

THE HIDDEN CIRCLE GAZETTE

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MUSIC

The Coventry Carol

BY ELIZABETH MOONLIGHT — 2024-12-20



The Dark Story Within Christmas

As we approach this joyful season, it has been tradition for many years to sing songs related to the Christmas Story. These songs are usually called 'carols¹', though this English word has an unclear origin. Its current meaning as a Christmas hymn of joy dates from around 1500.

The Coventry Carol² dates from around 1590, and was traditionally sung in Coventry³, England, as part of a so-called mystery (or miracle) play. These plays were performed to depict a story from the Bible. The Coventry Carol depicts the most horrific event imaginable - the Massacre of The Innocents⁴ - in which King Herod⁵ orders all male infants under the age of two to be slaughtered. The song is sung by a mother, and takes the form of the lullaby she is singing to him, knowing that the soldiers are coming to take him away.

¹[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carol_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carol_(music))

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coventry_Carol

³<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coventry>

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massacre_of_the_Innocents

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great

Lully, lullah, thou little tiny child, Bye bye, lully, lullay. Thou little tiny child, Bye bye, lully, lullay.

O sisters too, how may we do For to preserve this day This poor youngling for whom we sing, "Bye bye, lully, lullay"?

Herod the King, in his raging, Chargèd he hath this day His men of might in his own sight All young children to slay.

That woe is me, poor child, for thee And ever mourn, and may For thy parting neither say nor sing "Bye bye, lully, lullay."

There are many, many versions of this carol, some old and some more up-to-date. Some 'authentic' and some very modern. I listened to more than 20 before I decided on this version. How did I choose? It was the only one that made me cry. To me, in it's simplicity, it evokes the mother alone and frightened, knowing that this is the last time she will sing a lullaby to her son. Additionally its production manages to combine a modern feel with the instrumentation, yet preserves the ancient, dark harmonies which together succeed in conveying this unique carol's very disturbing message.

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f41me1t-Rq8>

I would like to thank everyone who has read my '[Women Composers](#)⁶' this year and, no, I haven't forgotten. I took a break and they will return in the New Year with the final 2 articles. I thank all those who have responded, either directly here, through Discord or via 3DX. It means a lot to me to be able to share beautiful music with others who love to listen.

Finally I would like to wish you all a happy, peaceful and musical Christmas time. I hope you can be with family or friends or someone you love - either real or virtually.

Love you all *Elizabeth Moonlight*

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⁶<https://thehiddencircle.com/women-composers/>