

To Shorten Winter's Sadness

English Music and Song for Christmas and Winter from the 16th and 17th Centuries

In the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Christmas was preceded by a fast that went from the beginning of Advent until Christmas Eve, followed by days of feasting and revelry, not only for Christmas itself, but also St Stephen's Day, St John's Day, Innocents' Day, New Year and the Feast of the Epiphany (Twelfth Night).

The days of Christmas were filled with feasting, music, dancing, rowdy games and other revelry, often overseen by the Lord of Misrule. It was a time of great hospitality, with landowners providing food for all their workers. At Court and in the great houses, plays and sumptuous masques would be performed. Many of Shakespeare's plays were first performed at this time of year.

In a cold season when little work could be done on the land, many labourers went as "mummers" from house to house bearing a bowl of wassail (hot spiced ale, sometimes also called "lambswool" if roasted apples were added) decorated with ribbons, garlands (and sometimes a golden apple), caroling, giving blessings and a drink of wassail in exchange for gifts of money or food.

Books of Christmas carols were printed throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These editions usually lack melodies to go with the words although the indication 'to the tune of' is sometimes printed at the top of the carol. The word "carol" probably comes from the medieval Latin "*carula*" which has interchangeable meanings of a round dance or a song and as such it is fitting that the biggest single source of melodies named for the carols in these books is the collection of dance tunes in Playford's "English Dancing Master" in its many editions.

Another source of Christmas songs is "Hymnes and Songs of the Church." Printed in 1623 with words by George Wither and melody and bass lines by Orlando Gibbons, this collection contains hymns and carols for all the major festivals of the Christian year.

Gifts were given on New Year's Day rather than at Christmas, and could be anything from ribbons, apples, sweetmeats, gloves and laces, to a piece of music written as a gift for a patron, to lengths of cloth or fine jewels. Incidentally, although 1st January was called 'New Year's Day', the New Year did not officially begin till the Feast of the Annunciation on 25th March.

For the feast of the Epiphany, a special cake containing a bean and a pea (sometimes dried, sometimes of metal) was served; whoever found these would be King of the Bean and Queen of the Pea for the evening.

Christmas was not considered to be truly over until the feast of Candlemas (2nd February) when candles were blessed in church and decorations such as holly, ivy, rosemary and bay were finally taken down.

Winter was a lean time, with long nights, very little fresh food and when most outdoor pursuits became impossible. On more than one occasion the River Thames froze over so severely that it was possible to roast an ox on the ice. "The Watermen's Song on the Thaw" describes a frost fair held on the Thames and rejoices at the melting of the ice.

I hope you enjoy this collection of music – I have had a great deal of pleasure putting it together.

Tamsin Lewis
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Playing Catches

When reading the catches, start with the top stave and read through to the end. Go back to the beginning and read the second stave, then the third. The catch works as a round, so when the first person has finished the first stave they move on the second, and the next person starts at the beginning.