

The Medieval Origins of ‘O Come, O Come Emmanuel’

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Members of the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter, a Catholic order formed in 1988, perform a Gregorian chant at Our Lady of Guadalupe seminary in Denton, Neb., on May 12, 2017. AP Photo/Nati Harnik



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Commentary

If you know the world of classical music, you know it is filled with a sniffy snobbery that causes most normal people to recoil. This is deeply regrettable because it is wrong historically and aesthetically. Most of what we call “classical” music was in fact popular music and has survived not due to elite culture as such but, quite simply, people loved it and still do.

We confront this every year during the Christmas season as we are surrounded by popular carols that elites are quick to judge as inferior and 19th-century forms of pastiche.



This has long been the fate of the beloved song “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” It has long been a favorite of the people, and we start hearing it in the weeks before Christmas as a common hymn for Advent. People just love singing “Rejoice, rejoice.”



The words themselves are based on what is known in the Middle Ages (even as early as the 8th century) as the O Antiphons, which were originally in Latin with a large amount of Hebrew since they deal mostly with the prophecies of the coming Messiah. They have been sung during Vespers services associated with convents and monasteries, and come to the people mostly in the form of this beautiful hymn.



(As an aside, I learned to sing all the O Antiphons in Latin with Gregorian notation, and, while beautiful, I can assure you that they are not nearly as catchy.)

Whether the popular hymn (Latin: “Veni, Veni Emmanuel”) is dressed up with huge choirs with orchestras or sung in the plainest way with chant only, it is one of the more popular holiday favorites the world over. And yet in the right circles, you will always bump into an “expert” that will tell you that it is nothing other than a 19th century fake that some composer tried to fob off as real. Then, of course, you are supposed to feel bad for liking it!

Well, there is some remarkable news about this due to a [discovery](#) by the great chant scholar Dr. Mary Berry. She had a very long career as a

musicologist with a specialization in Gregorian chant in particular. She spent decades digging through monastic archives to trace the origins of hymns and melodies. What she discovered about this one in particular is rather mind-blowing.

It did indeed appear in an English hymn book in the 19th century. The editor of the book included this hymn and thought perhaps it had a much deeper history but he was unable to document it, thereby triggering the pedants to decry the piece as nothing but a pastiche for which no serious musician can really have affection.

What she found in 1966 archival research proved otherwise. It actually originates as a 15th century melody sung in funeral processions. We should be clear that this is the earliest-known version but it might have been around many centuries earlier, given the capacity of the oral tradition to pass on melodies more reliably than the printed manuscript can.

I will now let her tell the story of her discovery, in typically humble terms.

“The well-known Advent hymn O Come, O Come, Emmanuel belongs to the ever-growing repertoire of popular hymns known, loved, and sung all over the English-speaking world. It made its first appearance as far back as 1854, in Part II of the Hymnal Noted, edited by Thomas Helmore. The English words are based on a free Latin paraphrase of the great O Antiphons, which are sung with the Magnificat at Vespers on the days leading up to Christmas Eve. These antiphons themselves came into existence at least as early as the eighth century. The paraphrase can be traced back to the seventh edition of the Psalterium Canticum Catholicarum, published in Cologne in 1710. The present splendid English translation was made by Thomas Alexander Lacey (1853-1931) for the English Hymnal (1906), of which he was joint editor.

“The familiar melody was said by Thomas Helmore to have been ‘copied by the late J. M. Neale ‘from a French Missal’ which he located ‘in the National Library, Lisbon.’ But in a letter to the press in 1909, H.

Jenner claimed that his father, Bishop Jenner, had copied both the tune and the words in Lisbon in 1853. All attempts to track it down, however, failed: neither a French Missal, nor indeed any service-book from Lisbon could be produced to justify either claim. The compilers of the 1909 historical edition of Hymns Ancient and Modern drew a complete blank, and, more recently, one scholar even made the ingenious suggestion that Thomas Helmore had perhaps composed the tune himself, coyly hiding his identity behind the pretence that it was an ancient tune gleaned from a Continental source.

“I was able, however, in 1966, to vindicate his honor. My attention had been drawn to a small fifteenth century processional in the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale. It was Franciscan in origin and probably intended for the use of nuns rather than friars. Turning the pages I discovered, on folio 89v ff, a number of troped verses for the funeral responsory *Libera me* in the form of a litany, beginning with the words ‘*Bone iesu, dulcis cunctis.*’ The melody of these tropes was none other than the tune of O come, O come Emmanuel. It appeared in square notation on the left-hand page, and on the opposite page there was a second part that fitted exactly, like a mirror-image, in note-against-note harmony with the hymn-tune. The book would thus have been shared by two sisters, each singing her own part as they processed.

“So it would seem that this great Advent hymn-tune was not, in the first instance, associated with Advent at all, but with a funeral litany of the saints in verse, interspersed between the sections of a well-known responsory. Perhaps it is a measure of Helmore’s genius that he detected in this melody an appropriate Advent sound as well, one which conveys an unmistakable sense of solemn expectancy, not only for the Nativity of Christ, but also for his Second Coming as judge and as savior. Helmore was shrewd enough, also, to have been aware that an indubitable link exists between the theology of Advent and a procession marking the passage from death to eternal life.”

Now, you can see clearly: she was brilliant, a master musicologist. But even more than that, her discovery saved popular affections from the

scythe of snobbery. Fancy-pants musicologists who have long put down this beautiful piece had to eat crow, which is always satisfying.

Enjoy this glorious piece of music with full knowledge that it is at least half a millennium old and probably older, perhaps dating back to the same age as much of the Gregorian repertoire.

Lesson: Civilization in all its signs and wonders is a very long process in the building, transversing many generations, and escaping the capacity of any intellectuals to fully understand it all. To participate in it is to be part of what G.K. Chesterton called “the democracy of the dead,” a daily plebiscite to find value and discard the rest, *in saecula saeculorum*. That’s how we get the phrase “the test of time.”

So many of our Christmas traditions have come to us this way, from the Christmas tree to mistletoe to the date on which it occurs. The same is true of the songs that surround us in this season. Traditions like this are much more enduring than any pop star or regime.

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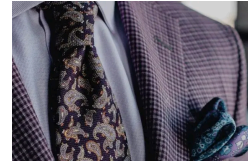
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