

Wassail! - Composer's note

*"In town and countryside, carollers, waits and wassailers of all kinds sang and played at the door throughout midwinter nights and into the dawn... voices echoing in the cold air."**

The genesis of *Wassail! Carols of Comfort and Joy* was a chance conversation four years ago with my friend Stephen Tudway in our Hertfordshire village. Stephen suggested that he and I organise a December gathering in our lovely medieval church for local people to come and sing 'carols in a folk style'. He lent me his CDs of Maddy Prior and The Carnival Band; I listened to them and was hooked. At the same time, I immersed myself in an album by Coope Boyse and Simpson (quoted above) as well as Kate Rusby's wonderful Christmas recordings. The event proved so popular – the barrels of real ale and home-made pork scratchings may have contributed to this – that 'Carols & Capers' (the name borrowed from one of The Carnival Band's discs) has become a Christmas highlight in our village. Every year, on a cold December night, I find myself strumming my guitar, surrounded by an ever-growing band of recorders, violins, *cajóns* (we even had a shawm last year!) and hundreds of people making merry and singing songs together. I can't imagine Christmas without it, and it's been in my mind ever since it began to compose a large-scale folk Christmas choral piece, following in the footsteps of *Zimbe!*, *Ahoy!* and *Song Cycle*. When United Learning approached me with the commission, I seized my chance.

'Wassail' is a pleasing word; both a noun and a verb, it's rich with connotations of Christmas, times gone by, celebrations, carol-singing and the wishing of 'good health' (the word's Anglo-Saxon derivation). I was keen to explore the folk heritage of Christmas songs, pre organs-in-churches and 'Nine Lessons and Carols'. I was equally fascinated by the concept of carols as dances (the word might derive from the French 'carole' meaning a circle dance, and so many of these tunes are in compound or waltz time or have irresistible dance rhythms) and also by the tradition of carol-singing and wassailing door-to-door. Carols in the medieval period were often only loosely based on the Christmas story and were primarily used for domestic entertainment rather than devotional purposes. They can be sacred or secular, or a mixture of the two.

The carols I have chosen for this piece vary from Latin songs about the angel Gabriel visiting Mary (*Angelus ad virginem*, mentioned in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and one of the best compound-time melodies of all in my opinion), through various pagan allusions to holly and ivy, via the secular midwinter song *Drive the cold winter away*, to a haunting new carol by my wife Joanna on a similar theme, *Spring will come again*. There is also my own version of the musical panel-game favourite 'one song to the tune of another': *While shepherds watched* has over 70 recorded melodies (many of which are still sung in the pubs of northern England), so I've chosen three of my favourites, including one some will know as *On Ilkley Moor bar t'at*. Likewise, the popular but lyrically non-sensical *I saw three ships come sailing in* (to land-locked Bethlehem!) fits very nicely to a folk-dance from Cornwall in south-west England. Naturally, I wanted to end the work with a wassail song. Since there are so many to choose from, I have arranged them into a rousing medley to finish the piece.

So, it is to my friend Stephen Tudway, and to the villagers of Wheathampstead, that I dedicate this work. I'm excited to be introducing a new generation of schoolchildren to this rich tapestry of Christmas and midwinter carols and I hope that the spirit of joy, reflection and celebration will bring pleasure to singers and listeners alike, this Christmas and in Christmases to come. Happy wassailing!

Alexander L'Estrange, 2017

* from the album *Voices at the door* by a cappella folk group Coope Boyes & Simpson

Wassail! - Songs

1. What sweeter music can we bring?

Words: from A Christmas Carol by Robert Herrick (1591–1674); tune: The Wexford carol, Irish trad.

2. The Sussex carol

Collected by Ralph Vaughan Williams from Mrs Verrall, of Monk's Gate, Sussex, in 1904

3. Drive the cold winter away

Words: Anon., before c. 1625; tune: 17th century sources, including John Playford's The English Dancing Master (1651)

4. The holly and the ivy

Traditional English carol based on two tunes, from Herefordshire and Gloucestershire

5. Gaudete!

Words: Anon., from Piaie Cantiones (1582) – a collection of late medieval Latin songs and carols

6. The first tree in the greenwood

Cornish folk melody, often known as the Sans Day carol, as it was first transcribed from the singing of Thomas Beard, a villager in St Day, Cornwall

7. Spring will come again

New words and music by Joanna Forbes and Alexander L'Estrange

8. The Wexford carol

Irish traditional carol

9. Angelus ad virginem /Gabriel's message

Based on a 13th /14th-century song mentioned in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales; Gabriel's message is a Basque traditional carol

10. I saw three ships (The Furry Dance)

Words: traditional; tune: folk melody, from the Cornish village of Helston

11. While shepherds watched (three ways)

Words: Nahum Tate; tunes: Hail! chime on, Lyngham and Cranbrook (just three of the many melodies sung to this popular carol)

12. Wassail! (medley)

Words: traditional; tunes: various, from all over England

Wassail! - Lyrics

1. What sweeter music can we bring?

What sweeter music can we bring Than a carol, for to sing
The birth of this, our heavenly king? Awake the voice! Awake the string!

2. The Sussex carol

VERSE 1:

On Christmas night all Christians sing To hear the news the angels bring.
On Christmas night all Christians sing To hear the news the angels bring.
News of great joy, news of great mirth, News of our merciful king's birth.*

VERSE 2:

Then why should men on earth be so sad, Since our Redeemer made us glad?
Then why should men on earth be so sad, Since our Redeemer made us glad?
When from our sin he set us free, All for to gain our liberty?

VERSE 3:

When sin departs before His grace, Then life and health come in its place.
When sin departs before His grace, Then life and health come in its place;
Angels and men with joy may sing, All for to see the new-born King.

VERSE 4:

All out of darkness we have light, Which made the angels sing this night,
All out of darkness we have light, Which made the angels sing this night,
'Glory to God and peace to men, Now And for evermore. Amen.' Amen!

3. Drive the cold winter away

VERSE 1:

All hail to the days that merit more praise
Than all the rest of the year,
And welcome the nights that double delights
As well for the poor as the peer.
Good fortune attend each merry man's friend
That does but the best that he may;
Forgetting old wrongs, with carols and songs,
To drive the cold winter away.

VERSE 2:

This time of the year is spent in good cheer,
And neighbours together do meet.
To sit by the fire with friendly desire,
each other in love to greet.
Old grudges forgot are put in the pot,
All sorrows aside they lay;
The old and the young do carol this song
To drive the cold winter away.

VERSE 3:

To mask and to mum kind neighbours will come,
With wassails of nut-brown ale.
To drink and carouse to all in the house,
as merry as bucks in the dale.
Where cake, bread and cheese is brought for your ease

To make you the longer stay;
At the fire to warm will do you no harm,
To drive the cold winter away.

VERSE 4:

When Christmas's tide comes in like a bride
With holly and ivy clad,
Twelve days in the year much mirth and good cheer
in every household is had.
The country sport is then to resort
to gambols or Christmas play,
Where everyone does the best that they can
To drive the cold winter away, away,

We'll spend the long nights in merry delights,
With a song and a tale or a cup of good ale,
With mirth and good cheer to end the old year,
To drive the cold winter... away. [Shout] WASSAIL!

4. The holly and the ivy

VERSE 1 (HEREFORDSHIRE TUNE):

Oh the holly and the ivy,
When they are both full grown,
Of all the trees that grow in the wood,
The holly bears the crown.

CHORUS 1, 2, 3, 4:

Oh the rising of the sun
And the running of the deer,
The playing of the merry organ,
Sweet singing all in the choir.

VERSE 2 (GLOUCESTERSHIRE TUNE):

The holly bears a blossom,
As white as lily flower,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
To be our sweet saviour.

VERSE 3 (both tunes):

Oh the holly bears a berry,
As red as any blood,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ
To do poor sinners good.

VERSE 4 (GLOUCESTERSHIRE TUNE):

The holly bears a prickle,
As sharp as any thorn,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,
On Christmas day in the morn.

VERSE 5 (both tunes):

Oh the holly bears a bark,
As bitter as any gall,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,
For to redeem us all.

CHORUS 5 (a cappella):
Oh the rising of the sun
And the running of the deer,
The playing of the merry organ,
Sweet singing all in the choir.
(On Christmas night all Christians sing in the choir.)

VERSE 6 (GLOUCESTERSHIRE TUNE):
The holly and the ivy,
When they are both full grown,
Of all the trees that are in the wood,
The holly bears the crown.

CHORUS 6:
The rising of the sun
And the running of the deer,
The playing of the merry organ,
Sweet singing in the choir.
Sweet singing, sweet singing in the choir.

The holly... and the... ivy...

5. Gaudete! (“Rejoice!”)

REFRAIN 1:
Gaudete, gaudete, Christus est natus
Ex Maria virgine, Gaudete! [repeat]

VERSE 1:
Tempus adest gratiae Hoc quod optabamus,
Carmina laetitiae Devote reddamus.

REFRAIN 2

VERSE 2:
Deus homo factus est, Natura mirante,
Mundus renovatus est A Christo regnante.

REFRAIN 3

VERSE 3 (canon):
Ezechielis porta Clausa pertransitur,
Unde lux est orta Salus invenitur.

REFRAIN 4

VERSE 4 (canon)
Ergo nostra contio Psallat jam in lustro,
Benedicat domino, Salus Regi nostro.

REFRAIN 5

6. The first tree in the greenwood

VERSE 1:
Now the holly bears a berry as white as the milk,
And Mary bore Jesus, all wrapped up in silk.

CHORUS 1:

And Mary, she bore Jesus, our Saviour for to be,
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly.
Holly! Holly!
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly.

VERSE 2:

Now the holly bears a prickle as sharp as the thorn,
And Mary bore Jesus, on Christmas day morn.

CHORUS 2:

And Mary, she bore Jesus, our Saviour for to be,
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly.
Holly! Holly!
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly.

VERSE 3:

Now the holly bears a berry as black as the coal,
And Mary bore Jesus, who died for us all.

CHORUS 3, 4:

And Mary, she bore Jesus, our saviour for to be,
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly.
Holly! Holly!
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly.

VERSE 4:

Now the holly bears a berry as blood it is red;
and Mary bore Jesus, who rose from the dead.

OUTRO:

The holly and the ivy, when they are both full grown,
The holly and the ivy, The holly bears the crown.
The holly bears the crown... the crown.

7. Spring will come again

VERSE 1:

The nights are drawing in, my dear, The nights are drawing in.
And winter's on its way, my dear; Old winter's on his way.
And the cold wind is blowing, And soon it will be snowing.
Oh the nights are drawing in, my dear, The nights are drawing in.

VERSE 2:

We met when we were young, my dear, When we were very young.
And spring was in the air, my dear, Oh spring was in the air.
As the buds grew into flowers We danced through April showers.
We met when we were young, my dear, When we were very young.

VERSE 3:

And promises we made, my dear, Those promises we made.
When summer days were long, my dear, Those summer days were long.
And the yellow sun of morning Never failed to keep us warming.
And promises we made, my dear, Those promises we made.

VERSE 4:

A family we grew, my dear, A family we grew.
And autumn leaves they fell, my dear And Autumn leaves they fell.

But the farmer reaped his sowing. And we kept the fires glowing
And our family it grew, my dear, our family it grew.

VERSE 5:

And thus our lives unfold, my dear, And thus our lives unfold.
The seasons come and go, my dear, The seasons come and go.
So when winter days are looming, Soon the blossoms will be blooming.
And spring will come again, my dear, And spring will come again.
Yes spring will come again, my dear,
Spring will come...again.

8. The Wexford carol

VERSE 1:

Good people all this Christmas time
Consider well and bear in mind
What our good God for us has done
in sending his beloved Son.
With Mary holy we should pray
To God with love this Christmas day.
In Bethlehem upon that morn
there was a blessed Messiah born.

VERSE 2:

The night before that happy tide,
The noble virgin and her guide
Were long time seeking up and down
To find a lodging in the town.
But mark right well what came to pass:
From ev'ry door repelled, alas!
As long foretold, there refuge all
Was but a humble ox's stall.

VERSE 3:

Near Bethlehem did shepherds keep
Their flocks of lambs and feeding sheep;
To whom God's angels did appear,
Which put the shepherds in great fear.
"Arise and go" the angels said,
"To Bethlehem; be not a afraid,
For there you'll find, this happy morn,
A princely babe, sweet Jesus born."

VERSE 4:

With thankful heart and joyful mind
The shepherds went the babe to find,
And, as God's angels had foretold,
They did our saviour Christ behold.
Within a manger he was laid,
And by his side the virgin maid
Attending on the Lord of Life,
Who came onto earth to end all strife.
Who came on earth to end all strife, to end all strife.

9. Angelus ad virginem / Gabriel's message

“ANGELUS” VERSE 1 (Latin):

Angelus ad virginem
Sub intrans inconclave,
Virginis formidinem
Demulcens, inquit: “Ave!”
“Ave regina virginum!
Caeli terraeque Dominum
Concipies et paries intacta
Salutem hominum;
Salutem caeli facta,
Medela criminum.”

VERSE 2 (English):

Gabriel to Mary came,
A holy message bare he.
Deeply bowed the maiden mild
To hear him say “Hail Mary”.
“Fear not, for blessed news I bring;
“Fear not, for Jesus, heaven’s king,
Thy first born son Shall soon be born in pureness,
A child of truth and grace,
by thee He comes victorious,
To save the human race.”

“GABRIEL’S MESSAGE” VERSE 1, 2:

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
His wings as drifted snow, his eyes as flame.
"All hail", said he, "thou lowly maiden Mary,
Most highly favoured lady. Gloria!"
For known a blessed mother thou shalt be;
All generations laud and honour thee.
Thy son shall be Emmanuel, by seers foretold;
“Most highly favoured lady. Gloria, Gloria!”

“ANGELUS” VERSE 3 (English):

When the girl had understood
She spoke in answer lowly:
“I am but a maid of God,
Of Him whose name is Holy;
With thee, O messenger of heav’n
By whom this prophecy is giv’n
I well agree, so let it be my destiny,
According to thy word.
O Gabriel! behold me:
The handmaid of the Lord!”
Gloria... Gloria... Gloria!

10. I saw three ships come sailing in (*The Furry Dance*)

VERSE 1:

I saw three ships come sailing in,
On Christmas Day, on Christmas day,
I saw three ships come sailing in,
On Christmas Day in the morning.
And who was in those ships all three?
On Christmas Day, on Christmas day,
And who was in those ships all three?
’Twas Joseph and his fair lady!

VERSE 2:

Pray whither sailed those ships all three?
On Christmas Day, on Christmas day,
Pray whither sailed those ships all three?
On Christmas Day in the morning.
O they sailed into Bethlehem,
On Christmas Day, on Christmas day,
O they sailed into Bethlehem,
On Christmas Day in the morning.

INSTRUMENTAL (with claps)

VERSE 3:

And he did whistle and she did sing: [Whistle tune!]
And he did whistle and she did sing: *Fa-la la la la-la-la-la la la la*
And all the bells on earth shall ring
On Christmas Day, on Christmas day,
And all the bells on earth shall ring
On Christmas Day in the morning.

VERSE 4:

I saw three ships come sailing in
On Christmas Day, on Christmas day,
I saw three ships come sailing in
On Christmas Day in the morning.
And all the angels in heav'n shall sing
On Christmas Day, on Christmas day,
And all the angels in heav'n shall sing
On Christmas Day in the mor...ning!

11. While shepherds watched (three ways)

VERSE 1 (HAIL! CHIME ON):

While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on, all on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory and shone around.

CHORUS:

Hail! Chime on, chime on,
Merry, merry Christmas bells, chime on,
Hail! Chime on, chime on,
Merry, merry Christmas bells, chime on!

VERSE 2 (HAIL! CHIME ON)

“Fear not”, said he, for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled, troubled mind,
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind.”

CHORUS

VERSE 3 (LYNGHAM):

To you in David's town this day
Is born of David's line, is born of David's line
A saviour who is Christ the Lord,
And this shall be the sign.

VERSE 4 (LYNGHAM):

The heav'nly babe you there shall find
To human view displayed, to human view displayed,
All meanly wrapped in swathing bands
And in a manger laid.

VERSE 5 (CRANBROOK):

Thus spake the seraph, and forthwith
(and forthwith!)
appeared a shining throng
Of angels praising God, who thus,
Of angels praising God, who thus,
Addressed their joyful song, [CLAP CLAP]
addressed their joyful song, [CLAP CLAP]
addressed their joyful song:

VERSE 6 (CRANBROOK):

"All glory be to God on high
(God on high!)
And to the earth be peace;
Goodwill henceforth from heav'n to men,
Goodwill henceforth from heav'n to men
Begin and never cease, [CLAP CLAP]
begin and never cease, [CLAP CLAP] begin and never,
Begin and never cease, [CLAP CLAP]
begin and never cease, [CLAP CLAP]
begin... and... ne...ver... cease!" [CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP]

12. Wassail (medley)

1. SOMERSET WASSAIL

Wassail, O wassail all over the town,
Our cup it is white and the ale it is brown.
The cup it is made of the good ashen tree
And so is the malt of the best barley.

CHORUS 1:

For it's your wassail and it's our wassail,
And it's joy be to you and a jolly wassail!

VERSE 2:

Oh master and missus, are you all within?
Pray, open the door and let us come in!
Oh master and missus a-sitting by the fire,
Pray think on us poor travellers, a-trav'lin' in the mire.

CHORUS 2:

For it's your wassail and it's our wassail,
And it's joy be to you and a jolly wassail!

2. GLOUCESTERSHIRE WASSAIL

VERSE 1:

Now here is to Dobbin and to his right eye;
Pray God send our mistress a good Christmas pie,
A good Christmas pie as may we well see,
With the wassailing bowl they'll drink to thee.

REFRAIN:

Drink to thee, drink to thee.
With the wassailing bowl they'll drink to thee.

VERSE 2:

So here's to the maid in the lily-white smock,
Who tripped to the door and pulled back on the lock,
Who tripped to the door and pulled back the pin
For to let these jolly wassailers in!

REFRAIN:

Wassailers in! Wassailers in!
For to let these jolly wassailers in!

3. HERE WE COME A-WASSAILING (Staffordshire)

Here we come a-wass'lin'
among the leaves so green,
Here we come a-wass'lin', so fair to be seen.
Love and joy come to you, And your wassail to you.
Praise God send you... a happy new year.
A happy new year, a happy new year,
Praise God send you a happy new year!

4. HERE WE COME A-WASSAILING (Yorkshire)

VERSE 1, 2:

We are not daily beggars who beg from door to door
But we are neighbours' children whom you have seen before.
Wassail, O wassail all over the town,
Our cup it is white and the ale it is brown, brown, brown...

CHORUS:

Love and joy come to you, And to you your wassail too,
And God bless you and send you a happy new year,
And God send you a happy new year...

FINAL CHORUS:

Love and joy come to you, And to you your wassail too,
And God bless you and send you a happy new year,
And God send you a happy... new year!
[Shout] WASSAIL!

Wassail! - About the composer, Alexander L'Estrange

“If you had to create from scratch the perfect 21st century musician, Alexander L'Estrange would be your template.” Howard Goodall

Alexander L'Estrange (b.1974) is an award-winning British composer, arranger, jazz musician and choral animateur of international acclaim. A Master of Arts graduate of Oxford University, he has been dubbed “the added 9th of choral music” due to his consummate fusion of the English choral tradition with jazz.

L'Estrange is best known for his popular series of 40-minute choral works for SATB choir, unison children and jazz quintet which began with *Zimbe! Come, sing the songs of Africa!*. The piece took the choral world by storm, firmly establishing L'Estrange as one of the most popular choral composers of our age; *Zimbe!*'s 10th anniversary concert, conducted by the composer, took place at New York's Carnegie Hall.

The most recent work in the series, *Freedom! The Power of Song*, was written in collaboration with his wife, composer and lyricist Joanna Forbes L'Estrange. L'Estrange's sacred anthems are recorded by the award-winning chamber choir Tenebrae on their *On Eagles' Wings* album. His secular songs include *Love's Philosophy*, setting Shelley, Tennyson and Byron, and *Winter Songs*, another collaboration Joanna. Alexander L'Estrange is the go-to arranger for world-class vocal groups including The King's Singers and has written hundreds of arrangements of songs from across the musical spectrum for Faber Music's *Choral Basics* series.

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