enough material to fill a second volume.

Once again, I've arranged the pieces so that they follow the cycle of the days of Christmas, beginning with Christmas Day, then St Stephen's Day, St John's Day, Innocents' Day, New Year, Twelfth Night and Candlemas.

Because so many Christmas songs were set to popular tunes, the same melody, or part of a melody was occasionally used for more than one carol. This means that a couple of the melodies found in "To Shorten Winter's Sadness" are repeated in this book (the tune of "Dulcina" and part of "Essex Last Goodnight" and of Gibbon's "Another for Christmas Day"). I have also given lyrics for a couple of other carols set to tunes in this book in the notes at the end.

Although all the words chosen come from British writers, I've had to use German sources for two of the carols in Wedderburn's "Gude and Godlie Ballatis" as no English versions survive from this time. I've also included John Bull's settings of the Dutch Carol "Een Kindeken is ons geboren" (Unto us a little child is born).

The Christmas season was a time when the wealthy opened their houses to poorer folk, and provided food for their workers throughout all the days of the holiday. The lyrics of several carols make it clear just how much these quantities of roast beef, pig, goose, plum pudding (or plum broth or porage) and minced pies, not to mention plenty of ale and sack, were appreciated!

The carol "Hey for Christmas" describes the sort of riotous revelry that accompanied these feast days. I've followed this with the tune of one of the dances that is mentioned in the ballad: "Kissum" - more usually known as "The Cushion Dance", and very much associated with Christmas sports.

Twelfth Night was a time for wassailing crops to help them grow, and of drinking from the wassail bowl, as seen in "Wassell, Wassell". Although the official end of Christmas was Candlemas, many people began to return to work after Twelfth Day, so the sentiments expressed in "A Carol for Twelfth-Day" were shared by many.

I've included two settings of the Nunc Dimittis for Candlemas which was the end of Christmas. The first comes from Gibbons and Wither's Hymns and Songs of the Church, while the second, with the words taken from Este's Psalter, is set (on Playford's advice) to the tune of Psalm 84 (in the Tenor line), better known to us now as the tune for "While shepherds watched their flocks"; this is a tune that had been in use for this psalm since the mid sixteenth century.

As an appendix, I've added a set of ballads about Christmas in the Seventeenth Century: "Christmas's Lamentation", complaining about the lack of charity being shown in the times; "The World Turned Upside Down", lamenting the abolition of Christmas under Oliver Cromwell; and three songs delighting in the return of Christmas after the abolition of the Rump Parliament and the coming of Charles II.

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2013