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Christmas Songs: Why That Tune?

Abstract

"What is it about some of the Christmas golden oldies that evoke such warm feelings of home and holiday?"

Posting about the rich tunes of Christmas music from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/christmas-songs-why-that-tune/>

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in things

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Christmas Songs: Why That Tune?

Karen A. DeMol

What is it about some of the Christmas golden oldies that evoke such warm feelings of home and holiday?

Consider “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire,” “I’ll be Home for Christmas,” “Silver Bells,” “Let it Snow,” and others. For one thing, the texts drip with real or imagined Christmas imagery and experiences—even experiences we have never had but which we feel are quintessential Christmas—nostalgia for something that is now gone or never was. For instance, those chestnuts—I have never roasted a chestnut. But the opening line of that song, with its leisurely octave leap, sung by Nat King Cole’s mellow voice, conjures up images of cozy evenings with friends near a fire and yes, those roasting chestnuts as a celebratory “must-have.” “I’ll be Home for Christmas” is more poignant, with its melancholy suggestion that I might be there only in my dreams. “Silver Bells” is a city song: city sidewalks, strings of street lights, happy shoppers, and over all, the silver bells; why would rural folks long for that?

Musically, the songs that carry nostalgia are those with easy melodies, warm instrumental colors (such as strings), and mellow vocal tone. Textually, they thrive on association: the memories or images of sights, sounds, and experiences associated with the Christmas holidays.

Meaning by association is certainly one way in which music carries meaning. Sometimes the associations are personal. For example, a song has meaning for us because it was “our song” during our courtship or played at our wedding.

However, more often, associations are not individual but are generally held; the writers of the Christmas songs above are assuming that we all associate bells, snow, carolers, wide-eyed children, and mistletoe with Christmas.

Sometimes associations with a tune are difficult and make it unusable. Haydn's beautiful melody entitled "Austrian Hymn" was taken over by the Nazis for the text "*Deutschland, Uber Alles*" ("Germany Over All"), rendering it unusable by anyone knowing the Holocaust. As that association fades, it may become possible to sing it again, with the setting of Psalm 87 known as "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken."

But sometimes—and richly—tunes with associations are intentionally and powerfully chosen to underline or expand the meaning of the text. A tune with a well-known text, used in a different context or with a different text, can enrich the new context by its associations. Consider Bach's choice of tune for the congregational response within his "Christmas Cantata": in this jubilant cantata, which begins "Christians, be joyful!" the story of the birth of Jesus is proclaimed with solos, choral movements, bright brass, and strong strings; the congregation responds with wonder, "How shall I fitly greet thee?" The tune for that response is not a new, "up-beat," joyful tune, but the somber tune of "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded." Through the music, Bach reminds us of the purpose of Christ's coming which is to be a sacrifice on our behalf.

In the relatively new *Psalms for All Seasons*, tunes with Christmas associations have been used for Psalm-settings with references to the coming of the King. Psalm 96 refers to the advent or coming of God to rule in righteousness. One of the tune options (96F) uses the tune of "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming." Another, Psalm 122, is designated for lectionary readings during Advent (Year A); one of the tune options (122F) is the tune of "Sussex Carol," commonly sung with the text "On Christmas night all Christians sing to hear the news the angels bring" (*Lift Up Your Hearts* 89). Another tune option for Psalm 122 is "Forest Green" (122A), one of the tunes used for the text of "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

Joining tunes to associations with Psalm texts is not limited to Psalms with Christmas implications. Psalm 19, that great ode to God's creation, has been set to a melody from Haydn's magnificent *Creation*, which tells the story of creation and rejoices in it (*Psalms for All Seasons* 19B). One of the tune options for Psalm 38, an anguished lament of the crushing burden of sin and its effects, is

“Chickahominy,” a tune associated with “Ride on, Ride on in Majesty,” a text about Jesus’ journey to the cross (*Psalms for All Seasons* 38A). A tune option for Psalm 65, a Psalm celebrating God’s care of the world and its abundance, is “St. George’s Windsor,” associated with thanksgiving for harvest (“Come, you thankful people, come; raise the song of harvest home”) (*Psalms for All Seasons* 65E). And a tune option for Psalm 126, which speaks of the Israelites being brought back from exile, is the plaintive American folk tune, “I am a poor wayfaring stranger” (*Psalms for All Seasons* 126A).

When encountering these songs in worship, we could casually note the new use of the tune as interesting. Better, we are encouraged to ponder the connections between text and tune to deepen our wonder and our worship.