Chapter 5

Libertas Decembrica: Singing Songs in the Christmas Season

Everyone has some liking for those curiously-fashioned little songs which come into brief prominence for a season at the end of the year. . . . In the multitudinous choice of carols it is disconcerting to note how the same stock-pieces crop up year after year, to the exclusion of other and better things. We are too easily put off with the expedient in art; our children do not properly prepare their little programme; our choirmasters all too naturally reach down the old, time-worn sheets that have done duty so long.

Chapter epigraphs are formatted as a block quotation. Following a blank line, the source is placed flush right. Two blank lines precede the main text.

—Edmondstoune Duncan, “Christmas Carols”

Christmas carols have long held an ambivalent position within contemporary culture, as the above epigraph suggests with its “old, time-worn sheets” of Christmas songs that “crop up year after year.”¹ Shopping malls, dentist offices, and radio stations resound untiringly from Thanksgiving to Christmas with the strains of “Away in a Manger” and “Silent Night,”² while in our increasingly multicultural and international communities, nonreligious holiday songs, such as “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” are gradually replacing sacred carols. For those, however, for whom the year concludes with Christmas, the familiar refrains of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” and “The First Nowell” are still recalled and sung from year to year without fail, whether caroling in the streets, worshipping in churches, or sitting around the piano at home.

Many of the still-performed carols and hymns can be traced back to the nineteenth century—if not earlier—and can be found in numerous translations and adaptations, resulting in a relatively limited repertory, albeit one with international appeal. While it is a rare occurrence to be able to connect any current carols with those of the Middle Ages or Renaissance, there is no question

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