

My Dancing Day: Carols and Movement

By Cecilia Curran

We usually think of Christmas carols as "music to program in December and January," and we forget, sometimes, that the carol is a song form and, in fact, a dance form. In this article, we'll explore the origins of the carol (music and dance) and think about using some Dalcroze-style movement with carols in the classroom.

Twelfth Century Roots

The carol emerged in France in the twelfth century from musical roots that gave rise to various secular and religious musical/dance forms. All of these, in fact, may have emerged from the religious processional hymn in use at the end of the eleventh century. At about the same time, in the twelfth century, a particular kind of stately dance music appeared in various nations. These very similar forms often used music with a textual (later, instrumental) refrain; some of the forms are the *virelai*, *rondeau*, *ballade*, and *carol*. In Italy, a dance/song form with a religious text, called a "*lauda spirituale*," arose from the Franciscan reform movement.

In France, Italy, Spain, and other areas of Western Europe, the musical form of the "carol" (or "carole") became the principal dance form in courtly society throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Curiously, it was also the most popular dance form in "lower" society as well, crossing fairly strict social boundaries between the nobility and the "commons." It was, most probably, a processional dance form in which the dancers formed a chain or a circle (or, possibly, both in the same song) and provided the music for themselves by singing an unaccompanied tune. The steps were gliding rather than leaping or skipping; people moved forward (or, in a circle dance, to the left), following the lead of a "fore-singer," who would intone the refrain. The dancers would repeat the refrain while moving, and then continue the dance as the "fore-singer" sang the verse of the carol.

Not too many of those earliest texts and tunes survive, but some later carols can give you an idea of the relationship to dance of even the earlier carol tunes. If you have access to some recordings of traditional carols, listen to a secular carol like "The Boar's Head/Caput apri defero" or "I Saw Three Ships." Note the refrain in each one: a Latin text in the first ("Caput apri defero . . .," "The boar's head I bring, giving praises to God") and "On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day" in the second. Note, too, that "I Saw Three Ships" is in a question-and-answer format, so it may have been led by two singers (man and woman?) alternating the verses, with the dancers chiming in on the refrain. The carol "The Holly and the Ivy," with the refrain "The rising of the sun . . ." was probably also alternated between boys (holly) and girls (ivy), with all joining in on the refrain. More religious texts and tunes that reflect the solemn, stately dance origins of the carol may be found in "In dulci jubilo" (which we know with English texts like "Good Christians, All, Rejoice") or "The First Nowell."

One of the most interesting texts, with a tune that may go back to the origins of the carol in dancing, is "My Dancing Day." The voice singing the text is Christ's, who looks forward to his "dancing day" so he can call his "true love to my dance." The text of the refrain is: "Sing O my love, O my love, my love, my love; this have I done for my true love." Like Sebastian Temple's much later text, "Lord of the Dance," the verses of "My Dancing Day" trace the story of Jesus' life from his birth, through his baptism and ministry, to his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

By the fifteenth century, the carol had developed into an elaborated form of polyphonic music which, however, never really lost its association with processions and dance. Some of the polyphonic music of the fifteenth century, in fact, uses texts that are translations of--and, in some cases direct borrowings from--the Latin texts of processional hymns. One example is a carol for St. Stephen's Day (December 26), which echoes the meter and a line from the hymn used for a procession to St. Stephen's altar after vespers on his feast: "Pray for us that we saved be: Protomartir Stephane."

Carols and Movement

Like the oldest texts and tunes, we've lost all but the most general understanding of the dance forms with which the carol was associated. But we might get a better sense of how carols work by using Dalcroze movement with some of the ancient carols. Allowing students to express the musical motion of a tune like "In Dulci Jubilo" will reveal the underlying dance shape of the music.

One activity used in Dalcroze classes that might work well with carols is the use of colored scarves. As the children move, they expressively wave the scarves to the music. These scarves may be made locally (by parents or, perhaps, as a school project), or they may be purchased commercially. Each scarf used by younger children (kindergarten, pre-first, first grade) should be at least twenty-seven inches square; for older children (grade two and higher), the scarves may be as large as fifty-four inches square. Not only is the use of such scarves effective as a musical tool, but it is also beautifully visual, and the children love using these scarves. One commercial source for such scarves is West Music; phone: (800) 397-9378.

You might even try inviting your students to dance a simple processional movement to a carol such as "I Saw Three Ships." With you as the "fore-singer," they could move forward for the first part of the verse ("I saw three ships come sailing in," stop and clap once as they join in singing the refrain ("on Christmas Day, on Christmas Day")), move backward on the second part of the verse ("I saw three ships come sailing in"), stop and clap again, then bow to one another as they finish the verse with the refrain ("on Christmas Day in the morning").

A project like this might even be something to think about for your school or parish Christmas pageant or seasonal service of lessons and carols.

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