

Angels We Have Heard on High

Probably from eighteenth-century France and is totally anonymous

E G#m F#m7 E
Angels we have heard on high,

E B E B7 E
Sweetly singing o'er the plains.

E G#m F#m7 E
And the mountains in reply,

E B E B7 E
Echo-ing their joyous strains.

E C#m7/G# F#m7 B E A B7
Glo- - - - o - - - o - o - o - oria!

E F#m7 E A E B7
In ex - cel-sis Deo!

E C#m7/G# F#m7 B E A B7
Glo- - - - o - - - o - o - o - oria!

E B C#m7/G# A E B7 E
In ex-cel- - - - sis De-e - o!

E G#m F#m7 E
Come to Bethlehem and see,

E B E B7 E
Him whose birth the angels sing.

E G#m F#m7 E
Come adore on bended knee,

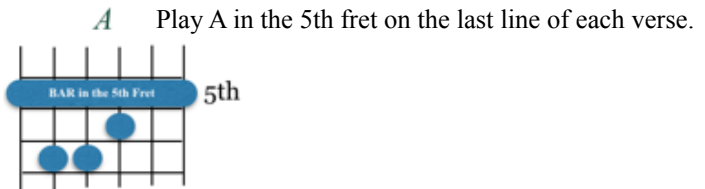
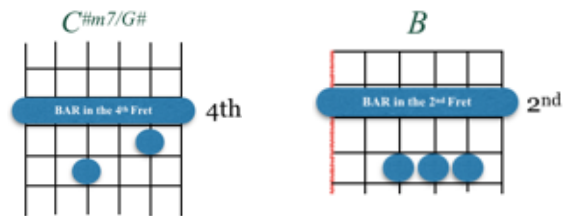
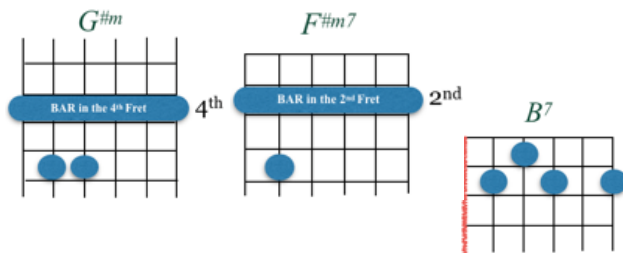
E B E B7 E
Christ the Lord, the new born King.

E C#m7/G# F#m7 B E A B7
Glo- - - - o - - - o - o - o - oria!

E F#m7 E A E B7
In ex - cel-sis Deo!

E C#m7/G# F#m7 B E A B7
Glo- - - - o - - - o - o - o - oria!

E B C#m7/G# A E B7 E
In ex-cel- - - - sis De-e - o!



History

Of the several widespread myths about Christmas carols, the most intriguing is almost surely the amazing Telesphorus tale. The story line of this incredible bit of misinformation relates the singing of a nativity hymn in the year A.D. 129 via the orders of Bishop Telesphorus of Rome. This ancient Latin hymn, the anecdote continues, ultimately evolved into the refrain of the famous French carol “Les anges dans nos campagnes.” There are three enormous difficulties with the Telesphorus incident. One is the infinitesimally tiny odds that any piece of music could survive for nearly two millennia. Another is the total lack of any historical documentation for the incident. And the other is the style of the music in question, which clearly indicates composition in the modern era.

After the myth of Telesphorus and other erroneous data about the carol are cast into the trash can of history, the fragments that remain provide a reasonably certain chronology. The carol is probably a product of eighteenth-century France and is totally anonymous. By 1816 the carol was known in England, for on that date James Montgomery (1771-1854) derived his renowned carol “Angels from the Realms of Glory” from “Les anges.” The tune of the French song has been used with Montgomery’s lyrics since then, but an 1867 melody by Henry Thomas Smart (1813-1879) is more commonly linked with the English carol today. In 1855 the carol was first published in France, and in 1862 the most familiar of several English translations, “Angels We Have Heard on High,” was published without indication of authorship. The 1862 translation, though, varied considerably from the form now used. In 1916 an American carol collection printed the present version, again anonymous, and it is suspected that this was the first appearance of the revision.

Altogether, “**Angels We Have Heard on High**,” with conjecture and anonymity strewn throughout its historical path, is probably the most historically fragile of all the international-class Christmas carols. Less is actually known about “Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly,” but there is little confusion or historical garbage associated with “Deck the Halls.” There is even some doubt as to whether the song was from folk sources, as is commonly believed, or from mainstream sources. The use of Latin in the lyrics suggests creation in a church-affiliated environment and the high esthetic content and relative sophistication of the music imply substantial musical training. In any case, the song is one of the most beautiful and finely constructed pieces of the holiday season. Whether the excellent French lyrics or the similar-quality hybrid English translation is combined with the remarkable melodic blend of grace and subtle dynamism, “Angels We Have Heard on High” is artistically at the top of the carol genre. The highlight of the song, of course, is its buoyant, compelling, and highly elastic refrain which is quite conducive to singing or instrumentation. The noted English composer Martin Shaw (1875-1958) is just one of the talented persons who may have been lured by the attractiveness of the refrain. Shaw, possibly influenced by the famous piece, created a widely used “Gloria in excelsis Deo” choral composition entitled “Fanfare.”

In all, “Angels We Have Heard on High” is one of the most tasteful, enduring, and appreciated of our carols. The essence of the piece is very aptly summarized in its Latin refrain “Gloria in excelsis Deo,” or in English, “Glory to God in the highest.”

By William E. Studwell, The Christmas Carol Reader (Haworth Popular Culture) (p. 54). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

Christmas as you go