

## The oldest Christmas carols

The Apostles sang songs of praise, many based on the Psalms. As founders of the churches, their enthusiasm inspired their new congregations into song. But unfortunately they did not leave us any copies of the musical scores.

One of the earliest known Christmas songs is from the 4th Century, *Jesus refulsit omnium*, composed by St. Hilary of Poitiers. During the 12th Century, **St Francis of Assisi** formally introduced Christmas carols to church services. As patron of the arts, he inspired the composers and poets of the day to deliver Christmas music. The lighter joyous Christmas songs were introduced many years later in Renaissance Italy – the 1400s, the time of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. The earliest known copy of an English carol was written by Ritson about 1410. Throughout the years, monks also contributed significantly in composing music themes from the Bible.

When **Johannes Gutenberg** started his printing press rolling in 1454 copies of carols could be distributed fairly freely. However, keep in mind that Christmas celebrations were suppressed by purists at that time; Christmas did not become widely popular until late last century. Thus, many of the Christmas carols that we know today are not quoted directly from the Bible and were composed fairly recently.

### **Carols are banned but bounce back**

Christmas carols were banned between 1649 and 1660 in England by Oliver Cromwell who thought that Christmas should be a solemn day. (Cromwell also abolished the monarchy.) When Protestants, inspired by Martin Luther, took to the joy of Christmas carols, many had to flee Europe under pressure from the Catholic Church. They took the Christmas carols with them to their new homes across the world. In 1649, John de Brebeur wrote the first American Christmas carol, called *Jesus is Born*.

Fortunately, in Europe, when carols couldn't be sung in Churches, they found a stage elsewhere. The world's most famous religious play, the Passion Play, was staged in **Oberammergau**, Germany in 1634 (and has been performed every 10 years since). In the 1700s, the music by Mendelssohn and Handel was adapted and used as Christmas carols.