

Hello, and welcome back to Busy Kids Love Music! I'm Carly, and I'm so glad you're joining me for this final episode in our series on the British composer Benjamin Britten. Today, we're diving into one of his most beloved and iconic holiday works, A Ceremony of Carols. It's an incredible piece that has brought joy and beauty to listeners worldwide, especially during the Christmas season. So, let's jump in!

A Ceremony of Carols was written by Britten in 1942, during World War II. Now, this piece has an especially unique origin story. It all began when Britten was on a journey across the Atlantic Ocean, returning to England after spending several years in America. He was traveling on a Swedish cargo ship, and the trip was slow and dangerous due to the ongoing war, making it a tense time for Britten and the other passengers. During the voyage, Britten started reading a book he had picked up during a quick stop in Nova Scotia, Canada. This book was a collection of medieval English poetry, and its verses had a captivating quality that sparked Britten's imagination.

As he read these poems, Britten began to imagine them as music. This is when the idea for A Ceremony of Carols first took shape. He immediately started composing music to go with some of the poems, creating what would become a stunning collection of carols in Middle English, the language spoken in England from about the 12th to 15th centuries.

The result was a piece for treble voices, which are often performed by children's choirs, and harp accompaniment, which gives the music a very bright and enchanting sound. It's a collection of eleven songs, and each carol has its own style, mood, and charm. Britten's music reflects the medieval poems' emotions beautifully. Let's listen to a bit of one of the first songs in the set, "Wolcum Yole":

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What are some words you would use to describe this music? I think it has a joyful, spirited sound to it. It's like a festive greeting to open up the performance. Now listen to the contrast of the haunting and gentle lullaby of "That Yonge Child."

When Britten finally arrived back in England, he completed the composition and was eager to have it performed. The very first performance of A Ceremony of Carols took place in 1942 at Norwich Castle in England, just before Christmas. The setting of the old castle was ideal for this music, giving it a feeling of stepping back in time.

Over the years, A Ceremony of Carols has become a popular choice for choirs during the holiday season, especially for youth choirs around the world. It's often performed in churches and concert halls as a way to celebrate Christmas, and its medieval roots make it a unique addition to any holiday concert. Britten's use of the harp is particularly special because it gives the carols a gentle, ethereal sound that pairs beautifully with the youthful voices of a children's choir.

And even today, A Ceremony of Carols is a favorite in music programs, and it's not uncommon for schools and youth choirs to perform it every December. Many recordings of A Ceremony of Carols are also available, so families who love Britten's music can enjoy it during their holiday celebrations. If you head to this episode's show notes at [busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/138](https://busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/138), I've linked a playlist of a few different performances of the piece in case you'd like to listen to it in its entirety. These recordings bring out the detailed beauty of Britten's compositions, allowing listeners to feel the warmth and spirit of the season.

Thank you for joining me on this journey into the life and music of Benjamin Britten! If you missed any of the previous episodes in this composer series, I'll link to them in the show notes. I hope you enjoyed this special look into A Ceremony of Carols and feel inspired to listen to it this season. It might be a different kind of holiday music than you

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typically listen to, but it's always exciting to explore new musical styles and discover new things to enjoy. I hope you'll join me for the remainder of December as we continue to learn about other holiday pieces. I look forward to connecting with you again in two weeks when our next brand new episode of Busy Kids Love Music airs. Bye for now!