

The Christmas Carol Music Quiz

How much do you know about some of the most popular Christmas carols? If you can answer all of these questions without having read the historical notes first, you can give yourself the ranking CarolMaster!

1. Neither composer nor lyricist would have approved of which famous Christmas carol, assembled after their deaths?
2. Which carol may have been written by cowboy singer Montana Slim?
3. Which carol (melody) was composed by an editor and critic for the New York Tribune?
4. Which beautiful carol was frowned upon by church authorities who denounced it for lack of musical taste and "total absence of the spirit of religion"? [Hint: Its composer is most famous for his ballet Giselle.]
5. Which carol was originally composed for guitar, along with two voices, and choir, because the church organ was broken? [It was composed on Christmas Eve and ready in time for Midnight Mass!]
6. When Scrooge hears this song in Dicken's "A Christmas Carol," he grabs a ruler and the singer flees in terror. Which carol is it?
7. Which carol gets its melody from a song that is mentioned in Shakespeare's "Merry Wives of Windsor"?
8. Which song was originally written for a Thanksgiving program?

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Answers

1. Neither composer nor lyricist would have approved of which famous Christmas carol, assembled after their deaths?

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing! – The music is from the second chorus of a cantata by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) written in 1840 to commemorate Johan Gutenberg and the invention of printing. The words are from a hundred years earlier, written in 1739 by Charles Wesley whose brother, John, founded the Methodist Church. "Hark, how the welkin (heaven) rings," he originally wrote. A colleague, the Calvinist Whitefield, substituted the familiar opening line over the protests of the author. In 1855, after both Wesley and Mendelssohn were dead, Dr. William Cummings put the words and music together in spite of evidence that neither author nor composer would have approved. [Quiz note: Mendelssohn had made it clear that his music was for secular use, and Wesley had specifically requested slow solemn music for his words.]

2. Which carol may have been written by cowboy singer Montana Slim?

Jolly Old St. Nicholas – This traditional American carol is generally considered anonymous, although it may have been written by Wilf Carter. [Quiz note: Wilf Carter was also known as cowboy singer Montana Slim]

3. Which carol (melody) was composed by an editor and critic for the New York Tribune?

It Came Upon A Midnight Clear – The words for this American carol are based on a poem written by Unitarian minister Dr. Edmund Sears in 1849. The following year, inspired by the poem, Richard Storrs Willis, a composer as well as editor and critic for the New York Tribune, wrote a melody called "Carol" to which the words were adapted.

4. Which beautiful carol was frowned upon by church authorities who denounced it for lack of musical taste and "total absence of the spirit of religion"? [Hint: Its composer is most famous for his ballet Giselle.]

Cantique de Noel (O Holy Night) – This carol was written by Adolphe Charles Adam (1803-1856), the French composer best known for his ballet "Giselle." At the time, it was frowned upon by church authorities who denounced it for lack of musical taste and "total absence of the spirit of religion." The French text is by Cappeau de Roquemaure; the English by American clergyman John Sullivan Dwight (1812-1893).

5. Which carol was originally composed for guitar, along with two voices, and choir, because the church organ was broken? [It was composed on Christmas Eve and ready in time for Midnight Mass!]

Silent Night – Silent Night was written on Christmas Eve in 1818 in Oberndorf, Austria. The organ at St. Nicholas Church was broken, and the repairman could not get there in time to fix it for the evening service (Midnight Mass). Joseph Mohr, the assistant pastor of the church, was determined that they not be without music. He had written a poem, "Stille Nacht", which he gave to his friend the church organist, Franz Gruber. Gruber immediately composed the melody and arranged it for two voices, choir, and guitar in time to be performed that night at the Midnight Mass. By 1955, Silent Night had become the most recorded song of all time.

6. When Scrooge hears this song in Dicken's "A Christmas Carol," he grabs a ruler and the singer flees in terror. Which carol is it?

God Rest You Merry Gentlemen – When Scrooge, in Dicken's "A Christmas Carol", heard this cheerful carol, he grabbed a ruler and the singer fled in terror. It is traditional English going back to the 16th or 17th century. The usual harmonization, like that of "The First Noel" is from Sir John Stainer (1840-1941).

7. Which carol gets its melody from a song that is mentioned in Shakespeare's "Merry Wives of Windsor"?

What Child Is This – This melody is the beautiful Greensleeves. It dates from Elizabethan time, possibly even earlier. The song was first registered in 1850 to Richard Jones with lyrics that were neither religious nor respectable. Shakespeare mentions it by name in "The Merry Wives of Windsor" in which it is played while traitors are hanged. In 1865 William Chatterton Dix (English) wrote "The Manger Throne", three verses of which became "What Child Is This."

8. Which song was originally written for a Thanksgiving program?

Jingle Bells – The words and music were written in 1857 by James Pierpont for a Thanksgiving program at his church in Boston. It was so well received that the children were asked to repeat it at Christmas. It has been a Christmas song ever since.

Additional Notes

O Come All Ye Faithful (Adeste Fideles) – This carol is sometimes attributed to John Wade, a British exile living in France. Otherwise it is considered to be an anonymous Latin Hymn. Around 1751, Wade put the text with music, probably by John Reading (English). In 1853 the familiar translation first appeared, attributed to Rev. Frederick Oakley.