

O Holy Night (Cantique de Noel)

Minuit, chretiens

Placide Cappeau (1808-77) was a local wine merchant and poet from Raquemaure in southern France. The local clergy asked him to write a Christmas poem to celebrate the recent renovation of their church organ. He authored *Minuit, chretiens* in 1843. Adolphe Adam (1803-56) composed the accompanying music and 1847 saw its premier. Adam is known primarily for his opera and ballet of which *Giselle* (1841) is his best known.

Initially the song was warmly accepted by the French Catholic Church, however, many phrases did not sit well with church authorities. Soon after it was written, the 1848 Revolution broke out in France; Adam worried some observers by calling *O Holy Night* a “religious Marseillaise,”

As early as 1864, the *Revue de Musique Sacrée*, a distinguished journal focusing on Catholic liturgical music, wrote: Adolphe Adam’s [*Minuit, chrétiens*] has been performed at many churches during Midnight Masses....it might be a good thing to discard this piece whose popularity is becoming unhealthy. It is sung in the streets, social gatherings, and at bars with live entertainment. It becomes debased and degenerated. The best would be to let it go its own way, far from houses of religion, which can do very well without it.

Further church criticism of the song focused on its militant tone and dubious theology.

The song was rarely included in the hymnals in France, despite its growing international popularity and was even banned for a while. Official French publications of Catholic music described Cappeau as a socialist and a drunk, and a falsehood about Adam being Jewish.

Unitarian minister, music critic, and editor of *Dwight's Journal of Music*, John Sullivan Dwight (1813–1893) was perhaps the most consequential American musical authority in the nineteenth century. He adapted the song into English in 1855. This version became popular in the United States, especially in the North, where the third verse (including "Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother, And in His name all oppression shall cease") resonated with abolitionists. It is the version we sing today.

In Canada in 1858 Ernest Gagnon (1834-1915), a Canadian folklorist, composer and organist introduced the song in Canada where it became a Canadian tradition for parishes to select a soloist for the Midnight Mass performance of *Minuit, Chrétiens* from among local noteworthies as a special honor. Today, in French-language churches, it is commonly used at the beginning of the Midnight Mass

O Holy Night was played on the first ever radio broadcast. It was played on the violin by the inventor of the radio, Reginald Fessenden, on December 24, 1906.

On the following page is a comparison of a literal translation of the original French compared with the English we sing today. Thank you to my fellow West Valley Chorale member and French teacher RuthAnn Price for the translation.

Pat Kilburn

Disclaimer: I have pieced together the origins of this song from the sources below. You may find other sources with different or additional information. Reconstructing the history of carols is fraught with uncertainty. Most French accents are missing.

Sources: The New Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians, sheet music, and various websites, and Wikipedia articles.

Original French version 1843

Placide Cappeau

Minuit, chrétiens,
C'est l'heure solennelle
Ou l'Homme Dieu descendit jusqu'à nous
Pour effacer la tache originelle
Et de Son Père arrêter le courroux.
Le monde entier tressaille d'espérance
En cette nuit qui lui donne un Sauveur.
Peuple à genoux, attends ta délivrance!

Noel! Noel! Voici le Rédempteur!
Noel! Noel! Voici le Rédempteur!

Le Rédempteur
A brisé toute entrave:
La terre est libre et le ciel est ouvert.
Il voit un Frère ou n'était qu'un esclave,
L'amour unit ceux qu'enchaînait le fer.
Qui Lui dira notre reconnaissance?
C'est pour nous tous qu'Il naît,
Qu'Il souffre et meurt.
Peuple debout, chante ta délivrance!

Noel! Noel! Chantons le Rédempteur!
Noel! Noel! Chantons le Rédempteur!

Literal Translation

**RuthAnn Price, French Teacher
West Valley Chorale Member**

Midnight, Christians,
Is the solemn hour
When the Man God came down to us
To wipe out the original sin
And to stop His Father's wrath.
The whole world is thrilled with hope
On this night the Savior was given to it.
People kneeling, wait for your deliverance!

Noel! Noel! Here is the Redeemer!
Noel! Noel! Here is the Redeemer!

The Redeemer
Has broken all obstacles:
The earth is free and the sky is open.
He sees a brother who was only a slave,
Love unites those who were chained.
Who will thank Him?
He is born for us all,
He suffers and dies.
People get up, sing about your deliverance!

Noel! Noel! Let's sing about the Redeemer!
Noel! Noel! Let's sing about the Redeemer!

Adapted United States version 1855

John Sullivan Dwight

O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth;
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
'Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn;
Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices!
O night divine! O night when Christ was born.
O night, O holy night, O night divine.

Led by the light of Faith serenely beaming;
With glowing hearts by his cradle we stand:
So, led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here come the wise men from Orient land,
The King of Kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our friend;

He knows our need, To our weakness no
stranger!
Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!
Behold your King! your King! before him bend!

Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is Love and His gospel is Peace;
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our
brother,
And in his name all oppression shall cease,
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful Chorus raise we;
Let all within us praise his Holy name!

Christ is the Lord, then ever! ever praise we!
His pow'r and glory, evermore proclaim!
His pow'r and glory, evermore proclaim!