

MSC Singers Class #1 - November 10

Folk Music at Christmas: Many of the Christmas Carols that we enjoy during this festive season, come out of the vernacular folk tradition. This fall, there will be six on-line classes. Each class will be in two sections, the first part being where we delve into the history of five folk-Christmas Carols. Here in order of the classes, are the pieces I have picked for us to study and sing:

The Cherry Tree Carol

Mary Had A Baby

What Child Is This

I Wonder as I Wander

Go Tell It on the Mountain

The second part of our class will be more singing. We can sing along together to various carols that I will put out on YouTube. As well, I have written for you a fun two-part arrangement of *The Cherry Tree Carol*. I think, using my Finale composing program, we can learn this piece together on zoom. It will be interesting and hopefully, a good experience. And if we get good enough at it, perhaps on the sixth class you can record your voice part on your digital phone and send it to me. I am hoping to assemble your recordings into a virtual choir piece. This last idea is a long shot but worth a try.

Class # 1 The story of the *The Cherry Tree Carol*.

I first discovered this “Cherry Tree Carol” listening to Joan Biaz. Ever since, it has been one of my favorites. But if you do some investigation on your own, you will find that this folk song has had one of the most complex journeys, from the middle east to the Appalachian Mountains. With some study on your own you will find that there is a lot more information to discover than what we will cover in this first class.

First a general statement about early folk music: Down through the ages and going back to the Medieval Period, telling stories through music measured heavily in the lives of the common people. The unwritten stories that were told at Christmas were frequently turned into poems, plays and songs which were then passed along in the oral tradition until such time they were written down. The *Cherry Tree* story is one of those middle eastern stories that was written down in the gospel of “Pseudo Mathew,” then turned into a mystery play and then a folk song. So how this iconic story became a Christmas carol?

The Origins of The Cherry Tree Carol:

We begin with the familiar Christmas journey to Bethlehem found in Luke 2:4–5. In this story, Joseph is walking alongside a donkey with a very pregnant Mary perched on its back. Poor old Joseph is having trouble coming to terms with young Mary's mysterious pregnancy. When they stop near a cherry orchard to rest, Mary complains that she is tired and with child and she asks Joseph if he would pick her some of the fruit. Joseph gets mad and in a most disrespectful way, tells Mary to get the guy who got her pregnant to pick the fruit for her. In the story, the infant Jesus has the last word when from the womb, he speaks to the tree and commands it to lower a branch down to Mary. Joseph, witnessing this miracle, immediately sorry and repents of his harsh words

***JOSEPH was an old man, And an old man was he,
When he wedded the younger Mary In the land of Galilee.***

***Joseph and Mary walk'd Through an orchard good,
There were cherries and berries and rich as any blood.***

***O then bespoke Mary, So meek and so mild,
'Pluck me one cherry, Joseph, For I am with child.'***

***O then bespoke Joseph With words so unkind,
'Let him pluck thee a cherry That brought thee with child.'***

***Then bow'd down the highest tree Unto our Lady's hand:
Then she said, 'See, Joseph, I have cherries at command!'***

***'O eat your cherries, Mary, O eat your cherries now;
O eat your cherries, Mary, That grow upon the bough.'***

Lets listen to this story sung by Jean Ricci. I call this the Appalachian Mountain version.

Note that it is called Child Ballad #54

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7FeXU7PIWc>



As a Christmas song, the Cherry Tree Carol has its roots in the Middle Ages. It appeared around 1500 in a set of Bible-based mystery plays performed in England, known as the “*N-Town Plays*”. But although the Middle Ages may give us images of yule logs, holly and ivy, as I mentioned before, the actual original inspiration for this story, is even older coming from Syria and the “Gospel of Pseudo Matthew” This is also referred to as “The Infancy Gospel of Matthew” ...But it is interesting that in the original version, it is a date tree, not a cherry tree, bows down to Mary.

So how did this drama from Syria find its way to the medieval England? Most likely the story came to England with Crusaders returning from the Holy Land after the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099. Captivated by this story, it was adapted and became part of the developing English Mystery play tradition. Next it this story/play turned into a folk song, *The Cherry Tree Carol*.



Later on, this folk song which was in the aural tradition, was transcribed or notated. The *Cherry Tree Carol* appears to have first been collected in Britain in the nineteenth century by Francis James Child, an American scholar who in 1860 collected 305 English, Scottish, Irish, and American folk songs.

THE
ENGLISH AND SCOTTISH
POPULAR BALLADS

EDITED BY
FRANCIS JAMES CHILD



IN FIVE VOLUMES
VOLUME I

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
The Riverside Press, Cambridge
LONDON: HENRY STEVENSON, SON AND STILES

In his book there are three versions of the song "*The Cherry Tree Carol*."
It is published it as Child Ballad 54. **Here is that first musical transcription**

1

D F#m

When Jo-seph was an old— man, An old man was—

0 2 2 4 2 4 2 0 4 2 2 2 4

5

A G D D

he, When he court-ed Vir-gin Ma-ry, The queen of Gali-

2 4 2 0 4 2 0 2 0 0 0 0 2

9

F#m G D D

lee, When he courted Vir-gin Ma-ry, the queen of Gali - lee.

4 4 2 0 4 2 0 2 0 0 0 0 4 2 0

In 1992, The Cherry Tree Carol was included in four different versions in *The Oxford Book of Carols*. In this book the editors described the carol as one of several “doubting Joseph” songs. Here is a footnote which says; “*Centuries of use have woven a tangled web of variant texts, all of them marred by the vagaries and omissions of memory, by singers' mishearings and their replacement of idioms no longer understood, by their clipping or expansion of lines to fit different tunes, and by editorial inventions.*”

Let's compare at least two prominent but different melodies for this Christmas carol. Here is a second version as noted by the famous composer scholar, Cecil Sharp in 1913. I call this the English version:

4.—THE CHERRY TREE CAROL.

Noted by Cecil J. Sharp.

SUNG BY MR. J. THOMAS,
CAMBORNE, CORNWALL, MAY 9TH, 1913.

When Jo - seph was an old man, An old man was he, He
wed - ded our Ma - ry, The Queen of Ga - li - lee.

Part two – listening:

~ Here are two choral versions using the English melody

The Cherry-Tree Carol arranged by David Wilcox - King's College - 2012

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOTM_ZLPfDM

Arranged by Sarah MacDonald - Ely Cathedral

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlqSAyp34TU&app=desktop>

~ Here are two Appalachian folk versions of the Cherry Tree Carol:

Joan Baez -

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uc2-LR0Albc&list=RDUc2-LR0Albc&start_radio=1&t=41

Peter Paul and Mary -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5CIJpQDRRA&app=desktop>

JUDY COLLINS - LIVE 1996

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5DSEeqnwjE>

~ Two more examples -check out these pop versions:

STING - Live in Durham Cathedral -- 2009

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZp5rkPpqIQ>

Mark O'Connor bluegrass band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbodOwVn17Y>

