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The “Hidden” Carols: A Christmas Singing Tradition in the English Pennines

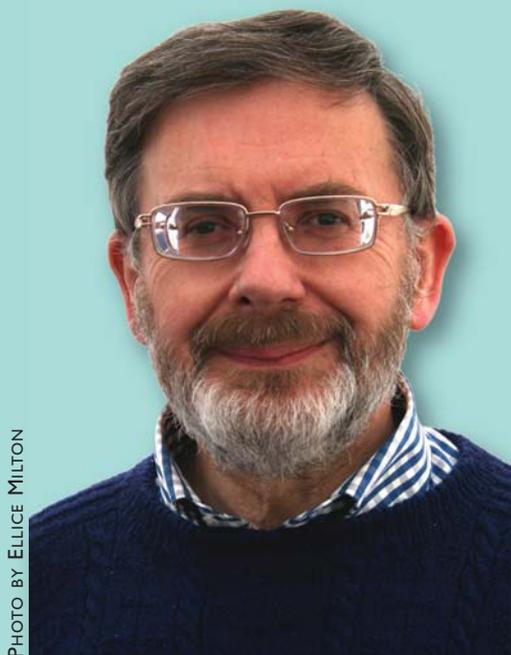


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The 'Hidden' Carols:

A Christmas Singing Tradition in the English Pennines

For well over two and a half centuries, the performance of distinctive carols has been a feature of the seasonal holiday of Christmas in villages in many parts of England, especially in the West Country and in the region around Sheffield in South Yorkshire and Derbyshire on the eastern edge of the Pennine hills. The latter area forms the focus for this lecture. The region comprises some fifty or more significant settlements and associated communities, many of which maintain a vernacular caroling tradition. In contrast to the monodic examples of solo performers recorded by folksong collectors in the early part of the twentieth century in England, the carols and the manner of performance are wholly dependent on group interaction, characterized by part singing and often complex instrumental accompaniment.

Why then are they described as "hidden?" The official history and evolution of post-Reformation carolling in England is problematic for several reasons. In the first place, the principal scholarly accounts (e. g. Routley, 1958) conveniently overlook a body of evidence from the mid-eighteenth through to the early twentieth century, because it did not fit with the authors' ideology or agenda. In the second place, the commentators passed judgement on aesthetic grounds that the corpus of music associated with this tradition of caroling was unworthy of serious consideration. In fact, they elevated the discourse on Christmas carols to an elitist level that ignored evidence from the grass roots and was not based on ethnographic data. This situation was further exacerbated by the publication of 'authoritative' collections of Christmas carols, which restricted their contents to reflect this position (e. g. Husk, 1868; Chope, 1875; Bramley & Stainer, [1878]). Following the 'discoveries' of the early folksong pioneers, the carol collections were widened, but stopped well short of including any reference to the vernacular caroling sung in parts (Dearmer, Vaughan Williams, Shaw, 1928). Although the early folksong collectors encountered such vernacular caroling traditions, they chose to exclude them as they considered them outside of their brief (Sharp, 1907 and 1911; Vaughan Williams, 1919). This is unsurprising, as they preferred to focus on an earlier form of caroling, monodic, performed solo, and ballad-like in its narrative structure.

Unlike fieldworkers in the USA (notably George Pullen Jackson, 1933, 1937), they could not accept group performance and the singing in parts as admissible to their folksong canon. Moreover, they believed that folksong should be anonymous and in the case of many of these vernacular carols, this was demonstrably not the case. Hence in their role as gatekeepers, the early folksong collectors left a significant element of vernacular musical tradition in England unrecorded, undocumented, and under-researched. For the promoters of the post-World-War-II folksong revival movement (Kennedy, 1975; Lloyd, 1967; Seeger and MacColl), the English village caroling tradition lacked the essential 'folk' qualities of 'authenticity' and 'purity,' while for musicologists, especially scholars of hymnody and psalmody, the tradition fell short in terms of musical 'good taste,' and it was castigated for failing to conform to western classical rudiments of music, which largely postdate it (Keyte and Parrott, 1992).

In this presentation, I aim to explore the development of this tradition in terms of musicality, group structure, style, and repertoire. I will analyze the dynamics of performance that characterize these groups, including the roles of singers and the performance milieu – currently most focus their activities in the village pub rather than the church or chapel. These carols differ in both style and content from the standard repertoire broadcast on the media and promoted by churches and choral institutions. They are performed without formal musical direction by ad-hoc groups, largely comprising untrained singers, rather than by choirs and conductors. This paper discusses the overall sound-ideal created by such caroling and the dynamic soundscape that identifies this form of cultural expression. The research draws on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken during the past forty years.

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