

Why does Christmas music sound so special?

Christmas is just around the corner as the classics are playing. Here are some reasons why Christmas music is always special.

Christmas is just around the corner as Mariah Carey and Michael Bublé classics hit the streets. While some people turn on holiday music as soon as Halloween is over, others are sick of hearing the same songs over and over again before December 25. But whether you love them or hate them, there's no denying that Christmas carols have a certain quality to them that captures the spirit of the most anticipated holiday of the year. Here's why Christmas **music sounds so special** .



Sleigh bells, seasonal settings and melodies

Let's start with one of the most visible aspects of Christmas music: bells. Bells of all kinds—sleigh bells, chimes, and glockenspiels—ring in countless Christmas tunes. Although closely associated with the Yuletide season, bells are not Christmas-specific and appear in plenty of non-Christmas songs as well. Take, for example, The Beach Boys' "God Only Knows," a song that uses sleigh bells but doesn't appear on any Christmas playlist—although it does appear in the 2003 Christmas romantic comedy *Love Actually*.

But sleigh bells have a good reason to be associated with Christmas. Back in the 19th century, horse-drawn sleighs were a popular mode of transportation when it snowed. Because sleighs glide smoothly through the snow and are difficult to see in the white, horses were given bells attached to their harnesses as a safety measure to alert people to their presence. As a result, anyone who has had a white Christmas will associate the sound of jingling bells with the holiday.

The sound of horse-drawn sleigh bells is referenced in the classic Christmas song 'Jingle Bells', but that song was actually originally written for Thanksgiving. 'Jingle Bells', along with other cold weather tunes like 'Let It Snow' and 'Baby, It's Cold Outside', do not actually refer to Christmas, but are associated with it because they are often played in stores and on the radio in December, and have even been used in Christmas movies.

Much of the music played during the Christmas season, however, is explicitly about the holiday. Most Christmas songs are filled with lyrics about the season—from kisses under the mistletoe to Santa leaving presents under the tree—and often lean toward nostalgia. But festive lyrics and sleigh bells aren't all that make a song sound Christmasy.

It's starting to sound a lot like Christmas, with Mariah Carey and Michael Bublé wafting over the airwaves. While some people turn on holiday music as soon as Halloween is over, others get sick of hearing the same songs over and over again before December 25. But whether you love them or hate them, there's no denying that Christmas songs have a distinct quality that makes them sound, well, Christmasy. Here's why—and it's not just that lingering sleigh bell sound.

Bells, seasonal backgrounds and images

Let's start with one of the most visible aspects of Christmas music: bells. Bells of all kinds—sleigh bells, pipe bells, and glockenspiels—ring out countless Christmas tunes. Although they're associated with the Yuletide season, bells aren't strictly Christmas music and appear in many non-Christmas songs, too. Take The Beach Boys' "God Only Knows," for example, which uses sleigh bells but isn't on the Christmas playlist—though it does appear in the 2003 Christmas romantic comedy *Love Actually*.

But sleigh bells have a special association with Christmas for a reason. Back in the 19th century, horse-drawn sleighs were a popular mode of transportation when it snowed. Because sleighs were quiet in the snow and hard to see in the whiteout, horses were given harnesses with bells attached as a safety measure to alert people to their presence. As a result, anyone lucky enough to have a white Christmas will associate the sound of jingling bells with the holiday.

The ringing of horse-drawn sleigh bells is referenced in the classic Christmas song "Jingle Bells," but that song was actually originally written for Thanksgiving. 'Jingle Bells,' along with other cold weather tunes like 'Let It Snow' and 'Baby, It's Cold Outside,' don't actually refer to Christmas, but we associate them with the holiday season because they're often played in stores and on the radio in December (and often even earlier!) and are used in Christmas movies.

Much of the music played during the holiday season, however, is explicitly about the holiday. Most Christmas songs are filled with holiday lyrics—from kisses under the mistletoe to Santa leaving presents under the tree—and are often nostalgic. But festive lyrics and sleigh bells aren't the be-all and end-all when it comes to making a song sound Christmasy.

Christmas chords and melodies

Music experts have identified similarities in the composition of popular Christmas songs. In 2017, Professor Joe Bennett of Berklee College of Music analyzed the 78 most-streamed Christmas songs on Spotify and found that 95 percent of the tunes were in a major key. 'In contemporary pop, the repertoire is more in the minor key,'

Bennett told Discover. This means that not only are Christmas lyrics nostalgic, but so is the music itself, either by way of recalling or coming from a bygone era.

Many of today's most popular Christmas songs date back to the 1940s, when jazz was at its peak; "White Christmas," "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," and "Let It Snow" were all originally recorded during this time. The most common chord progression in jazz is 2-5-1, and many Christmas classics from the '40s, '50s, and '60s feature it. But since jazz has been away from pop music for decades, if a newer song uses 2-5-1—or any other jazz chord progression—it often has a nostalgic Christmas feel.

Mariah Carey's 1994 hit "All I Want for Christmas Is You" is a great example of a newer song (despite being 30 years old!) that has successfully made it onto a Christmas playlist. The song also borrows from classics. Many modern pop songs use only a few chords, but Carey's melody is inspired by jazz, which, in the words of trained music journalist Adam Ragusea, offers " *a Baskin-Robbins full of chords and chord flavors—sevenths and ninths, half and full drops, various inversions, etc.* " On top of that, "All I Want for Christmas Is You" has an upbeat tempo that recalls Phil Spector's 1963 album *A Christmas Gift for You* and Motown Christmas covers. As a result, Carey's song evokes nostalgia for holiday music across multiple time periods.

While Christmas songs often feature a variety of chords, their melodies are designed to be easy to sing. Professor Darren Sproston from the University of Chester found this with Christmas carols. *'People have to learn the melody quite quickly to be able to sing it in that communal setting—but that's also true of popular music, and the choruses are meant to engage the audience so they can 'sing it,'* ' Sproston explained to Discover. Choral singing itself is also often a feature of Christmas songs—the choir in John Lennon's 'Happy Xmas (War Is Over)' is just one example.

That special Christmas sound can essentially be achieved by combining sleigh bells, a few jazz chords, a catchy melody, and some festive lyrics. That alone may not be enough to guarantee a song becomes a Christmas classic, but it will get the songwriter on the right track.

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