The Carol and Its Context in Twentieth-century England

Cloria in excelsis deo, et in terra pax hominibus ("Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to all people"), Luke 2:14, was likely the first carol ever heard, sung by the angels over the fields of Bethlehem. It would be more than a millennium before the next documented account of carol singing. In this case, it happened in Greccio, Italy, where St. Francis made the first Christmas crèche (crib) in 1223, in response to the Manichaeism¹ of the eleventh and twelfth centuries—recreating the stable, even obtaining an ox and ass. People from around the village began to gather around St. Francis's biblical re-creation. As a result, the people "poured out their hearts in praises to God; and the friars sang new canticles..."²

The dawn of the Protestant Reformation brought carol singing—amongst a myriad of other activities—to an abrupt halt. The Reformation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries resulted in a fragmented church. The Lutherans viewed the feast of Christmas as a popish abuse. Since the Calvinist movement was quite popular, Christmas was consequently unpopular in England. Christmas Day was abolished by Parliament from 1644–1660; The Book of Common Prayer had no seasonal hymns. It was not until the Supplement to the New Version of the Psalms (1700) that interest in carols was rekindled. Only one Christmas hymn was included in the supplement: "While shepherds watched."

A brief history of the carol

Interestingly, Christmas thrived more in secular society than it did in the church during this time. One of the first examples of music printing in England is an anthology from c. 1530 that contained, among other things, carols by Ashwell, Cowper, Gwynneth, and Richard Pygott.³ Carols were primarily used in the home and private chapel. It wasn't until later that they became a part of the parish church. This is likely why carols from plays (the 'Coventry' carol, being one example) and carols for domestic use appear to be in constant use. Two domestic carols from *Poor Robin's Almanac* (1700) are as follows:

Now that the time has come wherein Our Saviour Christ was born, The larder's full of beef and pork, The garner's filled with corn.⁴

And we do hope before we part To taste some of your beer, Your beer, your Christmas

That seems to be so strong; And we do wish that Christmas-tide Was twenty times as long!⁵

For England, the eighteenth century was the "Golden Age of Hymnody" under Isaac Watts and the Wesleys. Hymns gained popularity over metrical psalms. The reason for the hymn's popularity was that the congregation could finally have a participating role in the worship service. Carols became increasingly hymn-like to fit the current trend.

By the nineteenth century, thanks to the efforts of the Methodists a century earlier, carols began finding their way into many ecumenical books like Hymns Ancient and Modern (1861), the first universally accepted hymn book of the Anglican Church. A renewed interest in the past, coupled with the Oxford Movement, provided the opportunity for John Mason Neale, an Anglo-Catholic cleric, to promote the ancient texts and music found in the Piae Cantiones (1582). The Victorian revival of the carol produced numerous new books, some devoted solely to the carol: Some Ancient Christmas Carols (1822), Carols for Christmas-tide (1853–54), and



Gustav Holst (early 1920s) in front of Queen's Hall (©Holst Birthplace Museum/ Cheltenham Art Gallery & Museum)

Christmas Carols New and Old (1871) being just a few examples.

From the *Piae Cantiones*, which itself contained medieval carols, to the Victorian carol books, twentieth-century composers could now build on the carol tradition that dated back hundreds of years. John Mason Neale, in his preface to *Carols for Christmas-tide*, described the method that twentieth-century English composers would also follow:

It is impossible at one stretch to produce a quantity of new carols, of which words and music shall alike be original. They must be the gradual accumulation of centuries; the offerings of different epochs, of different countries, of different minds, to the same treasury of the Church.§

The notion of carol singing was heightened significantly with the service of Nine Lessons and Carols. Originating at Truro Cathedral, Cornwall, on Christmas Eve (1880), the service retells in scripture and song the Redemption story of Christ—moving from the mystery and wonder of Advent to the miracle and joy of Christ's birth. The service was modified and introduced by Eric Milner-White, the newly appointed Dean of King's College, Cambridge, in 1918. It is this modified service that has been adopted by scores of parishes in England and abroad. Since its initial broadcast in 1928, the service of Nine Lessons and Carols has been heard by millions of people all over the world. An order for the service can be found in the back of Oxford's 100 Carols for Choirs. A look at this book also reveals a multitude of English composers who have made carol arrangements. Among the more well known are Holst, Britten, and Rutter.

Gustav Holst

It was the simplest of compositions by Gustav Holst (1874–1934) that would become one of his best-known: In the Bleak Midwinter (1905). Holst arranged the text by Christina Rosetti (1830–1894) while staying at a cottage in the Cotswold village of Cranham; it is also the reason why the tune is entitled Cranham. Just one year later, having gained significant popularity, his carol arrangement appeared in the English Hymnal (1906).

In the Bleak Midwinter is simplistic in the Eleak Midwinter is simplistic.

In the Bleak Midwinter is simplistic in that it is set like a standard four-part hymn: regular meter (4/4), homorhythmic, and functionally tonal harmonic motion. The choice of F major links Holst with the past, since F major was a common key in the Renaissance and Baroque eras for themes of a pastoral nature.

Four Old English Carols Organ Organ

A Babe Is Born (Four Old English Carols), Gustav Holst

One way of preserving several items of importance is to collect them. Choir partbooks and the multiple compilations of carol books have accomplished the art of preservation. Holst did something similar, but on a smaller scale, when he wrote *Christmas Day*, a choral fantasy on old carols with accompaniment for orchestra or organ

orchestra or organ.

Dedicated to the music students of Morley College, the work is a compilation of four well-known Christmas carols: "Good Christian Men Rejoice," "God Rest You Merry Gentlemen," "Come, Ye Lofty, Come, Ye Lowly," and "The First Noel." With the exception of two simultaneous carols occurring at the same time, the rest of the work is homorhythmic throughout.

same time, the rest of the work is nonorhythmic throughout.

Much like Vaughan Williams' Fantasia on Christmas Carols, this work by Holst opens with a soloist who sets the ambiance as if about to tell a story around a fire. The carols provide the form of the composition. Ascribing numbers to the carols—1) Good Christian Men Rejoice, 2) God Rest You Merry Gentlemen, 3) Come, Ye Loty, Come, Ye Lowly, 4) The First Noel—the form is 1, 2, 1, 3 and 4, 1, 2 and 4, and 1. True to rondo form, "Good Christian Men Rejoice" always appears in the tonic key, E-flat major. The simultaneous occurrence of two carols also provides unique contrast to the homorhythmic sections. The orchestral accompaniment is equally accessible, having many of the same attributes of the chorus parts, making it appropriate for amateur ensembles.

Like many English composers, Holst was influenced by folksong. In regard

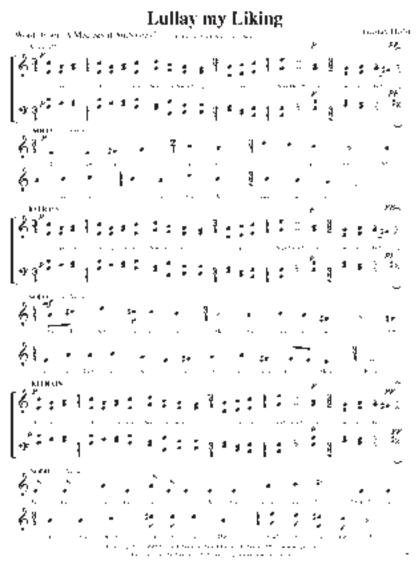
to carol settings and collecting them, it was his Four Old English Carols (1907), for mixed voices and piano, that embraced the "tender austerity" inherent in the songs of the English countryside. Although inspired by folksong, these tunes were of Holst's own creation. A Babe Is Born, Now Let Us Sing, Jesu, Thou the Virgin-Born, and The Saviour of the World Is Born make up this mini-collection.

The Saviour of the World Is Born make up this mini-collection.

The medieval text Jesu, Thou the Virgin-Born, the third carol from Four Old English Carols, was infused with plainsong and simple polyphony (largely homorhythmic). The use of both plainsong and polyphony in this particular work is not surprising, given the fact that Holst had been spending time copying Victoria and di Lasso motets for St. Paul's Girls' School.

As evidenced above, Holst seemed drawn to set multiple carols within one work. This mini-collection of carols is equally true in his *Three Carols* for unison chorus and 'ad lib.' orchestra. Holst was clearly thinking of the symbiotic relationship between music and people with this work. There are scarce examples of a significant choral work with orchestra that includes a unison chorus and an orchestra that can be made up of as many or few instruments as available ('ad lib.') and still be a viable work of art. "Holst was a conductor who allowed all genuine amateurs to play in his orchestra 'if humanly possible'." The three carols include the following: *Christmas Song: On This Day, I Saw Three Ships*, and *Masters in This Hall*.

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Lullay my Liking, Gustav Holst

There is one carol by Holst that does not exist in a set: Lullay my Liking for unaccompanied chorus. Like other carols, the text is medieval. Changing meters help accommodate natural text stress. With the exception of the chorus's fourth verse, the other verses are sung as a solo, and the choir answers with the re-frain "Lullay my liking, my dear Son..." This piece is also very accessible for an amateur chorus, as the refrain remains unchanged throughout the work.

Benjamin Britten

It was during the 1942 wartime months of March and April that Britten (1913–1976) wrote, while on board the ship that was taking him from America back home to England, A Ceremony of Carols. 12 Scored for treble voices—three parts to be exact—and harp, the work is powerful in its simplicity.

One aspect of simplicity is the accompaniment of a single instrument, the harp. One of the first instruments mentioned in the Bible, the harp has been the symbol of the psalmists, the heavenly host of angels, and serenity. Britten was planning on a harp concerto around this time; harp manuals were just a few of the books he had on his nautical voyage. However, despite the pleasurable sonorities from the harp that audiences have enjoyed for decades, this was not the case initially. "The use of the harp as an accompanying instrument in this context was considered radical at the first of text was considered radical at the time of

the première."¹³

The simplicity is also instantly audible from the first and last movement. Plainsong settings form the musical pillars to the eleven movements. Here, Britten chose *Hodie Christus natus est* from the Britten Christmas Eve Vespers to serve as a musical processional and recessional. The processional and recessional are both in A major, a key Bach often used for its Trinitarian symbolism in the key signature.

With such careful musical architecture, it is not surprising that the middle movement be solely devoted to the harp. In true pastoral fashion, the rhythm is a compound (12/8) meter. More interesting is the choice of key. Where the traditional pastoral key would be F major, Britten chooses the equidistant enharmonic equivalent, the tri-tone (C-flat major). The piece ends on the dominant F-flat, minus the third—a common me- $\,$ dieval device.

A final aspect of simplicity is the choice of voices and the way they are set. The sound of a child's voice, and their presence on stage, can create a sense of innocence and purity synonymous with simplicity. Musically, Britten was always careful when he wrote for children. Although the music often sounds complex, Britten generally used the technique of canon as a way to produce polyphony. What better way to produce the feeling of timelessness than with canon—where a melody could continue *ad infinitum* if need be? The most oft-performed extracted movement is *This Little Babe*, a perfect example of Britten's canonic writing for children's voices.



Benjamin Britten, skiing holiday, early 1960s (© Britten-Pears Foundation)

John Rutter

Perhaps the most frequently performed carol arrangements are those of John Rutter. Born in London in 1945, Rutter is arguably the most prolific and published composer of carols in the twentieth century, not only in England but also around the world. In Oxford's 100 Carols for Choirs, nearly thirty carols are by him. There are simply far too many carols by Rutter to discuss here. However, some examples show his connection to the past while writing in a modern romantic language.

"Joy to the World" is one of the most common carols in the Western hemisphere. Rutter could not have chosen a carol with more links to England's past than this one. The text is by Isaac Watts (1674–1748) and the original tune by Lowell Mason (1792–1872). Rutter modeled the accompaniment for the carol from the orchestral writing of Handel. Complete with descant, the Handelian orchestration to Lowell Mason's tune on John Wesley's text is one of Oxford University Press's most rented carols during the Christmas season.

Rutter wrote several other carols for chorus with orchestra or organ: Wexford Carol, Jesus Child, Donkey Carol, Angel's Carol, Nativity Carol, Star Carol, Candlelight Carol, Shepherd's Pipe Carol, and others. It is arrangements like Candlelight Carol, which can be classified as both a carol and an anthem, that have made Rutter a wealthy man. They contain the qualities necessary for any carol—a verse followed by a refrain, or burden.

In addition, the melodies and their respective accompaniments tend to be very sweet-sounding and melodious.



John Rutter (© Oxford University Press)

It is this latter trait that has brought Rutter fame and fortune. In this music one can hear the influence of Faurélike orchestration, Vaughan Williams-inspired melodies, and the often-used flattened seventh that is so common in popular music.

Many of the above-listed carols are

Rutter originals. As in *Shepherd's Pipe Carol*, for example, both the music and the text are by Rutter. The same is true of Jesus Child, Donkey Carol, Angel's Carol, Nativity Carol, Star Carol, and Candlelight Carol. Of the composers discussed thus far, none wrote as many original texts and tunes as Rutter. His contributions to the carol genre alone have brought significant attention to the choral world.

Herbert Howells

No discussion of the English carol would seem complete without mentioning *A Spotless Rose* by Herbert Howells (1892–1983). Herbert Howells wrote the

After idly watching some shunting from the window of a cottage...in Gloucester which overlooked the Midland Railway. In an upstairs room I looked out on iron railings and the main Bristol-Gloucester railway line, with shunting trucks bumping and banging. I wrote it for and dedicated it to my Mother—it always moves me when I hear it, just as if it were written by someone else. 14

With its parallel thirds and fourths, the piece evokes a sort of impressionistic quality. The irregular meters (3/4, 7/8, 5/4, 5/8, etc.) give the piece a fluidity of plainsong-like phrases not found in other carols. The fourteenth-century text also



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Herbert Howells (Reproduced by kind permission of the Herbert Howells Society)

provides a subtly respectful timelessness to the piece. A $Spotless\ Rose$ is mostly in four parts except at cadences where it breaks into five or, in the case of the final cadence, six parts. It is this final cadence that was much beloved by Vaughan Williams and Patrick Hadley. Since the work's creation (1919), Howells received a postcard every Christmas thereafter from Patrick Hadley that contained the cadence and these words, "Oh Herbert! That cadence!" ¹⁵

Summary

Holst, Britten, and Rutter represent the carol in their own unique way. Each had a distinct musical vocabulary that can be heard in their music. Some used the traditional approach of setting plainsong to their own time. Others, especially Rut-ter, have set melodies that are distinctly their own. Nearly every composer, it would seem, has taken a traditional carol and adapted a "modern" accompaniment to the otherwise traditional melody.

In terms of texts, it would be difficult to find an English composer who never set an already established text. From these examples, it is clear that the medieval carol is among the more popular. Rutter, although there are others not listed here, chose to write melodies and accompaniments to his own texts

Carols functioned as a social outlet, as *Poor Robin's Almanac* illustrates. Interestingly enough, although mention is made of Jesus, plenty is also made of food and drink. Like folksong, carols were for the people. It is for this reason that they continued to exist outside church walls.



Ralph Vaughan Williams (© The Vaughan

Carols were also devotional. For those Carols were also devotional. For those who had their own private chapel, one could find them being sung there. In the parish church, it would take the efforts of the Victorians to regiment them as part of the liturgical service. It would not be until 1918 that the entire world would be until 1918 that the entire world would be affected by the Nine Lessons and Carols service at King's College, Cambridge, which is perhaps the most influential rea-

son for the popularity of the carol today.

Besides being both social and devotional, carols have served as sparkling gems in choral concerts. Carols are "art music." Like many things throughout history, it is the way in which something is used that gives it definition. It does not seem out of place when a carol is sung in a secular location or by a secular ensemble. They exist for the betterment of music as a whole. Therefore, in the case the carol would be more closely listed with the aggid classification. linked with the social classification. As a result, the carol is one of those enigmatic genres that exist both liturgically and secularly—neither side taking issue with the other.

The main reason why the carol can dually exist is its simplicity. There is nothing to muddy the waters and create controversy, even when the subject matter is based on religious/biblical themes. Composers throughout the twentieth century in England managed to evoke their own voice while remaining true to the inherent simplistic quality of the carol.

Holst's simplicity came as a result of the element crucial to the carol: the people. He wrote for them. Simple melodies, textures, and accompaniments

meant that nearly every amateur could be an integral part of the carol tradition. Through simplicity of text, voicing, and accompaniment, Britten created his own form of simplicity. Rutter's simplicity is in the way the music sounds. It is so very easy to listen to (the same can-not necessarily be said about singing or playing them!).

Following the Victorian rediscovery (and regimentation) of the English carol dating from the Middle Ages, the carol tradition in England remained strong and thrived under several great composers: Holst, Britten, and Rutter among the more well-known. Through their carols, they presented the carol through use of traditional qualities (plainsong, medieval texts, and the like) while infusing their own musical language, aligning them-selves in the great carol tradition. With the carol's multiple characteristics, it was and remains an enigmatic genre that is social, devotional, and art music, sepa-rately and all in one. With the inception of what is perhaps the greatest advocate of the carol, the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols, English composers have provided the means for the carol genre to thrive, all over the world, for centuries and millennia to come.

Notes

1. "Manichaeism is the largest and most important example of Gnosticism. Central in the Manichaean teaching was dualism, that the world itself, and all creatures, was part of a battle between the good, represented by God, and the bad, the darkness, represented by a power driven by envy and lust. These two powers were independent from each other, but in the world they were mixed. Most human beings were built from material from the bad power, but in everyone there was a divine light, which needed to be released from the dark material of the body. In Manichaeism creation is regarded as a cosmic catastrophe, this even applies to man" http://i-cias.com/e.o/manichae.htm. (Thursday, August 18, 2005). As a result, Manichaeism denied the Virgin Birth, which is in direct opposition to the doctrine of the Incarnation. Manichaeism died out by the fourteenth century.

2. William J. Phillips, Carols: Their Origin, Music, and Connection with Mystery-Plays (London: Geo. Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1921), 3.

3. Richard Long, The Music of the English Church (London: Hodder and Stoughton)

3. Richard Long, *The Music of the English Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 26–27.

1972), 26–27.

4. Phillips, Carols, 118.
5. Ibid., 119.
6. Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott, eds., The New Oxford Book of Carols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), xx.
7. The Oxford Movement gave rise to the "Anglo-Catholics," who reintroduced the practice of vestments, surplices, genuflexion, use of holy water, and other "high-church" rituals.
8. Keyte and Parrott, xxi.

8. Keyte and Parrott, xxi.
9. The cottage now bears the name "Midwinter Cottage

Tradition

und Fortschritt

10. Imogen Holst, *The Music of Gustav Holst and Holst's Music Revisited*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 14. 11. Ibid., 45.
12. Britten also wrote the *Hymn to St. Ceci*-

12. Britten also wrote the Hymn to St. Cecilia during this five-week voyage.

13. Mervyn Cooke, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Britten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 281.

14. Paul Spicer, Herbert Howells (Bridgend, Wales: Poetry Wales Press Ltd, 1998), 67.

15. Christopher Palmer, Herbert Howells (Kent: Novello, 1978), 74.

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In addition to degrees in choral conducting, Vogt worked on a doctorate in organ at the University of Iowa, holds a diploma in organ from the Haarlem Internationale Zomeracademie voor Organisten (The Netherlands) and a master's degree in organ from SMU. He has given solo recitals at the National Cathedral (Washington, D.C.), St. Philip's Cathedral (Atlanta), and Fourth Presbyterian Church (Chicago), and has performed for the American Guild of Organists' education video series.

Dr. Vogt has served on the faculty for the Leadership Program for Musicians serving small congregations, and as the American Choral Directors Association's Repertoire and Standards Chair for Music and Worship for the state of Iowa. He is currently Department Chair and Director of Choral Activities at Mount Marty College in Yankton, South Dakota.

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