

Joyous strains of Christmas carols fill the Dec. air

What could sound sweeter than a chorus of voices singing hymns in perfect harmony? That same chorus of voices singing Christmas carols from a church choir or a snow-covered street corner.

The heavenly strains of carols awaken ears to the simple beauty of the Christmas celebration and, in no time at all, invite all within earshot to join in and sing.

The word, carol, derives from the Greek and Latin words for "chorus." It was used in the middle ages to describe a ring dance or song, which was generally sung among a group of persons, either seated or standing in a circle. At some later time in history, the word became synonymous with Christmas and songs of wonder.

Different from hymns

The Christmas carol—quite different from the traditional church hymn, which was always sung in Latin—originated as the song of the Nativity, sung in the vernacular and understood by all.

While many of the present-day Christmas customs originated with ancient cultures' forms of worship, it was not

until the second half of the 19th century that Christmas carols met with general acceptance in both Europe and North America.

When, in 1868, Bishop Philip Brooks was rector of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Philadelphia, he was asked by his Sunday school pupils to compose a Christmas hymn. It has since become the earliest popular carol composed by an American:

*O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark sky shineth
The everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

*For Christ is born of Mary;
And, gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondrous love.*

*O morning stars, together
Proclaim the holy birth!
And praises sing to God, the King,
And peace to men on earth.*



"OH, COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL . . ." The joyous strains of Christmas carols can be heard in churches or on street corners during the holiday season. While it is said that St. Francis of Assisi was the first to sing Christmas carols in the 13th century, carolling did not become popular until the mid-19th century in England. Here, choir boys at Winchester Cathedral. Courtesy of the British Tourist Authority.

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