

## MSC Singers Class # 3 - "What Child Is This?"

Greetings MSC Singers,

Well here we are again with another famous traditional Christmas carol, *What Child Is This?* This is truly a favorite during the festive season but as such, it is not a folk song but comes from a folk song. The story of *What Child is This* is steeped with intrigue. As you probably recognize, it shares the same melody with the folk song *Green Sleeves* which goes back to the 1500s. To reacquaint ourselves with this beautiful melody, let's first listen Daniel Estrem playing it on the Renaissance lute:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCpF2cwm\\_04](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCpF2cwm_04)

But I am getting a bit ahead of myself. First of all, let's take a look at the Christmas carol, *What Child is This* which was crafted not so long ago in 1865. Like all Christmas carols, it focuses on a major event from the Christmas story; namely, shepherds coming to visit the newborn Jesus. But the lyrics were added to this old melody centuries after the tune to *Greensleeves* was written around 1580.

The words were composed by William Dix, who was the son of a surgeon from Bristol, England. William Dix spent most of his life working as an executive at a maritime insurance company in Glasgow, Scotland.

The story goes that in 1865, when William was just 29 years old, he suffered from a near-fatal sickness. His near-death experience changed him completely. While undergoing his recovery, he experienced a spiritual awakening that inspired him to start crafting hymns. He, like all of us in this MSC Singer class, was infatuated by traditional folk songs.

So, when he started writing the lyrics for *What Child Is This* he decided to use the old English folk melody, *Greensleeves*. This turned out to be a good thing because it resulted in this carol being his most famous creation.

By the way, the melody to *Greensleeves*, was already being used during the festive season in another carol called "*The Old Year Now Away is Fled* ." This is an old New Year's Eve carol dated 1642:

The old yeare now away is fled  
The new year it is entered;  
Then let us now our sins downe tread  
And joyfully all appeare.  
Let's merry be this holy day  
And let us now both sport and play  
Hang sorrow! Let's cast care away  
God send you a happy new yeare!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bn1Zt4cv8ik>

As well, William Shakespeare used this popular tune twice in his famous play - "Merry Wives of Windsor."

*What Child Is This* using this rather old shop-worn melody, was finally published in 1871, six years after it was written. It was featured in an influential and prestigious collection of carols in the United Kingdom, called "*Christmas Carols Old and New*." This book of carols was edited by John Stainer and it was in this edition that Stainer was primarily responsible for harmonizing the musical setting that we know today. In recent times, this carol has gained significant popularity in the United States, in spite of it being of British origin.

William Dix went on to write many other hymns and carols. His style is imaginative and simple and sentimental. You may recognize these

other three carols Dix wrote; *As With Gladness Men of Old* and *Alleluia! Sing to Jesus*. He also wrote the Christmas song *The Manger Throne* which has the same theme of Jesus being born in a lowly stable. The point is that all these were formal compositions not born out of a folk tradition the exception being, *What Child Is This*.

So let's begin by looking at the lyrics.

The first verse sets a romantic image, a classic picture of the Nativity and the child Jesus sleeping on Mother Mary's lap, as the angels and shepherds providing a background with "anthems sweet."

*What Child is this  
Who laid to rest  
On Mary's lap is sleeping?  
Whom Angels greet with anthems sweet,  
While shepherds watch are keeping?*

The second verse:

*So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,  
Come Peasant, King to own Him  
The King of Kings salvation brings,  
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.*

This verse works through the idea that the manger was a "mean estate," or less than an ideal place for Jesus to be brought into the world. This is the same theme we have in the carol, *The Manger Throne*. Dix is perhaps hinting that if the birth of Jesus has its roots entangled with what's going to happen to him and in fact, this second verse refers to the anguish of Jesus's future.

## In the third and last verse

Oh, raise, raise a song on high,  
His mother sings her lullaby.  
Joy, oh joy for Christ is born,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary.

Dix expands on the idea of people attending the humble scene and the gifts that are being bought for the infant. And in the last verse, it reinforces the idea that like everyone, starting from the “king” or the “peasant” they are offered an equal chance.

Let’s listen to **Joan Baez** singing this beautiful rendition of *What Child Is This* in a folk song style:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wW2qAYMujfM>

Now a virtual A Capella arrangement of *What Child Is This* sung by **Peter Hollens**: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lGqf5ha\\_GEA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lGqf5ha_GEA)



Well what about the melody? As we stated before, this Christmas poem is set to a very old and well used melody from the Renaissance Period. First of all, "Greensleeves" isn't religious at all. In fact, it's all about a painful romantic situation which has a text that includes some pretty off-color ideas. Popular legend attributes this love song to Henry VIII, who is said to have written this poem and melody for Anne Boleyn.



She, after a pursuit of several years, finally became the second of his six wives. Henry later had Anne beheaded for "treason" (alleged adultery) when she failed to produce a son and heir. Ann did, however produce a daughter, who later became Queen Elizabeth I. Henry in writing this poem, accuses Anne of casting him off "so discourteously," despite the fact that he loved her, paid for her lodgings, and bought her a petticoat, a pearl-bedecked gown, and a jeweled necklace.

The song's scandalous twist is hidden in its very title because green wasn't a typical color in early Renaissance English society. According to some historians, for women's roles in the Renaissance period, the phrase a "green gown" referred to woman who engaged in promiscuous behavior — namely, getting grass stains on her dress while engaging in amorous activities outdoors. Some even speculate,

although this is debated, that the term "Greensleeves" might have even referred to a prostitute.

Here is later painting that is in the Harvard Museum of Art. It's by Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1863 of ***Lady Greensleeves***.



But the exact meaning of the song has been debated for centuries. In a book called *Roll Me in Your Arms: Unprintable Ozark Folksongs and Folklore*, Vance Randolph suggests the singer might have assumed Lady Greensleeves was a prostitute, given her green dress. According to this school of thought, the singer was mistaken and Lady Greensleeves took offense at his assumption.

Finally, it's interesting how immensely popular this melody was during the Renaissance. William Shakespeare even has Falstaff refer to the song in his play "The Merry Wives of Windsor": "*Let the sky rain potatoes! Let it thunder to the tune of 'Greensleeves'!*"

Here is the text to **Greensleeves**:

*Alas, my love, you do me wrong  
to cast me off discourteously,  
For I have loved you so long,  
delighting in your company.*

**Chorus** *Greensleeves was all my joy,  
Greensleeves was my delight.  
Greensleeves was my heart of gold,  
and who but my lady Greensleeves?*

*Your vows you've broken like my heart!  
Oh why did you so enrapture me?  
Now I remain in a world apart,  
but my heart remains in captivity.*

**Chorus**

*Thy petticoat of slender white  
With gold embroidered gorgeously;  
Thy petticoat of silk and white  
And these I bought gladly.*

One of my favorite singing groups is  
*The King Singers*. Here they are singing this beautiful arrangement of  
*Green Sleeves*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48GihXBfZ6I>

Here is **Greensleeves** as it might have been performed in the 1500s  
Jordi Savall & Rolf Lisveland

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzk13OqfFUA>

So that is all for today of the history part of our class. I hope you have enjoyed my talking about this wonderful and very popular Christmas Carol inspired from a folk song *What Child is This*.

For a final listening, who can resist this beautiful arrangement and presentation by **The Mormon Tabernacle Choir**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTyuW1Q2oxU>



Next Tuesday we will explore the old Appalachian folk song-carol *I Wonder AS I Wander*.

Have a safe and joyful Thanksgiving.

Hearts High, Stuart