

# WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

*traditional English melody*

*arranged for chamber orchestra, choir and congregation*

*by Douglas Mears*

## ***Instrumentation***

Flute  
Oboe  
English Horn  
Clarinet in A  
Bassoon  
3 Horns in F  
Timpani  
Percussion  
*Finger cymbals, tambourine  
suspended cymbal, mark tree*  
Harp  
Celesta  
SATB Choir  
Violin I  
Violin II  
Viola  
Cello  
Contrabass

## ***Notes***

The traditional English melody for this beloved carol, widely known as “Greensleeves,” was once thought to have been penned by King Henry VIII, though its true authorship has never been proven. Originally entitled “A Newe Northen Dittye of ye Ladye Greene Slevs,” this song, about a young lady and her boyfriend, first appeared in 1580. Shakespeare refers twice to “Greensleeves” in his play *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and in 1642, the tune was paired with a waits’ carol, “The old year now away is fled.”

William Chatterton Dix (1837-1898) authored a poem titled “The Manger Throne,” from which the lyrics of “What Child Is This?” are drawn, and published it in 1865. But it wasn’t until 1871 that Dix’s lyrics were matched with the familiar “Greensleeves” tune in John Stainer’s *Christmas Carols New and Old*, from where it spread to become a Christmas tradition.

At the time of composing the carol, Dix worked as an insurance company manager and had been struck by a severe illness. While recovering, he underwent a spiritual renewal that led him to write several hymns, including lyrics to this carol. Each stanza is a progression—the words start by asking about the Christ child’s divinity and finish by praising his name.

*What Child is this, who laid to rest,  
On Mary’s lap is sleeping?  
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,  
While shepherds watch are keeping?  
This, this is Christ, the King,  
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:  
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary!*

*Why lies He in such mean estate  
Where ox and ass are feeding?  
Good Christians, fear: for sinners here  
The silent Word is pleading.  
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through,  
The cross be borne for me, for you.  
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

*So, bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,  
Come, peasant, king to own Him.  
The King of kings, salvation brings,  
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.  
Raise, raise a song on high,  
The Virgin sings her lullaby.  
Joy, joy for Christ is born,  
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*