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FROM THE ANGELS TO A SYMPHONY

The Wanderings Of A Christmas Carol



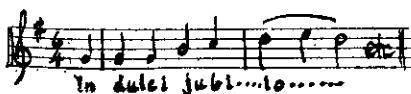
"THE first Christmas Carol was sung from the sky, and its inspiring words (though not, alas! its tune) have been preserved." So writes Percy Scholes in the *Oxford Companion to Music*, and we can share his regrets, for our acquaintance with the kind of music that might have been heard in Bethlehem 1943 years ago is slight enough. But as a matter of fact, a song sung by angels has been preserved; the chances are it is the one we want.

It came about when thirteen hundred and sixty years had passed since the Holy birth, that a German mystic named Henry Suso "heard the angels singing" (as a fourteenth century writer tells us) and he was drawn into dancing with his celestial visitors. They sang:

*In dulci júbilo
 Now sing with hearts aglow!
 Our delight and pleasure
 Lies in praesepio
 Like sunshine is our treasure
 Matris in gremio
 Alpha es et O!*

Since Suso was a German, naturally they sang to him in his own language; but, being good angels, they also put in a few words in the ecclesiastical tongue.

We can imagine that Suso lost no time in committing to permanent record the carol that was to wander over the world for centuries:



This tune was recently played over 3YA by the Woolston Band, and it will be heard from 2YA after 10 p.m. on Christmas Day in a programme of carols. Two verses will be sung in the setting by Gesius (1601) and then one verse as harmonised by J. S. Bach.

Among peoples for whom Latin is not the ecclesiastical language, this carol is sung to the words "Good Christian men rejoice, with heart and soul and voice."

The Song of the Crib

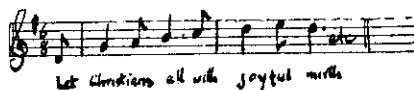
Another hundred years passed, and another German committed to paper a little mystery play to be acted round a crib in a church. It contained a carol ("Joseph dearest, Joseph mine, help me cradle the Child divine") which we have all heard at some time. Its opening phrase is the same, in essence, as that of "In Dulci Júbilo" (the notes of the first bar decorate the chord of the key-note slightly differently, but retain the rhythm). This tune can be found in any good collection of carols. The same phrase was used without alteration by a modern composer, Max Reger, in his "Cradle Song of the Virgin Mary," but just as "Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine" goes off into a new melody after the first phrase, so Reger's cradle-song provides yet another sequence. Brahms, in his Holy Cradle Song, Op. 91, uses "Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine" almost intact in the viola accompaniment. The Reger

song will be heard on the air this week and next week (see below), and it is a safe assumption that both "In Dulci Júbilo" and "Joseph Dearest, Joseph Mine" will be frequently sung by child and adult carol singers all over New Zealand during the same week.

Perhaps not so well known is an old Flemish carol, "A Little Child on the Earth has been Born," of which an arrangement by the Dutch composer Julius Röntgen can be seen in the *Oxford Book of Carols*. The notes that fit the first line are again the unmistakable phrase. Thus Henry Suso's dream has been travelling afield—the joyous little phrase has the character of the message it is associated with; it knows no boundaries.

And So To France

But is this the end of the matter? Look at a French Easter carol—"Cheer up friends and neighbours, now it's Eastertide"—which is also in the *Oxford Book of Carols*. The opening phrase is what you would expect of a French variant—more concise, much neater. The whole phrase is condensed into half the measure—but it is still the little fragment that the angels sang to Henry Suso. This carol is not unknown in New Zealand. So the tune has travelled west, and adapted itself to a song for a different occasion, but not of a different character. It would be natural to ask whether it went any further, and an old church-gallery book from Dorset, England, provides the answer. In it the Rev. L. J. T. Darwall discovered the tune and words of the "Yeomen's Carol" ("Let Christians all with joyful mirth . . . Now think upon our Saviour's Birth"). The opening phrase:



The first bar differs in the way the notes of the chord are distributed, but not in rhythm. The second is still identical with *In Dulci Júbilo*, and the other four songs mentioned.

Perhaps the "Yeoman's Carol" is not a regular favourite here, but what New Zealanders with an ear for music cannot remember the opening strain of the "Pastoral Symphony" in Handel's Messiah? The first bar is identical with the first full bar of the "Yeoman's Carol" (above) which in its turn is only another way of putting the notes of *In Dulci Júbilo* (the second bar of the Handel piece extends the phrase of the second full bar shown above, making each note a dotted crotchet).

And where, may we ask, did Handel get the tune? In Rome, where "pifferari" (Bagpipers) from Calabria in Southern Italy play it every year—at Christmas time. You may see pictures of them in the *Oxford Companion to Music*.

Germany—Flanders—France—Dorset—Calabria. Did it stop there? Let us look at the BBC Listener for June 24,

(continued on next page)