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Hey there! Welcome to episode 35 of Busy Kids Love Music, a podcast for music loving families. I'm Carly Seifert, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I am delighted to have you here with me today. Today's episode is brought to you by my Busy Kids Play Christmas Music Course. This course includes four video piano lesson tutorials for Christmas songs ranging from the beginning to intermediate level, and is available for purchase for just \$12 at busykidsdopiano.com/christmas, and I'll pop that link in the show notes as well.

This episode of Busy Kids Love Music is set to air just a couple of weeks before many people around the world will celebrate the Christmas holiday. There are many familiar holiday songs playing on the radio and in the stores at this time of year, and I thought it would be fun to take a closer look at a few of these well-known holiday tunes.

We'll start by learning a little bit about the joyful and powerful Christmas standard, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing". The words to this hymn were written by an English Methodist minister Charles Wesley, who was a prolific hymn writer and wrote over six thousand hymns during his lifetime! He wrote "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" to be sung on Christmas Day, and it was published in a collection of hymns and sacred poems in 1739.

Wesley's goal in writing hymns was to teach the poor and illiterate -- those who couldn't read -- important teachings of the Christian church. The text was updated by a student of Wesley's a few years later which includes wording more like the version we sing and hear sung today.

Wesley had requested slow and solemn music to accompany his lyrics, but about a hundred years after “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” was first published, Felix Mendelssohn -- a famous composer of the Romantic period -- composed a cantata. An English musician took a portion of that Mendelssohn piece and made it fit the lyrics of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing”, which is the tune we still use today. As you can see, sometimes a hymn changes throughout the years and different musicians and composers add their unique touches to make it into something special and memorable.

Our next hymn is a beloved African American Spiritual...

Another man by the name of Wesley -- this time John Wesley Work, Jr. is the reason we still sing this spiritual at Christmastime. Work was the son of a church choir director in Nashville and became the first collector of African-American spirituals. Collecting spirituals was no easy task as many were passed down orally among enslaved people, but very few were actually written down. “Go Tell it on the Mountain” came from the plantation fields of the South and was inspired by the enslaved population’s Christmas. While there are hundreds of spirituals, few had been written about Christmas, making “Go Tell It on the Mountain” unique.

Work published his first book and introduced the music to the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a choir at the nearby HBCU, Fisk University. Fisk Jubilee Singers toured the world, sharing the uplifting arrangements of African American spirituals in their concerts. John and his brother Frederick arranged the music that accompanied the powerful text of this hymn into an anthem that would suit the Fisk Jubilee Singers and become one of their show stopping pieces for their world tour.

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It may surprise you to learn that the final Christmas carol we're going to look at, wasn't actually written to be a Christmas hymn at all.

As with "Hark the Herald Angels Sing", there were a few different collaborators of "Joy to the World". The first was English poet Isaac Watts, who wrote the hymn based on Psalm 98 of the Bible. Watts wrote over 750 hymns, and this particular hymn was written to remind Christians that Christ would be coming again for a triumphant return.

The second collaborator of the hymn may be a name you're familiar with if you listen to this podcast regularly - George Frederic Handel. Now, Handel didn't actually intentionally collaborate on "Joy to the World". Bits and pieces of Handel's famous oratorio Messiah were borrowed to help create the tune of the hymn. Finally, a music educator in Boston, Lowell Mason, took those fragments from Handel and arranged it in a tune he called, "Antioch", which is the most common arrangement of "Joy to the World" in North America. Today this hymn is so popular that -- as of the late 20th century -- it was the most-published hymn in North America.

One of the things I love about Christmas carols is that there are so many different arrangements and interpretations. I've gathered a variety of arrangements for these 3 hymns and put them into a playlist on YouTube for you. I hope you'll check it out -- maybe while you're making gingerbread houses or baking cookies or doing another fun tradition that you like to do this time of year. You can find that playlist in this episode's show notes at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/35. You'll also find a transcript for today's episode and links to the clips that you heard on the show. All of that is at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/35.

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Thanks for exploring these 3 Christmas hymns with me today. To all those who will be celebrating next week, I wish you a wonderful Christmas and I look forward to connecting with you again in 2 weeks for the next episode of Busy Kids Love Music. Bye for now!