

We have been threatening to put together a Christmas album for a ridiculous number of years, but when I was moved to write "The Gifts of Midwinter" the project became real. A further ridiculous number of years have passed, but quality takes time. (That's our story, and we're sticking to it.)

Since then we have set out to find songs you don't hear on EVERY Christmas album, though we couldn't resist putting our stamp on a couple of personal favorites. So here they are, from the sacred to the secular, from medieval to modern. Good Yule and Merry Christmas.

Note: all italicized editor's notes are by me, Lisa Theriot. All translations are my own (I have trust issues!).

Gaudete

Words and Music (chorus, 4parts): *Piae Cantiones*. 1582
Music (verses): *Isrebnice Cantional*. 1420 (1)

I once heard a fighter say that he had been really inspired before a battle because the army was singing together in Latin. Horribly, they were singing this song, the chorus of which translates as "Rejoice, for Christ is born of the Virgin Mary!" I'm a little alarmed that they headed off to shed metaphorical blood singing this song, but I suppose it's quite the medieval attitude. There is no music for the verses in the *Piae Cantiones*; the verse melody is usually given as from the Bohemian collection referenced above; however, since I have seen at least three different verse melodies all claim the same source, I remain in doubt until the Czech National Library sees fit to web the collection.

Chorus: Gaudete! Gaudete! Christum est natus
Ex Maria Virgine, Gaudete! (repeat)

Tempus adest gratia,
Hoc quod optabamus;
Carmina laticia
Devote reddamus.

Deus homo factus est,
Natura mirante;
Mundus renovatus est,
A Christo regnante.

Ezechielis porta
Clausa pertransitur;
Unde lux est orta,
Salus invenitur.

Ergo nostra concio
Psallat iam in lustro;
Benedicat Domino:
Salus Regi nostro.

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If your Latin isn't what it should be, the verses are as follows:

The time of grace comes
That for which we have wished
With songs of joy
We the faithful return (God's) love

God is made man
By this wonderful birth
The world is renewed
By Christ who reigns

Ezekiel's gate
Closed, is passed through
Whence light issues from the east
And life is found

Therefore we shall raise
Music now encircling,
Praising the Lord:
Life to our King

Marmion's Christmas Song

Adapted from "Marmion", 1808, by Sir Walter Scott

"Marmion" is an epic poem by Sir Walter Scott set around the time of the Battle of Flodden Field (1513). In the middle, there is a totally unrelated description of a jolly Christmas party. I moved a few bits around and decided that it goes well with the melody from "The Sussex Carol," which begins, "On Christmas Night all Christians sing..."

On Christmas Eve the bells are rung
On Christmas Eve the mass is sung
The damsel dons her kirtle sheen;
The hall is dress'd with holly green;
Forth to the wood the merry-men go,
All to gather the mistletoe.

Then opens wide the Baron's hall
To vassal, tenant, serf, and all;
Power lays his rod aside,
And Ceremony doffs his pride.
And to the cottage, as the crown,
Comes good news of salvation down.

The fire, with well-dried logs supplied,
Goes roaring up the chimney wide:
The wassail round, in good brown bowls,
Bedecked with ribbons, blithely trowls.
So mix sobriety with wine,
And good cheer with thoughts divine

Then come the merry maskers in,
And carols roar with blithesome din;
If unmelodious the song,
It is a hearty note, and strong.
Listen, and in their mumming see
Traces of ancient mystery.

And so to merry England then
Old Christmas brings his sport again.
At Christmas broach the mightiest ale;
At Christmas tell the merriest tale;
Let chill winds whistle as they will,
We'll keep our Christmas merry still.

Words by Sir Walter Scott
From the introduction to Canto VI of "Marmion,"
Dedicated to Richard Heber, Esquire,
and set at "Mertoun House, Christmas."
Music, traditional, to "The Sussex Carol," melody
collected from tradition in 1919 by R.V. Williams
(the original lyric for the Sussex Carol was published in
Ghent in 1684 in a collection called "Small Garland of Pious
and Godly Songs.")

Adapted and arranged by Lisa Theriot
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Cantique de Noël

(Minuit, Chrétiens)

The original French is far superior to the English translation of "O Holy Night." The English version fails to capture the emotional transition of the Midnight (Minuit) Mass from awestruck to joyous. The first chorus asks the people to kneel in homage, but the second tells them to stand up and sing for joy at their salvation.

Minuit, Chrétiens, c'est l'heure solennelle,
Où l'Homme-Dieu descendit jusqu'à nous
Pour effacer la tache originelle
Et de Son Père arrêter le courroux.
Le monde entier tressaille d'espérance
En cette nuit qui lui donne un Sauveur.

Peuple à genoux, attends ta délivrance.
Noël, Noël, voici le Rédempteur,
Noël, Noël, voici le Rédempteur!

Le Rédempteur a brisé toute entrave:
La terre est libre, et le ciel est ouvert.
Il voit un frère où n'était qu'un esclave,
L'amour unit ceux qu'enchaînait le fer.
Qui Lui dira notre reconnaissance,
C'est pour nous tous qu'il naît, qu'il souffre et meurt.

Peuple debout! Chante ta délivrance,
Noël, Noël, chantons le Rédempteur,
Noël, Noël, chantons le Rédempteur!

Words by Placide Cappeau (1808-1877)
Music by Adolphe Adam (1803-1856)
Arranged by Lisa Theriot
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And if your French isn't what it should be...

Midnight, Christians, it is the solemn hour
That God-made-man descended among us
To erase original sin
And of His Father end the wrath

The whole world trembles with hope
In this night which gives us a savior

People on your knees, await your deliverance
Noël, Noël, here is your Redeemer
Noël, Noël, here is your Redeemer

The Redeemer has broken our bonds
The earth is free, and Heaven is open
One now sees a brother where there was a slave
Love unites those once bound in chains of iron
Who will tell him of our gratitude
It is for us all that he was born, that he suffered and died

People, arise! Sing of your deliverance!
Noël, Noël, sing of your Redeemer
Noël, Noël, sing of your Redeemer

Do You Hear What I Hear?

This is a favorite of mine and of several close friends, so as much as we tried to avoid modern Christmas songs, we had to make an exception for this one. Ken was happier about it when I told him what I wanted for the drums...

Said the night wind to the little lamb
Do you see what I see?
Way up in the sky, little lamb
Do you see what I see?
A star, a star, dancing in the night
With a tail as big as a kite
With a tail as big as a kite.

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy
Do you hear what I hear?
Ringling through the sky, shepherd boy
Do you hear what I hear?
A song, a song, high above the tree
With a voice as big as the sea
With a voice as big as the sea.

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty King
Do you know what I know?
In your palace warm, mighty King
Do you know what I know?
A child, a child, shivers in the cold
Let us bring him silver and gold
Let us bring him silver and gold.

Said the King to the people everywhere
Listen to what I say!
Pray for peace, people everywhere
Listen to what I say!
The child, the child, sleeping in the night
He will bring us goodness and light
He will bring us goodness and light.

Words and music by Noel Regney and Gloria Shayne
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How Far to Bethlehem?

I learned this song for a Christmas pageant when I was in the 4th grade, which doesn't quite make it traditional. O.o The words are by Frances Chesterton, wife of author G.K. Chesterton, but are most often sung to a traditional tune known as "Stowey," not this, the tune I was taught. I have combed books and the web looking for the provenance of this lovely minor melody, to no avail. If you know it, please tell me!

How far to Bethlehem? Not very far.
Shall we find the stable room lit by a star?
Can we see the little child? Is he within?
If we lift the wooden latch, may we go in?

May we stroke the creatures there,
Oxen and sheep?
May we watch like them and see Jesus asleep?
If we touch his tiny hand, will he awake?
Will he know we've come so far just for his sake?

Great kings have precious gifts,
And we have nought,
Little smiles and little tears are all we've brought.
For all weary little children Mary must weep.
Here, upon his bed of straw,
Sleep, children, sleep.

Words by Frances Chesterton (1875-1938)
Music, provenance unknown
Arranged by Lisa Theriot
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Riu, Riu, Chiu Villancicos de Navidad, from Cancionero de Upsala, 1556

It's a little sad that I could only interest my husband in doing this not only documentably medieval but totally rocking song after I played the Monkees' arrangement for him on YouTube. Sigh. Whatever works. "Riu Riu chiu" is onomatopoeia for the song of a nightingale (think "tweet, tweet"). Yes, that's nightingale song at the beginning.

Chorus: Riu riu chiu, la guarda ribera;
Dios guardo el lobo de nuestra cordera,
Dios guardo el lobo de neustra cordera.

El lobo rabioso la quiso morder,
Mas Dios poderoso la supo defender;
Quiso la hacer que no pudiese pecar,
Ni a'un original esta Virgen no tuviera.

Este qu'es nacido es el gran monarca,
Christo patriarca, de carne vestido;
Hanos redimido con se hacer chiquito,
Aunqu'era infinito, finito se hiziera.

Mira bien que os quadre que ansina lo oyera,
Que Dios no pudiera hacer la mas madre,
El quera su padre hoy della nascio
Y el que la crio su hijo se dixera.

words and music by Mateo Flecha el Viejo (1481-1553)
(aka Mateu Fletxa el Vell in Catalan)
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Translation, anyone?

*<tweet tweet>, the river keeps it (the nightingale)
As God from the wolf keeps our lamb*

*The rabid wolf wants to bite her
But God the powerful knows how to defend her
He wanted to make her unable to sin
Nor did original sin this virgin have*

*He who is born is a great king
Christ, our father clothed in flesh
We have redemption from this tiny creation
Though infinite, finite he was made*

*Mark well the rightness of what you have heard
That God could not make her more a mother
He that is her father is today of her born
He of whom she is the offspring is called her son*

Cully, Culley (The Corpus Christi Carol) Hill Manuscript, circa 1500

Though it developed into the Christmas Carol "Down in Yon Forest" this carol was originally from the Feast of Corpus Christi. We learned the tune from Archie Fisher, who got it from Robin Hall, who...

Chorus: Lully, lulley, lully, lulley!
The falcon hath borne my make away.

He bare him up, he bare him down,
He bare him into an orchard brown.

In that orchard there was an hall
That was hangèd with purple and pall.

And in that hall there was a bed
It was hangèd with gold so red.

And in that bed there lieth a knight
His wounds bleeding day and night.

By that bed there kneels a may
And she weeps both night and day.

And by that bed there stands a stone
'Corpus Christi' writ thereon.

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Drink to the Holly Berry

I wanted a wassailing song on the album, and when we looked at all the ones we knew, Ken said, "Why don't we write one?" So we did. Hey, we're musicians—we know how to beg for booze.

Chorus: Drink to the holly berry,
With a hey down, hoe down derry!
Just bring us ale, and good wassail,
And we shall all be merry.

Good Master, good mistress, and all of your kin,
We come bringing good Christmas cheer;
We'll sing you a song
And it won't be too long
The least you can spare is some beer.

Please give us a moment before we begin,
Refreshment is all that we need;
A bowl is the thing
And the better we'll sing
The least you can spare is some mead.

But open and let we poor carolers in
To stand at your table so fine
The night it is cold
And we won't ask for gold
The least you can spare is some wine.

Remember that charity keeps you from sin;
The Lord sees the good that you do!
And when we're all rich
And you live in a ditch
We'll happily share ours with you!

Words by Lisa Theriot
Music by Ken Theriot
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Note: The chorus is based on a traditional refrain:

*Drink to the holly berry
With a hey down, hey down derry
The mistletoe we'll pledge also
And at Christmas all be merry.*

Noël Nouvelet 15th century

The book in which I found this song dates it as "1483 (?)". Isn't that like saying it's approximately 2:37? How can you be that specific and unsure at the same time? Oddly, modern editions of this song use the opening line as the refrain, which is just dumb, because the third lines all end in <-et>, which rhymes with "nouvelet" but not with "ici."

Noël nouvelet, Noël chantons ici
Nouvelle gent, rendons à Dieu merci
Chantons Noël pour le roi nouvelet
Noël, Noël, o Noël nouvelet!

Quand je m'éveillai et j'eus assez dormi
Ouvris les yeux, vis un arbre fleuri
Dont il sortait un bouton merveilleux
Noël, Noël, o Noël nouvelet!

Quand je le vis, mon cœur fut réjoui
Car sa grand beauté resplendissait en lui
Comme un soleil qui lève au matin
Noël, Noël, o Noël nouvelet!

D'un oiselet après le chant oui
Qui aux pasteurs disait: Partez d'ici
En Bethléhem trouverent l'agnelet
Noël, Noël, o Noël nouvelet!

En Bethléhem Marie et Joseph vit
L'âne et le boeuf, l'enfant couché au lit
La crèche était au lieu d'un bercelet
Noël, Noël, o Noël nouvelet!

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Again, for the francophonically challenged:

*A carol for the newborn, a carol we sing here
People newly blessed give thanks to God
We sing a carol for the newborn king
A carol, a carol, a carol for the newborn!*

*When I arise and have had my sleep
I open my eyes and see a flowering tree
From which springs a marvelous bud...*

*When I see this, my heart delights
Because of the great beauty shining in him
Like a sun that rises in the dawn...*

*There is a little bird that then sings, "Aye"
And to the shepherds, "Leave here!"
In Bethlehem they will find the little Lamb...*

*In Bethlehem Mary and Joseph are living
With the ass and the ox the baby is bedded down
His crib in place of the manger...*

This Endris Night 15th c. Manuscript sources

The Oxford Book of Carols notes, "Was not new when it was written out in the Bodleian MS., Eng. Poet., e. 1, which is dated between 1480 and 1490." "This endris night" is roughly "the other night." Even divine babies want to be rocked by their mother.

This endris night I saw a sight
A star as bright as day;
And there among a maiden sung,
"Lullay, by by, lullay."

This lovely lady sat and sung,
And to her child did say:
"My Son, my Brother, Father dear,
Why liest thou thus in hay?"

My sweetest bird, thus 'tis required,
Though Thou be King veray;
But nonetheless I will not cease
To sing, By by, lullay."

The Child then spake in his talking,
And to his mother said:
"Yea, I am known as Heaven-King,
In crib though I be laid.

"For angels bright down to Me light:
Thou knowest 'tis no nay:
And for that sight thou may'st delight
To sing, By by, lullay."

"Now, sweet Son, since Thou art a king,
Why art Thou laid in stall?
Why dost not order thy bedding
In some great king's hall?"

"Methinks 'tis right that king or knight
Should lie in good array:
And then among, it were no wrong
To sing, By by, lullay."

"Mary mother, I am thy Child,
Though I be laid in stall;
For lords and dukes shall worship Me,
And so shall king's all.

"Ye shall well see that king's three
Shall come on this twelfth day.
For this behest give Me thy breast
And sing, By by, lullay."

"Now tell, sweet Son, I Thee do pray,
Thou art my Love and Dear—
How should I keep Thee to Thy pay,
And make Thee glad of cheer?"

"My dear mother, thou hold Me warm,
And keep Me night and day,
And if I weep, and may not sleep,
Thou sing, By by, lullay."

"Now sweet Son, since it is come so,
That all is at Thy will,
I pray Thee grant to me a boon,
If it be right and skill,

"That child or man, who will or can
Be merry on my day,
To bliss Thou bring—and I shall sing,
Lullay, by by, lullay."

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La Marche Des Rois (March of the Kings, Marcho Del Rèl) 15th c.

*The original Occitan (Provençal) lyrics for this carol are attributed to René, Comte d'Anjou et de Provence, Duke of Lorraine and King of Sicily (1408-80), or King René of "the Book of Love" fame. The French translation is attributed to Joseph Domergue, a French curate (d. 1729). The melody was either written or adapted from a previously existing dance tune by Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687) as the "Marche de Turenne" for Visconte Henri de Turenne (1611-1675). Bizet "borrowed" the melody for his *l'Arlésienne Suite* (1872), and the changes Bizet made have been incorporated back into the carol's tune.*

De matin j'ai rencontré le train
De trois grands Rois qui allaient en voyage,
De matin j'ai rencontré le train
De trois grands Rois dessus le grand chemin.
Venaient d'abord des gardes du corps,
Des gens armés avec trente petits pages,
Venaient d'abord des gardes du corps
Des gens armés dessus leurs juste-au-corps.

Puis sur un char, parmi les étendards
Venaient trois rois modestes comme d'anges,
Puis sur un char, parmi les étendards,
C'est Melchior, Balthazar et Gaspard.
L'étoile luit qui les Rois conduit
Par longs chemins devant une pauvre étable,
L'étoile luit qui les Rois conduit
Par longs chemins devant l'humble réduit.

Au fils de Dieu qui est né en ces lieux
Ils viennent tous présenter leurs hommages,
Au fils de Dieu qui est né en ces lieux
Ils viennent tous présenter leurs doux voeux.
Or, myrrhe, encens sont les beaux présents
Qu'ils ont porté à cet Enfant adorable
Or, myrrhe, encens sont les beaux présents
Qu'ils ont porté à ce divin Enfant.

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In case you're interested, the Occitan lyrics begin:

*De matin ai rescountra lou trin
De tres grand rei qu'anavon en viagi.*

Et en Anglais:

*One morning I met the procession
Of three great kings who were going on a journey
One morning I met the procession
Of three great kings upon the high road
First came the honor guard
Armed men with thirty little pages
First came the honor guard
Armed men in their livery*

*Upon a chariot, among the banners,
Came three kings, modest like the angels
Upon a chariot, among the banners
Were Melchior, Balthazar, and Gaspard.
The star led these kings
By long roads unto a poor stable
The star led these kings
By long roads unto the humble place.*

*To the son of God who was born in this place
They came to present their homage
To the son of God who was born in this place
They came to present their good wishes
Gold, myrrh, frankincense are the fair gifts
Which they have carried to the adorable child
Gold, myrrh, frankincense are the fair gifts
Which they have carried to the divine child.*

Puer Natus (A Child Is Born) 'Ein Kind Geborn', Psalmody, 1553

Thanks to the ideals of Martin Luther, who believed people should know what they were praying and singing, this song was translated into German from Latin plainchant. This is my English translation. I also picked the tempo WAY up; call me crazy, but when the lyric says "Rejoice!" I just can't imagine it's meant to be ponderously slow.

Puer natus in Bethlehem, alleluia
Unde gaudet Jerusalem, alleluia, alleluia.

A child is born in Bethlehem, alleluia
And so rejoice Jerusalem, alleluia, alleluia.

He lies here where the beasts are penned, alleluia
Whose reign shall never have an end, alleluia, alleluia.

By ox and ass he is adored, alleluia
They know him as our sovereign Lord, alleluia, alleluia.

Arab kings come journeying, alleluia
Sweet incense, gold, and myrrh they bring, alleluia, alleluia.

They enter in, each one in turn, alleluia
To hail the princeling newly born, alleluia, alleluia.

From virgin mother he began, alleluia
Begotten by no mortal man, alleluia, alleluia.

His flesh and ours the very same, alleluia
Yet sinless to the world he came, alleluia, alleluia.

All to restore humanity, alleluia
To dwell with God in amity, alleluia, alleluia.

In joy for such a blessed birth, alleluia
Now bless the Lord all ye on Earth, alleluia, alleluia.

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The Boar's Head Carol

*Words: T.F. Dibdin's Typographical Antiquities, 1812
(based on Jan van Wynken's Christmisse Carolles, 1521)
Music: traditional, Queen's College, Oxford*

This carol always reminds me of a certain Drachenwald feast where a boar's head was served to the Prince and the herald loudly declared "His Highness has the head of a pig!"

The Boar's Head in hand bear I,
Bedecked with bays and rosemary;
And I pray you, my masters, be merry,
Quot estis in convivio:

Chorus: Caput apri defero;
Reddens laudes Domino.

The Boar's Head, as I understand,
Is the rarest dish in all the land,
Which thus bedecked with a gay garland
Let us servire cantico:

Our steward hath provided this
In honor of the King of Bliss,
Which on this day to be served is
In Reginensi atrio:

Words and music traditional,
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The chorus says:

*We offer you the head of a boar
Give praise to the Lord!*

The other Latin lines are, respectively:

*Everyone at the feast declare
(Let us) serve singing
In the Queen's hall*

Personent hodie

*Words: Piae Cantiones, 1582
Music: Moosburg Manuscript, 1360*

This song is an unusual sacred-Latin-to-sacred-Latin "filk" or contrafactum. The underlying song is a 12th century hymn to Saint Nicholas (beginning, "Intonent hodie, voces ecclesiae...") which was at some point converted to this far more popular song traditionally associated with the Feast of the Holy Innocents.

Personent hodie
Voces puerulae
Laudantes iucunde
Qui nobis est natus,
Summo Deo datus,
Et de vir, vir, vir,
Et de virgineo ventre procreatus.

In mundo nascitur,
Pannis involvitur,
Praesepi ponitur
Stabulo brutorum,
Rector supernorum,
Perdedit, dit, dit,
Perdidit spolia princeps inferorum.

Magi tres venerunt,
Munera offerunt, *
Parvulum inquirunt,
Stellulam sequendo,
Ipsam adorando,
Aurum, thus, thus, thus,
Aurum, thus, et myrrham ei offerendo.

Omnes clericuli,
Pariter pueri
Cantent ut angeli,
Advenisti mundo,
Laudes tibi fundo.
Ideo, o, o
Ideo gloria in excelsis Deo.

** This line was omitted by the printer of the 1582 edition;
it was added by hand at some point to the copy digitized by
the Finnish National Museum.*

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And again, for those who want to know...

*Resounding now
Call the children
Praising joyfully
He that to us is born
By the Most High God given
And of virgin's womb begotten*

*Into man's world he was born
Wrapped in rags
In a manger laid
Stabled with the animals
The Master of Heaven
To ruin and plunder the Prince of Hell.*

*Wise men three worshipped him
Gifts presented him
The babe they sought
The star they followed
Him to adore
Gold, frankincense, and myrrh they offered him*

*All the priests
Like the children
Sing with the angels
Of his coming to the world
Give praise that you are made secure
Therefore give glory to God in the highest*

The Gifts of Midwinter

*I wrote this one snowy evening after an afternoon of
snowman-building with my husband and son. Some
occasions just put everything into perspective....*

Imagine the grief at the dawn of mankind
As they watched the sun die by the last of its rays
With none to declare as they soldiered on, blind
That the night did not herald the ending of days
But faith is our gift as we watch the light fade
And the year ends in darkness as each was begun
We'll not mourn the light and we'll not be afraid
And candles will serve till the spring brings the sun.
Faith...

CHORUS: ...is a gift that the Midwinter brings
In the stillness it stirs, in the silence it sings
It burns in the hearts of the young and the old
Like a flame in the darkness, a light in the cold.

In the turn of the year there is joy in the new
That makes us look forward and not to the past
To pleasures uncounted, afflictions but few
Our troubles will end, and our promises last
And hope is our gift as our thoughts fly ahead
To happier times than the time gone before
We'll not leave our hearts in the year that is dead
But rather sing welcome to what lies in store.
Hope...

Arms to enfold you and gather you tight
Are less often missed when the weather is mild
But fast we will hold in the midwinter's night
To the arms of a lover, or the hand of a child
And love is the gift that binds all gifts to one
The faith that we pledge with the giving of rings
The hope that we see in a daughter or son
And the greatest, that raises our state above kings.
Love...

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